

HOMO SUPERBUS

Gero Jenner

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National Day

No, it is no coincidence that the greatest and most magnificent building in the city is called the Pantheon. The name alone suggests what it claims to be: the dwelling place of gods—of those beings who, in human form, now inhabit the capital and rule it with a quiet, unquestioned authority.

At their center stands Cybor I. High-Spiritual. The people, with their usual preference for simplicity, call him Plato, and so shall we.

Seen from the outside, Plato offers little to distinguish him from any other man, apart from the green exclamation mark that runs from his throat down to his navel, identifying him as a member of the highest class. Yet even such markings have long since lost their power to astonish; in a world where the human body has become an object of design, no surface remains untouched for long. And still, appearances deceive. For beneath that familiar exterior, Plato is no longer what he seems.

His transformation is not visible to the casual observer, whose gaze rarely penetrates beyond the surface. But anyone capable of looking deeper would at once recognize that this man has been fundamentally reconstituted. Where once there had been a human organism, fragile and perishable, there is now something else—something engineered, stabilized, and, as he himself would claim, perfected.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his head, traditionally regarded as the most precious part of any living being. In Plato's case, one might be tempted to call it hollow, yet such a judgment would betray a grave misunderstanding. Within the carefully reinforced shell of his skull rests an object of extraordinary value: a cerebral chip of exceptional quality, directly connected to the Cloud beneath the Pantheon. It stores the accumulated intelligence of every human being who ever lived, past and present. Through this connection, Plato is able to draw upon a reservoir of knowledge that earlier generations could only attribute to their imagined gods.

And imagined they were. For what else were those ancient deities, if not projections of human ignorance—figures onto whom people projected their own deficiencies, bowing before them and mistaking illusion for truth? No one had ever seen them, let alone proven their existence by means of reason or experiment. It was a curious and persistent habit of earlier humanity to populate the heavens with their own reflections, only to kneel before them in submission.

Here, however, in the capital of Cyborstan, such fantasies have become unnecessary. In the Pantheon there now resides a being who could withstand scrutiny—one who embodies, at least in principle, the qualities once reserved for gods: knowledge without limit, existence without end.

Plato himself.

Having left his sleeping chamber on the third level, he has ascended to the luminous Hall of Heaven at the very top of the structure. From here, he gazes toward the horizon, where the sun is just beginning to rise, its red-gold disk slowly emerging from the darkness.

As always on this day—and only on this day—the first rays align precisely with the great avenue stretching eastward through the city. At its far end stands the towering statue of Allan, the founder, rising black and monumental against the light. The sun’s first beam strikes both the statue and Plato at the same moment, just as it was intended when the state was founded ten years ago.

As in previous years, Plato murmurs the ritual formula:

You are me, and I am you.

For a brief moment, he pauses. Then, as if compelled by a thought that has long been forming, he continues:

You are me, and I am you. We are one—and yet no longer equal. You were still bound to decay, destined to return to dust, your intelligence illuminating the world only for a fleeting span. I, however, shall endure. My body, from head to foot, is made of imperishable material, resistant to time and decay.

A faint smile passes over his face as his hand moves across his chest in quiet satisfaction. Yet when his knuckles strike a little too firmly against his torso, a sound emerges from within—a dull, metallic echo, as though something inside had shifted.

For a moment, Plato is irritated.

Such a sound does not belong to perfection.

The brief disturbance awakens a memory he would rather leave undisturbed.

There was a time when he had still been a mortal being—a Gaur, like all the others. Even then, he had enjoyed considerable respect. As Ambrosius Müller, he had been known as a distinguished scholar of the ancient Greeks, a philosopher in his own right. Among friends he had been called Plato; among detractors, Plato the Second. But whatever the name, he had remained subject to the same limitation as all others: mortality.

His own determination - his unwavering resolve – made him what he is. As the first human being, he had allowed the scientists—those tireless servants of progress—to perform the transformation upon him, replacing the frail substance of flesh and blood with a body constructed from the most durable materials, and a mind sustained by artificial means.

He had not made this decision lightly. A philosopher trained in exact thinking, he had insisted on understanding every step: his genetic code translated into data, his memories encoded, his knowledge preserved. Nothing, it seemed, had been overlooked.

And yet—

There remained that one moment.

The noise rising from below reaches him now: trumpets, drums, a swelling tide of sound.

The National Day.

Ten years since the founding of Cyborstan.

For a brief instant, he allows himself to linger in reflection. When he recalls the condition of his former mind—the soft, unstable mass of neurons that had once filled his skull—he still feels a trace of disgust. How crude it had been, how unreliable, how subject to decay.

All that lies far behind him now.

The transformation itself had proceeded according to plan. He had even been shown his future body in advance—a detail that had pleased him more than he would readily admit. Compared to his former self, the new body appeared somewhat younger, though not excessively so. A philosopher, after all, must not look like a youth; wisdom demands a certain maturity, or at least the appearance of it. His current form, one might say, suggests an age of fifty—ideal for a man of thought, as well as, perhaps, for a fine wine.

From below, the sounds grow louder.

The people, he reflects, have always had a fondness for noise. They call it music. Very well—on a day such as this, one must allow them their pleasures.

The success of his transformation had been beyond dispute. The new body, equipped with hundreds of finely tuned micro-motors, moved with a grace no natural organism could match. Even before his consciousness had been transferred, it had been demonstrated to him—remotely controlled, animated without a mind, yet already capable of astonishing precision.

A marvel of engineering.

He had applauded the scientists then and continues to regard them with a certain gratitude. And yet, the faint metallic echo that occasionally accompanies his movements reminds him that even the most refined construction is not entirely free of imperfections.

The rising sun now illuminates the city below. Government buildings emerge from the darkness, and beyond them, to the west, lies the recently completed Human Zoo—a carefully maintained refuge for selected specimens of the Gaur, the last remnants of the former humanity.

At that moment, the door to the Hall of Heaven opens.

Kropp enters.

He is the only untransformed human in Plato's immediate surroundings—a Gaur in every sense, burdened by his body, slightly bent, moving with an effort that would be unthinkable among the Cybors. And yet Plato tolerates him, perhaps even values him, in ways he would not readily admit.

“Kropp,” he says without greeting, “why do we have a human zoo?”

Kropp does not hesitate.

“To remind the citizens that the Gaur—including myself—are pitiable creatures. The contrast is meant to reinforce the sense of superiority among Cybors.”

“Excellent—quite correct,” Cybor the First replies, his gaze still directed toward the slowly brightening city. “Observe how the first rays of the sun already illuminate the Human Zoo, while on either side the ministries step gradually out of the shadow. It was a wise decision indeed to house the *Smoking Heads*, my most important collaborators, within the Pantheon itself.”

After a brief pause, he turns slightly toward Kropp.

“Tell me, Kropp—why is it that people persist in calling them ‘Smoking Heads,’ even though they are my finest scientists?”

The question is, of course, rhetorical. Plato is fully aware of the answer; the Cloud beneath the Pantheon would supply him with far more detailed information than any human interlocutor could provide. Yet he takes a certain pleasure in putting the fool to the test.

Kropp inclines his head.

“Chief, if I may venture an explanation. It seems that even the new human being has not yet reached absolute perfection. From time to time, one hears of certain... incidents. Some of those distinguished heads, as you rightly call them, have the unfortunate habit of thinking too intensely. And when that happens, the chip may overheat.”

He speaks without agitation, almost conversationally.

“Under normal conditions, the state ensures a lifespan of more than a hundred years for every chip—”

“Not merely ensures,” Plato interjects, “but guarantees.”

“Quite so,” Kropp continues. “And yet, the exceptional zeal of our Scis was perhaps not fully taken into account. When thought becomes too intense, the chip may reach a critical temperature. At that point, the surrounding filler material begins to react.”

He hesitates briefly, as though weighing how much detail is appropriate.

“At first, the effect can appear almost curious. Smoke emerges from both ears in delicate spirals, forming patterns that, to an uninformed observer, might even seem pleasing. But the phenomenon is not without consequence. Shortly thereafter, the affected individual collapses. One might reasonably ask whether such an outcome can still be regarded as progress.”

Plato does not respond immediately. The remark borders on impertinence, yet it touches upon a difficulty he himself has already considered.

Kropp, sensing neither approval nor disapproval, continues:

“To be sure, the state has reacted with foresight. The introduction of the brain thermostat has proven effective. In cases of excessive cognitive activity, the system now intervenes automatically, interrupting the process before critical overheating can occur.”

Plato nods slightly.

“A necessary correction.”

“Undoubtedly,” Kropp agrees. “Since then, such incidents have become rare. The heads no longer smoke. And yet, the name has remained. People tend to preserve what once struck them as memorable.”

He allows himself a faint, almost apologetic smile.

“Of course, the new system has its drawbacks. It may happen that some Sci, in the middle of a lecture, suddenly falls silent, his expression empty, his thought processes temporarily suspended. After a certain interval, normal function resumes. The inconvenience is minor, though perhaps not entirely in keeping with the ideal of uninterrupted rationality.”

Plato turns away from him and directs his attention once more to the horizon.

“It is the nature of progress,” he says after a moment, “to eliminate imperfections step by step.”

Below them, the sounds of the celebration have grown noticeably louder. Trumpets, drums, and the murmur of a gathered crowd rise in waves toward the upper levels of the Pantheon.

Kropp glances toward the open façade.

“Chief, the ceremony has already begun. They are expecting you.”

Plato remains motionless.

“You are mistaken,” he replies at last, without raising his voice. “I am already present.”

Kropp looks at him in confusion.

Plato gestures toward the great glass front of the Hall of Heaven.

“Come here. Look down.”

Reluctantly, the fool approaches and follows the direction of his lord’s gaze. Far below, on the central tribune, a figure stands before the assembled citizens, addressing them in a voice amplified across the square.

The resemblance is unmistakable.

Kropp draws in a breath.

“My double,” Plato explains calmly. “An exact replica—body and chip alike. While I remain here, observing.”

He speaks without pride, almost as if stating a technical fact.

“In our present condition, such duplication is entirely feasible. Every component of the body, including the most essential one, can be reproduced. The chip, in particular, admits of precise replication.”

Kropp remains silent, his gaze fixed on the scene below.

Plato continues:

“My double will now repeat what I have long since made clear: that we have abolished death; that we have eliminated pain; that we no longer depend upon crude material consumption, but draw our sustenance directly from energy; that we are resistant to fire; and that, through the Cloud, we have gained access to the totality of accumulated knowledge.”

He pauses, as though listening to the distant echo of his own words.

“These are the foundations of our existence.”

From below, the speech rises toward its climax, the voice of the double resounding across the square.

“When the function has been fulfilled,” Plato adds, almost as an afterthought, “the duplicate will be dismantled. It would be unwise to allow such a construct to persist beyond its intended purpose.”

Kropp nods slowly, though it is unclear how much he truly understands.

For him, as for any member of the old humanity, the sight remains disconcerting: one and the same man, here and there at the same time, observer and observed in one person.

Below, the celebration reaches its peak.

Above, in the quiet clarity of the Hall of Heaven, Plato watches—and for a brief moment, though no one would remark upon it, his attention seems to linger not on the triumph itself, but on the faint, almost imperceptible irregularities that persist even within a system that claims perfection.

Problems with Bliss

The applause rises from below like a rolling wave, then breaks against the walls of the Pantheon and dissolves into a dull, distant murmur. Kropp listens for a moment, though not with admiration. Life at the center of power has made him resistant to such displays. Enthusiasm, especially when amplified by loudspeakers, tends to lose its authenticity.

Yes, yes, he thinks, the usual spectacle.

Who, after all, inhabits this city? Not living beings in the old sense, but constructions—refined, polished, assembled from metals, minerals, and plastics. Even the animals marching below are no longer what they appear to be. They resemble elephants, rhinoceroses, lions; yet none of them are real. They cannot be. At seventy degrees in the shade, no organic creature could survive—not elephants, not horses, not even the stubborn rhinoceros. The Gaurs themselves had only endured by retreating underground. The animals had not been so inventive.

So the new humans rebuilt them.

Imitations. Replicas. Technically impressive, no doubt. In matters of imitation, the scientists—the “Smoking Heads”—are unmatched. And yet errors remain, small but telling. Kropp has seen elephants with two trunks, cheetahs adorned with feathered crests that no natural history book has ever recorded. But he says nothing. His knowledge comes from children’s books, and that alone already places him at a disadvantage.

Still, the spectacle has its appeal.

From above, he watches the procession: the massive bodies moving in perfect synchronization, each step measured, each motion aligned as if governed by a single will. The discipline is undeniable. The elegance, too, in its own mechanical way.

And yet he cannot suppress a certain curiosity.

Do those enormous heads also contain nothing but a tiny chip, hidden within vast cavities filled with artificial mass? Does intelligence always shrink when it becomes perfect?

He considers asking, then decides against it. The answer would most likely be accompanied by a lecture—on the deficiencies of Gaur reasoning, on the superiority of design over evolution, on the inevitable triumph of structure over chance.

He has heard it all before.

Below, the music resumes—cymbals and trumpets, somewhat less harmonious than intended, though only a Gaur ear seems to notice. The elephants have formed a line before the platform, and now, in a gesture that is meant to resemble reverence, they kneel. Their trunks—two of them in some cases—bend forward, touching their foreheads in a ritual greeting borrowed from Cybor custom.

The march that follows is lively, almost infectious. Kropp feels, against his better judgment, a faint stirring in his limbs. There had been a time when music could still move him—when the

body responded without reflection, when one might have joined such a procession simply for the joy of movement.

Now he stands still.

The distance between himself and the world below is not only physical.

“Have you heard my speech?” Plato asks suddenly.

Kropp nods.

“And have you understood it?”

Again, Kropp nods—though he senses that the question is not meant to be answered so easily.

Plato does not wait.

“Do you grasp what it means,” he continues, “that in our state there is no longer pain, no longer suffering? Earlier generations were plagued by everything imaginable—disease, injury, hunger, the cruelty of nature and of one another. Their lives were short, miserable, and uncertain. We have abolished all that. We have restored dignity to existence.”

He pauses, then adds, with a sharper tone:

“Have you understood that? Has your Gaur mind truly comprehended the magnitude of this achievement?”

Kropp hesitates—not out of ignorance, but because he senses that something in the question is unstable. Plato, he realizes, is not merely seeking confirmation.

He is searching.

Before Kropp can answer, Plato continues, almost impatiently.

“No, of course you have not. Otherwise you would have joined us long ago. Instead, you persist in carrying around that obsolete, perishable body of yours.”

There is, however, something unusual in his voice—a slight hesitation, a trace of uncertainty that does not belong to him.

Kropp notices.

And waits.

“Kropp,” Plato says at last, more quietly now, “for the first time, I ask you for advice.”

The words hang in the air.

Even Plato seems aware of their absurdity. He, who has access to the totality of human knowledge, who can consult the Cloud at any moment, now turns to a man who possesses nothing but his limited, unenhanced mind.

“And yet,” Plato continues, “I am confronted with a problem—a stubborn, unwieldy problem—for which I have found no satisfactory solution.”

He steps closer to the window, gesturing toward the spectacle below.

“You see the parade, the order, the discipline. You see what we have achieved. And yet you do not see what it cost me to make it happen. The people did not come willingly. They had to be compelled.”

He turns sharply.

“They no longer understand duty.”

Kropp remains silent.

“They want only one thing,” Plato continues, “to enjoy themselves—endlessly, without interruption. And you, Kropp, cannot even imagine what that means.”

Kropp raises an eyebrow slightly.

“I believe I can,” he says carefully. “The Place of Heavenly Peace.”

Plato watches him.

“Yes,” Kropp continues, gaining confidence. “They sit there, in those magnetic fields, receiving energy directly. No effort, no cost. The body fills, the senses overflow, and they experience... something like bliss.”

Plato sighs.

“You describe the mechanism,” he says. “But not the experience. It is not merely satisfaction. It is... overwhelming. A state in which all desire dissolves, because nothing remains to be desired.”

He pauses.

“And that,” he adds quietly, “is precisely the problem.”

For a moment, neither of them speaks.

Then Kropp says, almost thoughtfully:

“Perfection has no direction.”

Plato looks at him sharply.

“Explain.”

“If a being has reached everything it could ever want,” Kropp continues slowly, “then it no longer wants anything. No goals. No movement. No effort. It remains where it is—because there is nowhere left to go.”

Plato nods, almost involuntarily.

“Yes,” he says. “Exactly that.”

He begins to pace.

“They return again and again to the Place of Heavenly Peace. They charge themselves, exhaust their energy, then return to charge again—over and over, in an endless cycle of pleasure. The soldier no longer wishes to defend. The worker no longer wishes to work. The thinker—”

He stops.

“—no longer wishes to think.”

Kropp allows himself a faint, almost invisible smile.

“I had to act,” Plato continues. “I had to interrupt the flow—to cut them off from the source.”

Kropp nods slowly. He remembers the days when delegations had gathered before the Pantheon, pleading, kneeling, begging for the restoration of what had been taken from them.

“It was necessary,” Plato says, though it sounds almost like a justification.

“Of course,” Kropp replies.

“But it is not a solution.”

Now it is Kropp who takes a step forward.

“May I speak freely?”

Plato gestures impatiently.

“Speak.”

“You removed the bliss,” Kropp says. “And with it, you reintroduced something else—though perhaps you did not name it that way.”

Plato narrows his eyes.

“Pain,” Kropp continues. “Or at least the absence of pleasure. A lack. A tension. Something that pushes.”

He hesitates briefly, then adds:

“A sting in the flesh, one might say.”

Plato does not interrupt.

“If there is no such sting,” Kropp goes on, “then nothing moves. A being that is entirely satisfied has no reason to act. It has already arrived—everywhere.”

He pauses, choosing his words carefully.

“You have brought your people to something like paradise. But as everyone knows, paradise is not a place of work. It is a place of... eternal rest.”

Plato remains silent.

“The first step,” Kropp continues, “you have already taken. You interrupted the bliss. Now you must go further.”

Plato’s gaze sharpens.

“How?”

Kropp takes a breath.

“Bring back pain,” he says.

The word lingers between them.

“Not as cruelty,” he adds quickly, “but as necessity. As direction. As the force that creates desire, and with desire, movement.”

He lowers his voice slightly.

“We Gaurs never suffered from too much happiness.”

For a long moment, Plato does not respond.

He stands motionless, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond the walls of the Pantheon, as if attempting to reconcile what he has heard with everything he believes.

Then, abruptly:

“Go, Kropp.”

The tone has changed again—sharper, colder.

“Return to your quarters. We accommodate you, we preserve you, we spare you the conditions that would destroy you outside these walls—and still you remain what you are: an outdated construction, a remnant of a failed design.”

Kropp bows slightly.

He has learned not to take such words personally.

As he leaves, he cannot help but wonder whether, in this moment, it was not the so-called imperfect being who saw more clearly than the perfect one.

In the Name of Science: Plato Confronts God

The last echoes of the celebration fade.

The trumpets fall silent, the cymbals lose their sharpness, and what remains is only a distant murmur, dissolving into the morning air. Plato does not notice the imperfections in the music—the misplaced notes, the slight disharmony. The people may delight in noise; he has long since trained himself to prefer silence.

His double has finished the speech.

Below, the guards escort it—him—back into the Pantheon. The technicians will receive it, deactivate the chip, and place it carefully in its designated chamber, cushioned and secured like a relic of state. The body will remain, but only as a shell; the mind, temporarily withdrawn, returns to its origin.

Thus order is maintained.

Thus identity is preserved.

Or so it is said.

Plato stands alone now.

He had been advised to let his duplicate continue the procession, to accompany the guards to the statue of Allan, where the crowd has already begun to celebrate in its own way. There, beyond the formal ceremony, the event takes on a different character—less dignified, more exuberant.

A kind of festival.

Animals—constructed, of course—perform elaborate routines. Elephants form circles and produce the national anthem through carefully calibrated vibrations of their trunks. Unicorns—an invention entirely of the new age—spin on the tips of their single horns, balancing with improbable precision, their bodies drawn inward to maintain equilibrium. Lions arrange themselves into living pyramids, roaring in orchestrated harmony.

Impressive.

Ingenious.

And utterly absurd.

Plato dismisses the thought with a slight movement of his head.

Would it not diminish his dignity to be present at such spectacles? A philosopher, a ruler, a being of perfected reason—reduced to observing mechanical animals performing tricks for public amusement?

No.

There must be limits, even to progress.

And yet, he cannot entirely suppress a certain irritation.

The scientists—the Smoking Heads—have praised these performances as breakthroughs, triumphs of intellect over nature, demonstrations of what becomes possible once the blind constraints of evolution are finally overcome. They speak of innovation, of mastery, of a new phase in the history of existence itself.

But Plato knows better.

Or at least he believes he does.

When they are not lying on their marble platforms at the Place of Heavenly Peace, absorbing the energy of the sun and surrendering themselves to the pleasures of uninterrupted bliss, they occupy their minds with such inventions—solutions in search of problems, achievements that prove nothing except their own technical feasibility.

He stops.

For a moment, he presses his hand against his head, as though to steady something that threatens to shift.

“Am I the only one?” he murmurs.

The words are barely audible, more breath than sound.

“Am I the only one who is not... complete?”

He begins to walk again, slowly, almost without direction, his gaze lifting toward the glass dome above him, beyond which the sky now shines with the clarity of early morning.

There, in that vast and indifferent expanse, he imagines an interlocutor.

Or perhaps he does not imagine it.

“Lord of the mortals,” he says quietly, “you must have heard me.”

His lips move, but no sound carries beyond him. It is a conversation without witnesses, conducted in a space where language itself becomes uncertain.

“You heard how I defended you—how I justified your work. I spoke of your creation, of its triumph, of the order we have imposed upon what was once chaos. I reminded them of what they owe.”

He pauses.

“And yet... I had to force them.”

The words seem to weigh more heavily now.

“I had to deprive them of what I myself proclaimed as the highest good.”

His expression hardens.

“They would not move. They would not act. They would not even think. They lay there, absorbed in their bliss, indifferent to everything else. The state, the order, the future—none of it mattered to them.”

He takes a step forward, as if addressing someone standing just beyond the edge of his vision.

“Is this your design?” he asks. “Is this what perfection means?”

For a moment, there is silence.

Then he continues, more sharply now:

“They called you a god. They worshipped you, once—those primitive ancestors whose weakness we have long since overcome. They imagined you as omniscient, omnipotent, eternal.”

A faint, almost ironic smile appears.

“And now, here I stand.”

He spreads his hands slightly.

“I know what they knew—and more. I command what they could only fear. I have overcome death, eliminated suffering, abolished the crude mechanisms of organic life. If divinity is measured by knowledge and power, then tell me—what remains that separates you from me?”

The question lingers.

But even as he speaks, something resists.

It is not doubt—not in the conventional sense. Plato does not doubt his achievements, nor the principles upon which they rest. The transformation was real. The progress undeniable.

And yet—

There is a discrepancy.

A gap between what should be and what is.

“They do not want what I have given them,” he says more quietly now. “Or rather—they want only that. Nothing beyond it.”

He turns, his gaze drifting back toward the city.

“They have no need for purpose, no inclination toward effort. They have reached the end—and in reaching it, they have ceased to move.”

He pauses.

“And I must drag them back.”

His voice changes again, taking on a sharper, almost accusatory tone.

“Is this your answer?” he demands, looking upward. “To create beings who suffer—and thus move? To bind them to pain so that they may act? Was that your solution?”

The irony is not lost on him.

For centuries, suffering had been regarded as a flaw, a defect, something to be eliminated. And he has done so. Systematically. Completely.

Or so he believed.

Now, Kropp’s words return to him.

A sting in the flesh.

A primitive expression. Crude. Unrefined.

And yet—

Remarkably precise.

“If there is no pain,” Plato murmurs, “there is no desire. And if there is no desire... there is no direction.”

He closes his eyes for a brief moment.

“Then what have I created?”

When he opens them again, the sky remains unchanged.

No answer comes.

Of course not.

There is no voice, no presence, no divine correction.

Only the silence.

Plato straightens.

Slowly, deliberately, he regains his composure. Whatever uncertainty had momentarily surfaced is pressed back into the ordered structure of his thoughts, where it can be observed, analyzed, and—if necessary—neutralized.

There are problems.

Yes.

But problems exist to be solved.

“In the name of science,” he says quietly, almost as a conclusion, “there must be a solution.”

The words echo faintly beneath the dome.

Not as a declaration.

Not yet.

But as a decision.

The Update Center

“I’m terribly afraid. It’s here—here in my stomach. The fear sits there.”

“Please, don’t touch me! I have to hold on to it—my stomach. Otherwise it will jump into my head. And it’s so hot, unbearably hot. Thirty-five degrees in the shade. A brain like mine melts in that heat. Do you know the feeling when your mind seems to run out through your ears? It drives you mad. I can’t—I tell you, I simply can’t endure it any longer...”

Hieronymus Spice is not a man without willpower.

In the middle of the night he climbed the ladder leading to the third opening toward the upper world—a passage normally guarded by a single watchman. The man, however, had fallen asleep on his cot. Spice slipped past him carefully. Had he been caught, the consequences would have been severe: six months of hard imprisonment, forced labor—pedaling, always pedaling—to generate power for the underground lamps that keep tomatoes and beans alive below the surface.

No, that would not have been a joke.

He would never have risked such a flight, had it not been for the messages from his daughter Hilda—his only daughter, and dear to him. Why she had chosen to flee to the upper world and undergo transformation remained difficult for him to understand. Life below had not been without its modest comforts.

He had provided for her as best he could.

A capable hunter, they said.

“Yes,” he might have admitted, “I was indeed a skillful catcher of rats.”

On Sundays there were usually roasted mice; sometimes, if fortune favored him, even a fat rat—a welcome variation in a diet otherwise consisting mainly of greens, tomatoes, and beans grown under artificial light. It was not abundance, but neither was it starvation.

Why, then, had she insisted on leaving?

Because she had transformed.

That was the answer.

The heat could no longer harm her. And in her clandestine messages she spoke of the upper world as though the gates of paradise had opened. It was this—only this—that finally drove him upward: past the guard, along the Styx, crawling bent over for two hundred meters, and then climbing the steep incline.

Even before sunrise, sweat had poured down his face.

In daylight, the ascent would have been impossible.

At the top, just as Hilda had described, stood the building. Impossible to miss.

Even from below, near the Styx, he had seen the glowing letters:

“Center for Beatifying Transsubstantiation.”

Inside, the air was warm—but not yet deadly. A little above thirty degrees.

And immediately, a woman approached him.

“Stop crying,” she said, with a mixture of impatience and professional cheer. “You’re in the right place. Lie down. We’ll make this quick.”

She wore a white coat, spotless, reassuring in principle, though her tone suggested less patience than compassion.

When she saw his face, she added:

“You are in the best and safest hands. Look here—my insignia: certified up to five hundred degrees Celsius. At such temperatures, we Cybors hardly begin to feel warmth. You, on the other hand, may rest assured: once the procedure is complete, heat will no longer concern you at all.”

He continued to look at her uncertainly.

“Oh, come now,” she snapped. “Pull yourself together! You should be grateful. We are about to make a real human being out of you—a modern one, heat-resistant, and fully functional. Lie back. Relax. Cross your arms. It will take only a brief, painless moment, and you will be freed from that miserable earthly body of yours. A new one awaits you—immortal, flawless. All at the expense of the state.”

She paused, then added sharply:

“And I am beginning to wonder whether someone as whiny as you even deserves such generosity.”

This was Sister Misericordia.

Among colleagues, she was known simply as **MiseCor**.

Her manner, though perhaps surprising to an outsider, corresponded entirely to her function. Experience had taught her that Gaurs must be treated like children—firmly, clearly, without indulging their anxieties.

For was it not childish, after all, to enter such a place trembling with fear, when what was offered was nothing less than salvation?

And yet the Gaurs did tremble.

They always did.

MiseCor knew them well.

Creatures of the underground, accustomed to dim light, damp air, and modest expectations. Their bodies were poorly adapted even to moderate heat; beyond thirty-five degrees, their capacity for thought declined rapidly. At forty, it nearly vanished.

The temperature regulation in the Center was therefore not accidental.

In the entrance area, the air was kept cool enough to inspire trust. But once the patient lay upon the transformation table, the temperature rose gradually—subtly, almost imperceptibly—until resistance weakened and thought itself began to dissolve.

It was, after all, unnecessary to burden the process with prolonged discussions.

Such considerations passed through the Sister's mind as she observed Spice lying before her.

His distress, she knew, was not caused by heat alone.

The step he was about to take was immense: the abandonment of a life lived for decades, in exchange for something not yet experienced and not entirely understood.

Optimism could be presented.

Certainty could be asserted.

But the transition itself remained a leap into the unknown.

MiseCor had little patience for such reflections.

The whining of the Gaurs irritated her.

Her preferred remedy was simple: a steady stream of speech, leaving no room for objection.

“Listen carefully,” she said, leaning over him, fixing him with her dark, unwavering gaze. “We could leave you where you are—down there, in your damp holes. Nature has shown little mercy to your kind. On the contrary, it is slowly eliminating you. We offer you something else: full citizenship, immortality, a new existence. And what do we receive in return? Complaints.”

She straightened slightly.

“For the tenth time: do nothing. Lie still. Think of nothing—or, if you must think, imagine the full moon in autumn. Or think of Plato. Or of our Great Allan, who—”

She stopped.

Abruptly.

Her lips tightened.

Then, as if compelled by an unseen force, she began to sway—and to sing.

Her assistants, Brother Felix and the young Rottler, immediately joined in:

“Allan, Allan above all, above all in all the world...”

The interruption passed as quickly as it had come.

Moments later, she resumed her work as though nothing had happened.

“Now then,” she continued briskly, “we proceed. This hood—yes, I place it gently on your head. Good. The scanning begins immediately.”

She tapped the control panel.

“Your entire genetic disposition—do you understand?—is being transferred into the central cloud. Everything you have experienced since birth will be stored there. Permanently. A service provided by the state, of course.”

She smiled.

“And your new body is already prepared. Manufactured under strict quality control. Guaranteed functionality for at least three hundred years.”

She leaned closer again.

“And then—the final step. The union of mind and body. Your data will be implanted into your new brain—a chip no larger than my fingernail. At that moment, you will be one of us. Reborn. Immortal. Happy.”

Her gaze held him.

The machines hummed.

“Do you understand now,” she pressed on, “what happens if we do nothing? Your body decays. Your brain dissolves into a foul mass. Within hours—nothing remains. That is the sentence nature passes upon you. From nothing you came, into nothing you return.”

Spice’s face twitched faintly.

“And yet you hesitate!” she exclaimed. “You should fall at my feet with gratitude! Praise the Great—”

Again she stopped.

Again the reaction seized them all.

“Allan, Allan above all...”

This time, she recovered more slowly.

The strain was visible.

A conscientious worker does not have an easy task in such a place.

Then suddenly:

“Wait!”

A red light flashed.

“Voltage drop! Rottler—get on the dynamo! Quickly!”

The young assistant leapt into motion.

Pedaling.

Faster.

“The scan is stalling,” MiseCor said, her voice tightening. “Faster! The patient is losing color—this must not happen!”

At last:

“Good. Yes—there. Full power restored. The data flow resumes.”

She exhaled.

The crisis had passed.

Spice’s face regained some color. His eyes fluttered.

Relief spread across her features.

“How fortunate,” she murmured, careful now not to invoke the forbidden name again. “We have been spared a greater mishap.”

Spice opened his eyes slightly.

His expression had changed.

Calmer now.

Almost peaceful.

MiseCor allowed herself a final gesture of generosity.

“Mr. Spice,” she said loudly, “if you can still hear me, remember this: I have chosen a new name for you. A beautiful one. From now on, you will be known as **Spicy 1101.**”

She smiled.

“After a wine I particularly favor.”

The machines continued their work.

The process advanced.

And the man who had climbed up from the depths of the earth, driven by fear, hope, and the promise of something better, was already beginning to disappear into something else.

Damned Bugs!

In her own way, Sister MiseCor is one of the more remarkable figures among the twice-born beings who by now make up the greater part of Cyborstan's population. After all, she has devoted her life to assisting those unfortunate creatures in the vaults and caves of the underworld who, by reason of their ill-fated constitution, cannot endure the great heat of the upper world. A Cybor finds such sensitivity difficult to comprehend, being himself fireproof by definition; but she, the merciful sister, resolved out of empathy and compassion to help the poor wretches. Heat alone does not drive them upward. They have less and less to eat as well. Hunger and heat: these are the true reasons why they now stream in crowds to the Center to be professionally transformed.

It is only a pity that the sister finds among the Gaurs so little elevation of mind. Idealism is nowhere to be seen. The young and the strong among them care nothing for immortality and just as little for a fireproof body bearing the state seal of approval. They want food, that is all—food and an end to their beastly sweating. These are the real motives that now cause the Gaurs to besiege the Center for Beatifying Transsubstantiation. No doubt they are impressed by Sister MiseCor, who performs her philanthropic duty twenty-four hours a day without tiring and without shedding so much as a single drop of sweat. But the old humans are lamentably uneducated. They care nothing for the progressive ideology of the new mankind. Most applicants for beatifying transsubstantiation cannot even pronounce the phrase correctly. They say “transsub” or “tranziation.” That the new human remains as fresh at seventy and even two hundred degrees Celsius as they themselves are at best at thirty—that, and that alone, seems to them a persuasive argument. At least these mournful earth-ghosts do not fail to notice that every citizen of Cyborstan possesses a body made of indestructible material, fashioned from plastic and metals, including a number of particularly precious rare earths. Such things can indeed make a Gaur turn pale with envy, for his own body consists of the same worthless substance as that of dogs, cats, and cattle—hardly a cause for pride.

MiseCor has neither lack of time nor lack of opportunity for reflections of this kind. She comes into professional contact with the Gaurs every day. And yet scientific objectivity requires the narrator to make a clarification here, precisely with regard to the compassionate sister. The reader would do well not to place entirely uncritical faith in the promises of the new world. It must be admitted, in fairness, that even Sister MiseCor is no flawless specimen of the new humanity; in other words, said objectivity forbids us to certify her as one hundred percent perfect. This is not her personal fault, nor does it derive from any shortage of good will on her part. She is not morally responsible. The truth is simply that she suffers from a programming fault—among the Smoking Heads in the Ministry of Science, people prefer to speak more vaguely of a “technical failure.” That, however, is little more than learned circumlocution designed to minimize their own responsibility. Put plainly and to the point, the sister is from time to time afflicted by digital bugs: unexpected verbal attacks, embarrassing lapses that should not occur and yet continue to occur, even in this new world supposedly devoted in every fiber to progress.

This must be mentioned here because at just this moment such a bug occurs before everyone's eyes.

A moment ago the sister had been addressing the man with the large, frightened eyes lying before her in her official voice, loud and commanding and soothing at the same time. Suddenly, without the least visible cause, an uncontrolled flood of speech begins bubbling out of her. It

seems to rise straight from the abdomen into the throat—words that never should have crossed the threshold of the observing mind.

“Well now, my dear old fellow,” it bubbles out of her, “you do have an intelligent face. I thought so at once: this one might make it to Level One, to the Guardians, to our philosophers, where the highest intelligence of the state unfolds. Yes, that’s what I thought; but no, old sinner, you are not eligible. Sadly, you have only a limited IQ of one hundred and twenty. That is enough for the Warriors, of course—defense requires courage and muscle, while intellect may largely be dispensed with—but for you, my dear man, only the second tier is possible. With an IQ of one hundred and twenty, one does not enter the limited edition of the philosophers. That is how it is at your age. Alzheimer is already crouching at the door and has clearly been gnawing away at your brain.”

The sister has fallen into a kind of babbling trance.

“You see,” she chatters to the sleeping zombie on the table, “I was mistaken in you. Your intelligent face and those alert eyes led me by the nose. But mentally you are already half-chewed. Cyborstan cannot afford a specimen like you among the elite of the land. To get there you would have needed at least an IQ of one hundred and forty-five. *Pacem et benedictionem*, I say to you nevertheless from my compassionate heart...”

We need not comment further on this uncontrolled outpouring from an otherwise respectable sister. That she embellishes her drivel with scraps of Latin may testify to a striving for culture—a tendency Cyborstan knows well—but it does not improve matters. True, by this point the man on the operating table has already been largely sedated; at the beginning he swallowed NirvanaSan, the little red calming pill. Most of his data have already departed his skull in the direction of the Cloud, yet he is not completely brain-dead. The chatty bug therefore constitutes a grave breach of the medical ethic of the Center. Never should any member of its staff, least of all Sister MiseCor, have spoken so unguardedly in the presence of an update patient about the candidate’s future status. It is sheer chance that the old man hears nothing of it, being by now little more than a zombie. Had Hieronymus Spice received the news in full consciousness that his Alzheimer-frayed IQ destined him for the Warriors rather than the elite, it would very likely have triggered panic and despair.

How did such an incident arise?

In the command center of the Ministry of the Smoking Heads, the brain chips of all citizens of Cyborstan are monitored in real time: an obvious necessity for any state with proper self-respect, since the government must be able at any moment to assist any inhabitant in the event of psychic failure. Thus Sister MiseCor’s bug duly caused a red warning light to flare in the Ministry, and the cause of her verbal derailment was immediately investigated and meticulously “evaluated,” as we say in the technical language. But technical language should not deceive us. In truth, the fault was not easy to detect. For of course Sister MiseCor is programmed from the outset to avoid, in the presence of her patients, any allusion whatever to the three classes of Cyborstan: the Guardians, the Warriors, and the Producers. Sister Misericordia herself belongs to the second class, the Warriors, since beatifying transsubstantiation requires sound procedural knowledge, but no extraordinary intellectual gifts. In that sense she possesses exactly the qualifications required for her task. Moreover, members of the Warrior class are programmed from the start to be immune to self-doubt and thus to radiate the degree of self-confidence necessary to dispel the fears and suspicions of the Gaurs who are to be transformed.

This is absolutely necessary, for nearly every Gaur who manages to reach the Center is animated—indeed, thoroughly permeated—by the hope that his rebirth will surely make him a member of the highest class. Delusion and vanity remain astonishingly widespread among the Gaur and persist in every stratum. Each imagines that only unfortunate circumstances prevented him from becoming an Einstein, a Napoleon, or at the very least a Picasso. Their second birth in Cyborstan will, they suppose, change all that. It is a typical error of the old humanity. In Cyborstan, excellence is the principle. Only an intelligence quotient above one hundred and forty-five offers a chance of admission into the limited edition of the ruling elite.

All this the sister knows—must know, by virtue of her programming. Until the moment of her damned bug, she had diligently kept these facts to herself in order not to unsettle Spice, the day's update candidate. Had he so much as suspected that his future existence would place him merely among the Warriors or—worse still—among the common rabble of the Producers, the gravest reactions might have followed. The man might have sprung from the transformation table at the last moment, or torn the scanning helmet from his head. Such things have happened before.

Poor sister. She knows only too well the fears of those placed in her care, yet toward them she must behave as though she knew nothing of such problems, indeed as though no problems existed at all. This time it was presumably the alert, though frightened, eyes of Hieronymus Spice that fascinated her so much that her own brain veered off course. Her quiet concern for the man's future fate made her curious. Might he perhaps possess what it takes to celebrate his resurrection among the philosophers? A perfectly understandable curiosity tempted her to connect herself with the artificial intelligence in the Cloud, which then communicated to her, while the scanner still enclosed his head, the disappointing truth about the old man's half-eaten IQ.

From these facts the experts in the Ministry of Science concluded that Sister MiseCor's programming fault lay in an insufficient suppression of human curiosity and fellow-feeling. The command to remain silent about such matters had temporarily been paralyzed. Hence the bug, manifesting itself in incessant babble. The programmers saw themselves compelled to recalibrate her immediately and from a distance. As the technical phrase has it, she was newly "adjusted."

Fortunately, the diligent though, as we have seen, not entirely reliable sister is not alone in her task of granting salvation-seeking Gaur admission to the circle of the immortals. The Department of Beatifying Transsubstantiation has placed Brother Felix at her side. He is a man of thirty, with red, rounded cheeks and the gaze of a loyal dog. When the energetic young man first came up half-naked from the depths into the Center, they offered him immediate salvation as one of the twice-born. But then it emerged that Felix is an exceptional phenomenon among the Gaur: an incurable idealist. Before permitting the redemption to be performed on himself, he wants first to bring all his fellow sufferers, all roughly five hundred still-living Gaur, into a higher state of existence. In other words, Brother Felix is the living refutation of those black prophets for whom the world only ever grows worse. He sacrifices himself for others, although—as his permanently glowing crimson cheeks clearly show—he suffers more than most even at ordinary temperatures. This admirable resolve to transform all others before himself has earned him the name Felix, the Happy One. Happy even before his own second birth, he is a selfless brother to the whole human race.

That is why he has no need to hide the fact that he still belongs, in his own person, to the pitiable old humanity. While Gaur usually take pains to remain outwardly as unobtrusive as possible,

because they are ashamed of their backwardness, Brother Felix seems almost determined to display his inborn nature openly. One has only to look at his face to understand at once: this man is by no means heat-resistant. In the white room, at a temperature of around thirty-five degrees, his cheeks glow as if his head were in flames. One might fear an imminent stroke, yet this alarming prospect does not in the least prevent Brother Felix from fulfilling his task with the fervor of a saint.

His work in the Center can only be called beneficial. As soon as they see him, the update candidates allow themselves with surprising ease to be placed on the stretcher and under the hood. The blazing redness of his cheeks even encourages those seeking redemption to urge Brother Felix himself to undergo an update as soon as possible.

“My dear man,” Hieronymus Spice had said to him affectionately as he lay down on the table, “when I see you, I am overcome with pity for our whole suffering species. The sight of you pains my heart. I can see how hard the great heat is on you—with your cheeks as red as strawberry ice cream. That alone makes clear, even to a reluctant soul, how much we owe to the update, if it frees us from suffering of this kind. You are still young. You have a long life and the best prospects before you. My own case is different. I do not even know whether the effort of the transsubs—what is it called again?—you see, I grow so forgetful. Yes, of course: whether the transsubstantiation is even worth it.

“At my age such a question is understandable. Taken all in all, I have been reasonably satisfied with my former life. What is there left for me to do? Just now, before I lay down on this stretcher, I asked myself that question again. I have brought two daughters and a son into the world; one of them, my Hilda, already lives here in the Cybor world and is one hundred percent fireproof. One might say: enough. I recently refurnished the underground hole in which my son lives. My second daughter, with my help, found a decent husband. I have truly done enough. Besides, the moon is not supposed to crash into the Earth for the next ten million years. So as far as one can see, no immediate dangers threaten us. Enough, I say; all is more or less in order. With a quiet conscience I might finally say good-bye and enough to everything alike—to the lower world and the upper.”

Then he had sighed and added:

“Yes, brother, that is what I would have said, were it not for my daughter Hilda. She was transformed a year ago and has not let up with me since. What a disgrace, she says, to have a Gaur for a father, when it would be so easy for you, Papa, to get rid of the old ragged human. That is how my own daughter presses me. You see, that is the only reason I have forced myself to come. I let myself be persuaded, although—well, although everything is already completely enough.”

Brother Felix understands how agitated this newcomer is. The important thing now is that he swallow the red pill. Such emotional surges are not to be taken literally. They merely betray the animal fear of the transition. *Will I not simply be erased? Is my premature death being staged here?* That is the unspoken question; everything else is chatter. Against that fear only NirvanaSan helps, because the pill swiftly induces the desired calm in body and mind. Fear sets wild synaptic fires blazing in the brain of an applicant, which naturally interferes with any systematic scanning of the cerebral substance. Fortunately, NirvanaSan, the sweat-inducing heat, and the presence of Brother Felix usually form an effective medicine for extinguishing synaptic fires in the bud. Among the Gaur, the man is regarded as a saint, and that alone

suffices to make most forget what will eventually happen to their skull and their old body. They think only of the near future awaiting them as twice-born beings in Cyborstan.

But Brother Felix is not always gentle with recalcitrant applicants. At times he displays a surprising severity. So it is in this case, when the man on the table suddenly rises to the following blasphemous words.

“What am I supposed to do with immortality anyway?” Spice asks all at once, then broods on aloud. “What if in the end I die of boredom because everything has long since become enough? But no, not even dying will then be possible. As a Cybor I will no longer be capable of it, because you condemn me to immortality. Dear Felix, forgive me, but one does think such thoughts.”

This is exactly the moment for which Brother Felix has been waiting. When a Gaur on the stretcher strikes such tones, the pill has clearly not yet taken sufficient effect. For Felix, it is the signal for words of weight. He straightens his back and draws himself up before the old man.

“Shame!” he cries. “How can you speak like that, you defeatist? Are you an instance of *Homo sapiens* or merely its wretched caricature? Look here at this hand!”

He holds his hand close before the old man’s eyes.

“Do you know how many molecules are contained in the nail of the little finger alone? No? Of course not. You have not the faintest idea. In your entire life you never even asked. And yet there are specialists of the hand, called manologists, who devote their whole lives to such questions. In Cyborstan we have researchers for the hand as a whole, and now already for each individual finger, indeed for each segment of each finger. The index finger in particular excites a special thirst for knowledge among our manological specialists. One of them has conclusively demonstrated that the movements of its three segments mirror the structure of consciousness itself. That proof earned him the deserved Allan Prize!

“And now please look at my face. Have you ever asked yourself how many synapses fire behind human foreheads merely so that out of that fireworks display the miracle called man may arise? Tell me, have you ever heard of the tangle of neurons that makes your regrettably modest thinking possible? No, you have not, because instead you concern yourself only with whether immortality may not one day bore you.”

Here Sister MiseCor interrupts the saintly man’s stream of speech.

“Neuronal entanglement!” she exclaims in sudden excitement. One notices at once that something unusual is again happening within her.

“I have it,” she cries. “Cortical dissociation reveals itself in the divergent density of modified pyramidal loops in Layer III, while in addition the agranular configuration, especially in Area 4, emerges through the dominance of long-range projections; the heterotypic neocortex architecture contrasts strikingly with the isotypic granular structure in sensory fields, within which the distribution gradients of densely packed neurons and highly arborized pyramidal dendrites modulate integrative processing—”

Brother Felix turns first hesitantly and then in alarm toward his superior. She is clearly experiencing another digital bug, the second that very day. An entry from Wikigrandia, with

which the Cloud is assaulting her chip, has again burst uncontrolled through the barrier of consciousness.

“What can our dear Mr. Spice possibly understand,” Felix asks her in a gently reproachful tone, “of information of that kind? Dear sister, please take the mental capacities of our patient into account.”

Then he turns back to the candidate in a softer voice.

“Mr. Spice, remember this. In the new world no one suffers from boredom, and to die of it is impossible in principle. On the contrary, the Cybors find the span of time too short; they would most gladly wish for several immortalities at once. That is precisely what I have just explained to you by means of my hand and the brain. The hand will never be completely cartographed, and each single molecule will never be fully explored. And the number of cerebral synapses is, taken by itself, as great as that of all the heavenly bodies in the universe together. There is so much for all of us to know and investigate that no one need fear boredom for the coming billions of years. Be ashamed of yourself; collect yourself; come to your senses!”

Was it this admonition, or was it NirvanaSan, that finally brings the recalcitrant man to rest?

He nods several times in submission. Two tears run down his cheeks. He feels like a little child who has just committed a foolishness and has earned a punishing look from his mother. His eyes are wet and beg forgiveness, yet no spoken plea emerges. The scanner has done its work and largely pumped his brain substance empty. His features are visibly collapsing now. The lids sink over his eyeballs; his hands fall limp down the sides of the stretcher. Such is the state of the old Hieronymus Spice. Meanwhile, the Cloud beneath the Pantheon has been filled almost completely with what will now be the immortal mental substance of Mr. Spicy 1101.

As for the useless old body on the table, no grave will receive it. A stone promising eternal rest in the customary inscription is out of the question. Why should the new world retain such a superfluous ritual? As the candidate had already been promised, the new body was long ago manufactured in the Ministry of the Smoking Heads according to the measurements of the old one. Like every applicant, Spice had carefully filled out the questionnaire before his transformation. Question ten—whether he desired rejuvenation, and if so by how many years—he had checked with not inconsiderable enthusiasm. Yes, he would very much like to be twenty years younger. Outwardly, then, he will be preserved for eternity as a man of forty.

No one here mourns the old body. It is worth absolutely nothing any longer. In this matter science has revived an ancient tradition with its earliest origins in Persia. There, the discarded shells of the dead were laid out on towers so that vultures might consume them. So too has it become custom and usage in Cyborstan—for the benefit of those magnificent birds. While nearly all the rest of the animal world yielded to the heat together with old humanity, and only moles, rats, and mice—creatures of the underworld—survived, the vultures alone have endured the catastrophe. They still draw their majestic circles high in the blue vault of the sky. These mighty birds have always been credited with a special love of wisdom; and indeed they have ample time, while circling endlessly above the world, to brood upon its mysteries. They are especially fond of the Gaurs, whose discarded shells they consume, with science’s blessing, in so hygienic a manner that nothing remains but whitening and soon whitened bones.

Pleasure and Bliss in Cyborstan

Light as a feather—that is how I feel, reborn, almost absurdly reborn. I could jump, skip, dance; only I do not, because I am now one of the twice-born, a member of the Warriors, and therefore know what is proper.

Dear Hilda, I have my honor to uphold now, and a fitting dignity with it. Yet no one shall take from me this marvelous sensation, this feeling of lightness. My body no longer drags on me; it no longer pulls me downward as it used to. It is a triumph, nothing less, that gravity has lost its former power over Spicy, because inside I am now almost hollow. For sixty years I was a Gaur, an obsolete model; now at last I am a Cybor, and what is more, I wear a face made twenty years younger. I owe that to the good soul, that—what was her name again? Ah yes, to Sister MiseCor, who looked at a photograph of me from my fortieth year, my best age, and cried out in her brisk way, “Yes, this is the one we shall take. This is how the head shall look that we reincarnate into the new body.”

The good woman kept her word. I bear the face of a younger man, though in truth I had already been two full decades older. Every wrinkle from brow and cheeks has been ironed away. No wonder I feel so fresh, so almost youthful, in this new skin. But the main thing—the true marvel—she did not even mention. That is what gives me wings now. Whoever has not felt it in his own body cannot possibly imagine it. As I walk openly in the sunlight, the thermometer in my wristwatch shows no less than fifty degrees in the shade—fifty!—and I, once Hieronymus Spice and lately reborn as the Cybor Spicy 1101, can swear before all the world that I feel as well and as fresh as a swallow in spring.

Yes, dear Hilda, it is you, with your good advice, who have wrought nothing less than a miracle upon your no longer entirely old father. When I think back on the sixty dreary years in the depths below, I am seized afterwards by a kind of horror. They say that we Gaurs once populated the surface of the globe by the billions, but that lies so far back that no one now living has even the faintest inkling of it, much less a memory. We moles beneath the earth know nothing but dimly lit passages and damp shafts. Even down there it sometimes grew too hot for comfort, and yet only in those cooler entrails of the earth were we still able to survive at all.

But enough of memories. I am a new being now, transformed; I stroll along the main avenue of Cyborstan, with the statue of the Great Allan behind me and, ahead of me at the far end of the avenue, which I have only half traversed, the Square of Heavenly Peace and the towering Pantheon above it. The great man’s name I have only thought silently to myself, and yet even the silent recollection of the singular redeemer of mankind forces the hymn to my lips, the hymn everyone here hums the instant the founder’s name so much as crosses the mind:

Allan, Allan above all, above all in all the world...

Everything I see around me sprang from the mind of that genius. The avenue itself, for example, running arrow-straight from his bronze statue behind me toward the mighty seat of the gods. Of course the city existed before. Presumably the Gaurs built it centuries ago, when the temperature had not yet climbed above twenty degrees. But the special beauty of the avenue, its dazzling magic, comes from those splendid trees which Allan had the Smoking Heads invent. In the blazing sunlight their leaves no longer shine in monotonous green, as was once apparently the rule, but blaze blue, crimson, violet, or simply pink, in all the colors of the rainbow. How fresh and festive they look even from afar.

You know this, dear daughter. When one of us comes up from the underworld for the first time, the heart fairly leaps at such a sight. We saw vegetation of such beauty formerly at most once a year, and then only in miniature, at Christmas. In the small cave that was our home, your mother would decorate a tiny tree made of rods with tinsel and colored baubles, and in the end it would be adorned with two or three glittering lights. Once a year we allowed ourselves that luxury: once a year a little color and a little cheerfulness. But here these giant trees rise more than ten meters high, and each is built for eternity.

How I admire the crimson, deep blue, and partly rosy foliage of the artificial trees on either side of the broad roadway. Naturally they too are tested against fire; at two hundred degrees they remain as fresh as ever, incapable of wilting or drying out. Who would still wish to think of the incurable defects of their predecessors? Drought, so one hears, and the killing temperatures destroyed the old rubbish all over the globe. Let it be so. Who mourns it any longer now that Cyborstan has these glorious successors?

Ah, Hilda, if only you could see your father in this moment of blissful rebirth. I walk through the city like a man enchanted and transported. And on top of everything I am expected today to report to the post assigned me by the Ministry for Protection and Defense. They sent me a noble invitation:

Subject: Assignment of Employment for New Citizens of Cyborstan

Esteemed new citizen of our state! Having recently acquired, through the Institute for Beatifying Transformation, the status of a full citizen of the democratic people's republic of Cyborstan, and specifically as a member of Class Bb, you have thereby become a member of the Warrior estate (Class B) and are hereby requested to present yourself at the Ministry for Protection and Defense in order to assume, in timely fashion, the duties that await you...

And so, with this invitation in my pocket, I set out this morning toward the center. The Ministry for Protection and Defense lies directly at the foot of the Pantheon. Believe me, dear daughter: had one of my former companions in the underground told me only the day before yesterday, when I was still vegetating in those gloomy caves below, that I would feel so splendid on my first walk through the upper world, I should have laughed in his face. To an old Gaur such heat does not merely draw sweat from every pore; it robs him of life itself.

But all such defects are over now, and over forever, since I am a newborn Cybor. My dear, my wonderfully clever Hilda, immediately after the completion of the beatifying transformation I had every reason to beg your forgiveness in remorse. What a stubborn, thick-skulled blockhead I have been. Ignorance was to blame for my protesting the transformation to the very end. A mistrust of our glorious science had lodged itself in my brain, rotted by stupidity; mistrust of Allan himself. Now I live in the new world and know what a miracle the Smoking Heads have wrought in you, in me, and in the whole human race.

Only one thing—do not take it amiss from your old father—only this one thing I must still criticize. Let me call it no more than a tiny bitter drop in the cup of my rebirth. Did I not always believe—or did I only imagine?—that I possessed something of the thinker and philosopher in me? A thinker and philosopher, of course, in my own modest way. You surely remember. Even when you were a child I told you of pale Venus and red Mars and many other planets besides; and gladly I would wander from there into the depths and expanses of the infinite cosmos: exploding galaxies, red giants, and so forth and so on. Your papa always had a store of such

things ready. When at night we cautiously stuck our heads out of a hole into the upper world, into the hot open air, as we called it—since even at night the temperature was still much higher there than in our underground caves—I was regularly seized by the philosophical fever.

Do you remember? I would feel driven to count all the stars in the sky; and if a slightly less hot, even cooling breeze touched us, then I absolutely had to know from what land it had come—from Siberia, Greenland, or Antarctica. “You see, little one,” I would whisper in your ear, “it is curiosity that makes us human beings into philosophers. The philosopher asks and asks, and he goes on asking even when no one answers.”

You must admit, dearest daughter, the answers almost always failed to appear, but curious your father has remained down to this day. Unfortunately, that trait received insufficient appreciation during the beatifying transformation. They put your father only in the second estate, the Warriors. Sister MiseCor had already revealed as much to me before the transformation.

“My dear man,” she tried to soothe me while I lay on the bed and my data were already being sucked out—namely out of your father’s brain and into the Cloud deep beneath the Pantheon—“your IQ is, well, unfortunately only a little above one hundred and twenty. Among us Cybors that is enough only for the second estate.”

Nonsense, I still think. Must a philosopher necessarily be intelligent? Wisdom he must possess, and curiosity too. That, dear Hilda, that alone is what matters. So yes, they slipped that tiny drop of bitterness into my new existence during the rebirth. And so, because of this misjudgment, I shall probably never behold the Pantheon, the seat of the Cybor gods, from the inside. Very well, apart from that mistake I neither may nor shall complain. The world is arranged so that each should unfold his powers in the place appointed to him. You see, dear daughter, your father has already come to terms with his lot.

Still, I must pay attention—at every step through the great avenue, for example. It is called the **Avenue of the Smoking Heads**, as I have just read on a sign. I must watch myself because, as I have said, what I most want is to jump and dance. Yes, laugh if you like; you would never have believed your old father capable of such things. But if you could see how I feel at this moment, like some half-grown youth with the juice of life foaming within him. All my limbs are itching. One simply wants to jump when gravity no longer hangs so stubbornly on one’s members. I know, little know-it-all, you are surely smiling at my latest discovery. All this has long been known to you; indeed, you told me so beforehand. No wonder, you said, for the Cybor body is made of the lightest materials and is largely hollow inside. Naturally gravity finds much less to seize hold of.

True enough. Once again you were entirely right. But grey theory fades before fresh experience. That is why my limbs itch so. Out of sheer joy in life and high spirits your old papa would like to leap straight upward. You must understand: this is my first day in the new world. Why, this little hole in the street here positively tempts one to try. Believe it or not—I actually jump twice as far as before. But do not be alarmed; I jump only this once. No, I do not want you to have reason to be ashamed of your father here too. I know how to behave. To spring like a young colt is incompatible with my dignity as a member of the Warrior estate, which must defend the land—its land—against all outer and inner enemies, including deviants, lunatics, and cranks. There are rules for that, state-prescribed rules; the philosopher calls it ethos, and from that I, as a Warrior, may not deviate. What would people think of a defender of the state hopping down the public avenue? Such fooleries are left to the little people. Had I belonged to the third estate, the Producers, to the teeming mass, no one would even have noticed such extravagances. Who

cares how the common fellow behaves? But I have a daughter of the Guardians, I have you, and I know you must never have reason to be ashamed of a father who hops.

If only you could read my thoughts at this moment. “As a member of the Warriors,” I say to myself, “I have honor in my body now, a great deal of honor, and I may well be proud of it even if the philosophers would not have me.” Believe it or not, I have already fully accepted my fate, though I have not yet reported at the Ministry. I know this because a wonderful calm is entering my mind while I continue through the broad avenue in the radiant light of morning. From time to time I reach for the piece of paper in my trouser pocket. There stand the invitation and the precise department to which I am summoned.

It lay on the table of my apartment when I awoke from the coma after my transformation. Kind, is it not, the way a new citizen is looked after from the first moment? And yes, I like the little apartment too. Although, if I think of it carefully, a dwelling does not really belong among the necessities of the new human at all. The mind—I mean the brain chip—is safely housed in the skull already and has its own dwelling there. My new body, meanwhile, is not merely heat-resistant: according to the guarantee description it can withstand every sort of weather. In principle, then, one needs no roof over one’s head. And yet I gladly confess that I am pleased to have the place. You explained it to me before: the government of the Pantheon lays great value on tradition, and one does not wish to break entirely with the whole of history.

That makes sense to me, my dear; without an address one would feel homeless, and nobody wishes to be homeless. But tell me quietly, my dove, might there not also be a second reason for this arrangement? Are you quite sure the state does not find it easier thereby to supervise and control its citizens? It is only a foolish suspicion on the part of your father, still inadequately enlightened about the new order of things.

What catches my eye now are the many posters fastened to the trees.

HUMAN ZOO!

declares the strange heading, and beneath it:

See what you were before you became what you are!

There, life-sized, are shown two human figures entirely naked, complete with those primary sexual characteristics which nowadays exist only among the Gaurs and are known to Cybors only from Wikigrandia. Each is putting something into the mouth: the woman some wormlike creature still wriggling before her face, while the man appears to relish a roasted rat whose furious little mask still glares at the viewer from between his teeth.

The image is disgusting and is clearly intended to be; but the public, as is well known, loves sensation, and so crowds stand around every one of these posters.

“Ghastly,” I hear someone murmur. “The Gaurs are so horribly backward. One ought to let them die out; they are a stain on the annals of human history.”

“Fortunately there are only about five hundred left,” says another. “They live in the caves to the left and right under the Styx. I don’t know why the government must spend our taxes on a human zoo. Who still wants to see such primitives?”

At this point a man of the first estate joins them.

“They are an endangered species,” he says, correcting the others. “Their gene pool is valuable. Research cannot dispense with it. The government has established the human zoo for good reason. Every Cybor ought to know how far we have come in Cyborstan thanks to our Great Allan and thanks to Plato.”

At the mention of the Great Allan the people fall at once into reverent stillness. They draw themselves up, and all of us join in the first verse of the hymn to his praise:

Allan, Allan above all...

Dear Hilda, I sing with full throat and, believe me, with full enthusiasm too, because now I belong, because I am one of you, a genuine Cybor. And yet the poster inviting one to the human zoo, together with those two frightful figures on it, continues to stir inside my head. Nor can I shake off what the people said about shame, about descending from such underhumans.

At last I tear myself away. On the first day of my rebirth I am not going to let my mood be spoiled. After a few more steps toward the Pantheon I feel better at once. “Look around you,” I command myself. “Everywhere there is the atmosphere of a holiday.” Friendly, cheerful faces look back at one from every side—and not only human faces. At this very moment I also begin to notice our many-legged fellow creatures.

You know, Hilda, what meets me now on my stroll through the broad avenue fills me with amazement. In the depths below we had only rats, mice, and bugs, and these were generally unloved, since they helped themselves to the little food we so urgently needed.

Here, however—wait, there comes toward me a tall, slender figure with an owl perched on his right shoulder. A sizeable creature, with two enormous eyes, looking at me—how shall I put it?—looking at me with unblinking dignity. I am delighted and take courage.

“Dear sir,” I say to the white-bearded man, “my sincere compliments on this splendid bird. You are surely a great lover of animals. I imagine the creature must cost you something too, if only in daily feed.”

A very stupid question, as the slender gentleman immediately makes clear.

“You are new here, I suppose,” he replies, frowning, “otherwise you would know that second-generation animals require no food whatsoever. It is quite enough that we supply them regularly with energy. Current runs through their limbs and gives them all the strength required for the loveliest flights.”

Then he points upward with his finger and calls:

“Pallas! Show the gentleman what you can do!”

Ah, Hilda, how beautiful our world is, and how full of incredible wonders. Encouraged by this command, the bird launches silently from the man’s shoulder and rises in a slanting path high above the roofs until, in the sunlight, the great owl shrinks to a black point. But then, at the zenith, it suddenly plummets again with folded wings. I duck, throwing up an arm protectively over my head.

The effort was unnecessary. At the last instant the wise animal unfolds its wings once more, spreading them like a parachute that arrests the dive just before impact. Safe and entirely noiseless, the clever and obedient creature returns to its place upon its master's shoulder.

“Magnificent! Bravo! An unforgettable performance!” I cry, paying tribute to both man and bird. “You have trained it excellently.”

“Trained?” The man shakes his head and looks at me again with a furrowed brow. “As you can see, the bird is an owl; it has philosophy in its body. Dear Pallas,” he murmurs then to the owl, as though apologizing for my ill-considered words, “you truly need to be taught nothing.”

Then, turning back to me and speaking more loudly: “It is the same with us. Whoever is born into the class of philosophers needs no instruction. You, as I recognized at once from the two exclamation marks on your chest, belong to the second class, our esteemed Warriors.”

Ashamed, I lower my head. The man frowns once more, gives me the briefest nod, and moves on.

Had the day not been so beautiful, had the mood not been so festive, I would have had good reason to feel humiliated. My questions must indeed have sounded like those of a child. That owls are philosophical creatures I really might have known already. The Cloud had already whispered it to me the instant the man with the bird appeared, but I wanted obstinately to hear it from his own lips. At least he did enlighten me on one matter: only philosophers are entitled to keep an owl as companion and heraldic animal. Presumably it would amount to a legal offense if a man of the Warrior estate—your father, for instance—should decide to strut about with such company.

Still, despite the embarrassment just suffered, I must tell you that contact with a higher being also gives one a certain satisfaction and even pleasure. A little of the splendor falls on one's own person as well.

There is only one tiny thing, dear Hilda—at most a genuine trifle—that slightly dims my otherwise excellent mood. Not everything that glitters is pure gold, not even in the new world. I can hear already how little you will enjoy hearing this; I hear you asking why, on the very first day of my rebirth, I cannot stop grumbling. But be at ease, it is truly only a small matter. I feel vastly better than ever before, just not quite one hundred percent. A hair in the soup, no more. Yet even this small irritation keeps diverting my thoughts from their otherwise joyous course. I can confide it to you, though to a stranger I would never speak of anything so intimate. The fact is that from time to time there is a strange pulling sensation behind my ears—behind both ears—and it extends down to the corners of my mouth. As I examine myself now, it proves to be a rather disturbing and entirely new sensation.

This is the first day after my second birth, and the first day that this queer feeling has troubled me. Really an irritating sensation, positively weird, even if it is only a minor imperfection and presumably no more than a defect in the material. Yet when one is otherwise one hundred percent perfect, the smallest faults and pinpricks naturally loom larger. I will describe it exactly. It is the same feeling as with a suit that does not quite fit, at the shoulder perhaps. One twists and wriggles inside the troublesome covering; nervously one tugs here and there. I, for example, pull at both corners of my mouth and repeatedly tug each earlobe downward in turn. But it is no use, absolutely none. In the end I am reduced to comforting myself with the thought that a

suit will stretch over time until one day—though when will that be?—it sits exactly as it ought. That, my dear, is what I am hoping for.

By now I know how the Ministry of the Smoking Heads manufactures the human body. Brother Felix told me; he knows the process. After they have fabricated the body in the factory to the proper measurements, they immerse it in a bath—the bath of synthetic skin cells. That, he said, is the most advanced state of the art. In this bath the skeleton is wrapped as in a coat. One must imagine it exactly as in the old world, when an object of iron, say, was plated with silver or gold. So, he said, they treat the Cybors with artificial skin. The procedure has been refined so far that outwardly there is not the slightest visible difference from the Gaur. In truth, however, the difference is fundamental and could hardly be greater. The new skin does not age, nor is it parched by heat. They use artificial substances with an almost unlimited lifespan. It really is astonishing. The Pantheon guarantees each citizen skin of youthful freshness for three centuries.

“Good and fine—indeed, excellent,” I replied to that. “But it still pulls, unfortunately.”

And now something else occurs to me, something you once told me yourself. At the time I listened with only half an ear. It was immediately after your own rebirth, when we received the first note from the upper world with your news. You told us then that for quite some time your breasts had felt tight, and even under the arms. A few lines later, however, you reassured us that this was entirely normal: one carries the new skin around for a while, and then the skin gradually accustoms itself to the rest of the person, and the rest of the person in turn accustoms itself to the skin. Entirely normal, you insisted.

Wise child. I can picture you smiling slyly to yourself as you wrote it, and then going on, in the next lines, to rave enthusiastically to your then still unbelieving father about your transformed person. “All those superfluous organs of old humanity,” you wrote, “all that rubbish—liver, kidneys, lungs, intestines, and the rest—I need them no longer, thank goodness! Do you know what my inner self now consists of? No, of course you do not, you cannot even imagine it. I consist now only of hair-fine cables of conducting nerve strands and naturally several dozen tiny motors to move the limbs. Yes, keep looking at me from your eternally skeptical eyes; I know your old head cannot grasp the wonders of our modern progress. We Cybors no longer need any of the old ballast. How should one not feel light as a bird when inside one is as hollow as Swiss cheese?”

At the time I only shook my head in disbelief. That you could jump a meter and a half straight upward I simply did not believe. All that lies behind us now. I myself am finally transformed, feather-light, and full of gratitude. Well, up to a point, at any rate, since behind and around the ears and down toward the corners of the mouth it still pulls rather violently.

No matter, dear daughter, do not worry on that account. There is so infinitely much to see here—what matters one’s own small person and its ridiculous little ailments?

Indeed, astonishment follows astonishment. A broad-shouldered, somewhat grim-looking man is now approaching, and what do you think walks beside him on a leash? A full-grown tiger. A tiger! A creature of the underworld naturally sees such a beast in the open for the first time in his life; until now I knew such things only from dusty books. My God, for you and any established Cybor the sight is no novelty at all. You have lived here for years. But I—I hardly know how to put it—I am flattened with amazement, and not without a certain fear of the beast, I admit this to you openly. Of course I suspect it is made of plastic, just like the owl. But does that make it less dangerous?

Here, dear daughter, you may admire your father with a full heart. I did not retreat to the wall, nor flee behind a door, but took courage, approached the man at a respectful distance, and addressed him.

“Dear sir,” I said, “this animal is truly magnificent and so well behaved. May I ask, in all modesty, whether everyone in this state has the right to enjoy the protection of such a beast?”

The counterquestion did not even surprise me this time.

“You are apparently new here,” replied the broad-shouldered giant, “otherwise you would know that the handling of a sharp-clawed cat is a privilege of my estate. Only those who belong to the Warriors are granted the right to own such a dangerous beast and to lead it openly through the city. Great Danes, lions, and hyenas are likewise permitted to us soldiers. I myself prefer the tiger. Hyenas are not admitted to my house on account of their insane laughter; my wife rejects hyenas on principle. But of course that is a matter of personal taste.”

Dear daughter, unfortunately I did not know that one may safely address only a philosopher in public, because thinkers are generally peaceable. The people of the Warriors are best handled with caution. Had I known what would happen in the very next instant, I should have been less bold. I tell you, I never experienced such fright in all my life.

“Napoleon!” roared the man at the splendid beast. “Show the strange gentleman your art!”

Ah, Hilda, if only you had seen how the tiger demonstrated its art. Everyone else in the street froze as if nailed to the ground. With one tremendous bound the great cat sprang straight at me. I already saw myself lying on the pavement, torn apart, my head rolled aside, a tangle of red, blue, and yellow cables spilling from my shattered trunk. *It is over*, flashed through my mind; *certain death is before me*. And all this, dear Hilda, because in my fine holiday mood I had given my curiosity a little too much rein. So uncertain is human life!

But no—thank goodness, it is not quite so uncertain after all. The beast is superbly trained. In a second leap it simply clears my whole person. I feel a violent gust of air, as if a whirlwind had just slapped me across the head. But that is all, for at once the great cat returns to its master, whips its tail, rolls on its back with its belly upward, and wishes to be stroked.

What a thrilling spectacle. The people on the broad avenue, between the blue, red, and yellow tetratrees, clap enthusiastically. I myself have already forgotten that only an instant before I was looking death in the face. Indeed, I recover enough to imitate the master and murmur praise while scratching the animal’s belly.

Still, I notice that even a mock attack leaves traces of fear and panic behind it.

At any rate I stammer a little when I express my glowing admiration to the great tamer.

“Y-y-you know,” I say, still somewhat hoarse, for the voice is caught somewhere, “I—I also belong to the Warriors and am due to report for the first time today at the Ministry.”

“So I thought immediately,” says the man, “from the two lines on your chest. If I may offer you advice, get yourself such a fearless cat as well. It suits your future tasks as a guardian of the city. Lions are also to be recommended, especially for somewhat weaker natures,” he adds,

casting an appraising glance over my person. “At the moment, however, you must reckon with long waiting periods. It may easily take two or three months.”

He says this, gives a short nod, and goes on his way.

All I can say is this: one only truly comes to know a foreign land by measuring its streets in quiet attention, by observing its people, and yes, by allowing that the two- and four-legged animals too may produce surprises. What mountains of lies and fabulous tales were told to me—and to you as well, dear child—about the splendid city of the upper world. Almost none of it corresponded to the truth. Nobody, for example, foretold me that on the first day a tiger would jump over me.

And there is one further observation that I must confide to you. Promise me, though, that you will not repeat it to a living soul. At the moment of the jump—when the tiger sprang from the ground—something slipped into the scene that did not belong there, or so it seemed to me, something improper, almost ghastly. Half my terror in that supreme instant came from this alien ingredient. To put it bluntly—and promise me you will tell no one!—that alien ingredient was a squeaking sound, as if the joints of the tiger had not been used for some time. A real tiger—though what would one of us know about real tigers? I only imagine it thus. For in the underworld, among the Gaur, I never once heard such a squeak. So I am inclined to think now that these artificial bodies—the tiger’s and our own—must be serviced from time to time; perhaps even a general overhaul is needed. At any rate this squeak in the tiger’s body disturbs me. It had looked so elegant in all other respects.

But enough grumbling. Let us draw a sponge over it once and for all. I will not let this glorious morning be spoiled by so small a discord, especially as the people here are all so fond of animals. Tigers and owls I see no more; in their place there are many dogs and cats, and some people lead chickens and geese on leashes. That too looks surprisingly proper, the little creatures hopping and waddling along while filling the air with cheerful clucking and cackling. My curiosity no longer runs away with me, however. From the three vertical exclamation marks on their owners’ chests I can tell at once that they belong to the third estate. Tigers and lions are naturally not permitted to the Producers; besides, they could hardly afford such costly animals. The demand for daily solar charging must be considerable with those full-grown muscle-beasts.

And at that thought, Hilda, a great sadness suddenly comes over your father. At once all our unhappy fellow countrymen of yesterday stand before my eyes. I see the poor devils at their pedals, pumping and pumping from early morning until evening, and the next day the same again, sometimes not merely for days but for weeks. And why this dreadful torment? Because in the upper world the sun does not always shine, and the wind too may fail, and yet the generators must be kept running in order to produce the necessary current to keep the Cyborgs and their luxury beasts alive and functioning. Then our unfortunate treaders from below must make up the difference. At such thoughts it falls from my eyes like scales, and I feel again the terrible pain of earlier days. You know that I myself spent part of my youth strapped upon a little saddle, sweating and turning a dynamo with the strength of my own legs so that you in the heaven of Cyborstan might continue to live. Slaves of the upper world we were; you too, my dear daughter, still knew that life.

But wait—what now is this? No, I cannot remain in the past another instant. There is far too much to see in the present all around me. Toward me now comes, together with the crowd that fills the broad avenue, a centaur—so it would seem at first glance—a rider upon a horse.

No, that is wrong again. Your father, in this moment, hardly knows what he is saying. The four-footed creature under the rider is certainly no horse. Since when have horses borne a horn upon the forehead? Such animals were not to be found in our old storybooks. Then what is it? Wait—the Cloud speaks up automatically because I have fixed my eyes upon the creature in wonder. Wikigrandia appears in great letters directly within my field of vision.

This is a unicorn stallion, it instructs me. And the following text appears equally clear and yet transparent enough that I lose sight of nothing in the scene itself:

Only the upper hundred among the five hundred Phils—the so-called Soks, or Socratesses—enjoy the right to ride such an animal, because they investigate the foundations of Being and Time. Plato, lord of the Pantheon, is the only man permitted to ride even a winged dragon on his excursions.

Dear daughter, at this sight I shiver in silent reverence. “Wonderful! Unique!” I murmur to myself. Wonderful too is the behavior of the crowd. Not a single person fails to move both hands to the forehead and shape the index fingers into a pointed arrow, so that the energy proceeding from the apparition may enter head and body alike. At once even the clucking of the chickens and the gabbling of ducks and geese fall silent. A hush of rapture settles over the broad avenue between the towering palaces and the mighty tetratrees. The unicorn, meanwhile, proceeds in perfect noiselessness through the crowd as it parts respectfully before it.

But no—that too is not quite correct. It is no longer perfect silence. Something descends from the rider and his beast, a cloud of luminous words, if I may call it that. The people about me bow their heads as this light envelops both horse and rider, and from the cloud come strains of heavenly music.

“Fantastic,” sings the voice. “You enlightened and redeemed. Greatest from eternity unto eternity. Gather the golden coins of light from the ground. All is for you. From the glowing dome of the Pantheon truth streams down upon you. Experience the sweetness of existence, experience the trembling of inward joy. It is Cyborstan, charged with the energy of immortality. Dear sun, you twice-born...”

At length the music ebbs away together with the words, and the unicorn proceeds solemnly toward the Pantheon, where rider and mount finally disappear. The people raise the heads they had bowed in reverence; the bustle returns at once, as though nothing had occurred.

Strange, dear daughter, strange and unique—but I am now already nearing my goal. I see before me the wide white-shining Square of Heavenly Peace, there in front of the Pantheon.

Enlightenment

Dear Hilda,

I still have not seen you, although I have now spent two full days in the new world. My registration at the Ministry for Protection and Defense was an unquestionable success. I have been assigned to a unit of grenadiers and have even been allowed to order my future companion animal. I chose an eagle.

You see, when one comes up out of that gloomy depth, one longs above all for perspective. There is something almost philosophical about seeing things from above. Your father has always wanted to know what the world looks like from a bird's-eye view. Unfortunately, I am told I must wait six weeks—at least. On the other hand, I have been granted a full week to acclimate before beginning my service. A generous concession, is it not?

“You’ve come from barbarism, I suppose?” the man at the counter murmured, smiling at me with a kind of understanding.

A rather direct expression, wouldn’t you say? But I do not think he meant it unkindly. On the contrary, he showed a genuine interest in my integration. He even enrolled me, on the spot, for a guided visit to the Human Zoo.

“You absolutely need it,” he said. “If you arrive unprepared from barbarism, your eyes must first be opened.”

At this very moment I am crossing the narrow bridge over the Styx.

It has completely dried up.

Two days ago I crawled out of a dark hole there, past a guard who snored so loudly that I had no reason to fear discovery. Now I stand above it, a little dizzy at the height, yet determined to reach the other side.

Have you been there already—I mean to the Human Zoo? They say it was opened only recently, by explicit order of Plato, Cybor the First. The President, so one hears, is concerned with preserving tradition. Every Cybor is meant to see with his own eyes the kind of human being that once populated the entire planet.

I confess, despite my registration, I hesitated.

After all, my own past lies only two days behind me.

But then I told myself: who better than I to judge, calmly and fairly, the progress from the old human to the new? I may be, as one says here, fully “renovated,” but I still catch myself, even now, in habits that lead me by the nose. For instance, I could not prevent my mouth from watering at the sight of chickens and geese being led about as pets by the lower classes. I found myself imagining—quite vividly—how delicious they might have tasted, roasted, in the old days, instead of worms and mice.

“Outrageous!” you will cry now. “How unrestrained, how animal-like!”

And you are right, my dear.

But that is how it is. One does not shed an old identity in two or three days. I understand perfectly well that in the future I must see in a goose a fellow creature, not a meal. I shall make every effort. In any case, the man at the Ministry—who had examined my file and assigned me to the grenadiers—seems to have guessed what goes on in the mind of someone freshly arrived from barbarism. That is precisely why he recommended the Zoo.

“There you will see the subhumans in their natural habitat,” he added. “There you will be enlightened.”

Enlightened!

Once upon a time, parents led their children toward reason—that was what we called enlightenment. Now the world has turned upside down. We parents from the underworld are the backward ones, and must count ourselves fortunate if our children become Cybors, so that they may enlighten us.

You, dear daughter, have been doing just that for some months already.

I still remember your letter—the one in which you described the intricate problems the Smoking Heads had to solve before they finally succeeded in creating the new human being. Not merely imagining him—the idea, you wrote, had always existed. Even the Greek Plato had entertained it. But the true achievement lay in realizing the idea here on Earth, once the average temperature had risen to fifty degrees. That, you said, was the real challenge.

And at that point you took the opportunity to instruct your ignorant old father in fundamental matters. I recall your words almost exactly.

There was, you explained, the old story: that a bearded man somewhere above the clouds had strained his mind to the utmost in order to create everything in a hurry—stars, galaxies, the Earth, and finally all the crawling creatures upon it, including us sinful humans. Six days, no more.

That, you said, was the inherited version.

But there was another.

According to the Smoking Heads, the bearded man was a mere invention—and a homeless one at that, since despite all efforts, his residence had never been located anywhere in the cosmos. No such figure was needed. Blind chance, in cooperation with eternal and immutable laws, was entirely sufficient—provided one granted them enough time. Considerably more than seven days, of course.

Yes, my dear child, in the end you did succeed in enlightening your foolish old father.

But you were always a bit of a rogue, and remain so even now. Just when I thought I had understood everything, you swept away both explanations with a single stroke.

“That is what people believed in their ignorance,” you wrote, “but then came the Great Allan.”

He examined the entire matter thoroughly—and from that moment onward, everything took a new and entirely different course.

With a logarithmic table and a five-dimensional matrix in his left hand, and a pen in his right, Allan sat down at a drafting table and sketched the new human being in a few grand strokes. After that, it was a simple matter for the Scis to produce the Cybor scientifically, precisely, and in series.

The bearded god was obsolete.

So too was blind evolution.

That, I must admit, was quite a fireworks display at the end of your letter.

“Papa,” you added, “the Cybor is planned down to the last detail. From the tiny chip in his head—not larger than a fingernail—to the miniature motors in his joints, everything has been researched, tested, and perfected in the laboratory.”

At the time, your stubborn father merely shook his head.

Do not hold it against me now.

I have come to understand that every word you wrote was true. Like the doubting Thomas, I had to see and touch the truth myself before I could overcome my disbelief. From my own experience I can confirm that the planning—your planning with logarithms and dimensions—has proven entirely successful, even in my own case.

Only—

well—

only behind the ears, and down toward the corners of the mouth, there is still a slight pulling sensation.

But really, that is nothing. Not worth mentioning.

Let us draw a veil over it.

From now on I intend to rejoice and to think positively.

In the meantime I have also gained a sense of orientation. The Human Zoo lies only about three hundred meters from the Pantheon—at least as the crow flies—if one crosses this narrow bridge over the Styx. I assume that this proximity to the Center is meant to emphasize its significance. No doubt the government regards it as an important historical monument.

And now I am almost there.

Before the Portal: Thoughts on the Use and Blessing of Castration

Good. I have now arrived and at this moment stand only a few steps from the monumental entrance. And there, just as announced, the guide is already waiting. He carries a staff with a red-and-green pennant swelling lightly in the morning breeze, so that one can identify him from afar without difficulty. Around him a group of other visitors has already gathered, perhaps a dozen people in all, every one of them wearing a friendly, expectant expression. The man at the Ministry had hinted that a visit to the Human Zoo was a duty imposed by the government, but if one judged merely by these eager faces, there was no sign of compulsion. It seemed rather to be considered a special distinction.

Everyone is dressed for the occasion. Two of the three women wear red blouses, and one of them has a magnificent peacock feather in her hair, which, I must say, becomes her extremely well. Six or seven men are present too, most of them in suits and ties. Your father misses nothing: every one of the visitors belongs without exception to the first or second estate, as can be seen from the one or two vertical marks each wears, even upon the clothing, to distinguish himself from the common people. As for me, I chose for today's visit a white tie with raspberry-red dots. I also notice a child of perhaps ten years of age, a carefully groomed little rascal with a surprisingly intelligent face, very different from the snot-nosed cave-children I remember from our underground world.

Even here before the entrance, a surprise awaits us.

Flanking the monumental gate stand two mighty colossi. On the left I see an ape, three or four times life-size. It seems to be putting something edible into its mouth, while drawing its unattractive face into an expression of well-fed satisfaction. What exactly it is swallowing I cannot tell. What I do notice, however, is that I alone step closer to the statue, while the other visitors, evidently embarrassed by the sight, avert their eyes. Well, it is an ape after all. In such matters kinship is apparently not a thing to be acknowledged with enthusiasm.

No one here is proud of you! That is what I read in their faces.

A certain awkwardness has spread through the group. They prefer to turn their attention to the second figure on the right.

And this second figure—my God, Hilda—I can hardly describe the shock that passes through me. For this figure is me. It is, so to speak, my own face looking back at me. There I see my own outward form, my physical likeness, exactly as it still existed a few days ago—indeed, only two days ago.

It is terrible, the way contradictory feelings boil up inside me at this sight. On the one hand, dear child, your father may honestly say that he lived in reasonable peace with his former self for a full sixty years. More than half a century he was an ordinary mortal, remarkable neither for any special virtues nor for any outstanding sins. I was a Gaur like all the rest.

And yet, on the other hand—

I tell you plainly, on the other hand this colossus appears to me like something alien and uncanny. To tell you the truth and nothing but the truth: for the first time in his life your father is ashamed. I even have to turn a little aside so that no one in the group notices my discomfort or my blushing. The old hands among the Cybors would mock a greenhorn like me if they learned that I have belonged to them for only two days.

I must confess it openly. The colossus to the left repels me, but the oversized Gaur on the right arouses no sympathy in me either. The way he plants himself there upon his stone pedestal in all his primitiveness and self-importance is simply ridiculous. Yes, Hilda, even the protruding belly leaves an unpleasant impression. In one glance it teaches us fortunate Cybors, we new human beings, that the archaic Gaurs were creatures condemned to eat and eat and eat, several times a day, only in order not to perish. How grateful I am to you, dear daughter, that this animal compulsion now lies forever behind me.

That colossus is a real shock. My strongest impulse is to hurry through the gate at once, if possible at a run, just to finish as quickly as I can with the acquaintance of those two giants. How can such backward beings attain so absurd a self-satisfaction, I mean such an idiotic grin? But I cannot move on. Our guide has stationed himself before the figure of the Gaur. Clearly there is still something to be explained.

He informs us that the naked, multiple-life-size figure has been carved from genuine marble—Carrara marble—and, he adds, after the model of a work created more than half a millennium ago by an artist whose name we may read here on the polished plaque at the foot of the pedestal. This ancient name, he says in his rasping voice, is now known only to a few scholars. *Michel*, it reads, *Michel the Angel*. In those days, he explains with evident mockery, they called him *Michelangelo, il divino*—the divine Michel—as though, he adds, anything could be divine in a creature whose dreadful fate consists in being buried after a few decades of life and eaten by worms.

At this the guide laughs, and we visitors laugh as well. No one among us wishes to hear more about an angel who, after only a few years on Earth, serves as worm-food.

But the guide does not leave matters with this mocking dismissal. He appends to it a word meant to restore and comfort us.

“How times have changed,” he says soothingly to our agitated minds. “His present-day successor, MicAn 457, the leading sculptor of our land, may with full right and justice be called divine, because he is one of us—immortal and tested against fire. From the number 457 you may recognize him as an acknowledged member of our artistic order.”

Bravo, bravo! The three ladies of the group accompany this information with enthusiastic applause. From that alone I recognize that even in the new world it is still the women who possess a special sensitivity to art. One of them claps so vigorously that her bosom begins to ripple and sway.

Strange, is it not? Please, Hilda, do not misunderstand your father. This is not one of his usual jokes, and still less any improper stirring. I only ask myself what that traditional front-structure of the woman still serves for here. In the new humanity, has it not lost its purpose entirely? No woman here nurses a child at the breast. Why should she? The human being is manufactured in the arsenal, according to the instructions of the Smoking Heads.

Well then, I willingly admit that not everything must have a practical purpose. I know that myself already; you need not tell your father so. There is certainly something higher than utility. But does a generous bosom really belong among such higher things? I know, I know: there is tradition, and even modern humanity cannot or will not entirely do without it. There must still be something one can be proud of. Quite right, my daughter, on that point I agree with you. No doubt this particular lady is immensely proud of her splendid frontage. I assume she ordered it in precisely those dimensions. Very well—why not? Your father is tolerant. Perhaps it is a great advance indeed that everyone may now choose what he wishes to look like.

But back to MicAn 457, whom the guide has just praised so explicitly. I gladly join in the general applause. One ought not to underestimate the role of art and artists. In another of your letters, you once hinted that the artists had managed to secure for themselves a certain percentage of influence over the outer appearance of the new human being, over his visible façade, so to speak. They called it art in construction. We owe it to them, you wrote, that hair is no longer intolerably monotonous, as with the Gaurs—black, brown, perhaps blond at best. In millions of years evolution never hit upon more than that. The Cybor, by contrast, now enjoys the total freedom of perfect self-realization in the visible ego. Did you not tell me that your own hair shines in rainbow splendor, from deep red all the way into ultraviolet?

But why does the guide still linger before the offensive marble colossus of old *homo*?

Yes, that I shall now tell you, although it pains me to do so. Your father, though now fully renovated and already healed, as you see, of several of his former prejudices, still carries a good deal of the old Adam in his bones and continues to suffer from certain inherited taboos of thought. For that reason I must overcome dreadful inhibitions in order to repeat what the guide now, without any trace of embarrassment, states in our hearing. He describes the colossus standing there in crude nakedness as though it were nothing more than a failed appliance or some useless machine.

“Look at this man’s lower body,” he says. “At the meeting point of the legs you see a tube, and to the right and left of it two small capsules. Good. Now turn once more to the ape on the left. There you see that the man shares this hanging apparatus with his animal counterpart. You will observe, however, that in the ape it is considerably smaller. The tube there is little more than a stump.

“What conclusion must we, modern human beings, draw from this striking difference? I believe every one of you recognizes it immediately. Clearly the Gaur attached special importance to precisely this feature, to this badge of his own primitiveness. Instead of discarding it forever as useless, as we modern humans have done, he even outstripped the ape in his devotion to it.”

I hear expressions of disapproval from the visitors.

“Hard to believe.”
“How indecent.”
“What perversity.”

The guide continues without pause.

“In this small but decisive detail,” he says, “you may recognize the great leap into the future, the incredible advance our species has made as Cybors. This archaic organ, this tube with its two capsules, is of no use whatsoever, now that the Smoking Heads have succeeded in bringing

forth the new human being in a manner entirely clean, hygienic, and perfectly decent. You know that he is produced serially in the center of Cyborstan. Every one of you has surely visited the arsenal many times.”

Here the man pauses briefly and adds in a tone of reverence:

“Thanks be to Allan the Great!”

It is striking how powerfully the group is carried away, even before our actual visit to the zoo begins, by such introductory words. The guide has really delivered a handsome opening. It is a sign of professional mastery when an official guide knows, from the very beginning, how to make himself agreeable to his audience. In these few minutes he has vividly demonstrated to us the superiority of our own species and its high stage of development. And naturally he binds us together still more by means of the now obligatory act of solemn piety. In Cyborstan every citizen knows that the name of the Great Allan, perhaps the loftiest genius in all of human history, may not be uttered without the immediate singing of the well-known refrain of the national hymn. As a newly born Cybor, your father too joins in, spine straightened and head raised toward the heavens:

Allan, Allan above all, above all in all the world...

What a moving solemnity.

Moving? Ah, dear daughter, our old language still fails us at every turn. One must grow accustomed to the fact that one is hollow inside and no longer possesses a heart at all. Yet though I no longer need that organ, I distinctly feel how, in the course of our communal singing, waves of bliss ripple through my whole person; my back in particular grows warm with it. As an old human being I had never before experienced such a sensation of happiness. You know yourself: in our damp caves there were no patriots.

Since my successful—how does one say it again? transsub, transstance, or something of that sort?—everything has changed completely. I am now for the first time able to speak with you, my dear daughter, of a subject which until now I had anxiously avoided, because what among the Gaurs passed for decency strictly forbade its mention.

But now I am a new human being, and you have been one for several years already. We new humans are, after all, above the old prejudices. Father and daughter can now speak of what once was unspeakable.

The matter stands thus, to describe it to you exactly. Two days ago, after I had been brought from the Center for Beatifying Transformation—equipped with a new chip and a new body, though still in a coma—to the new apartment at the eastern end of the city, I opened my eyes for the first time as a twice-born human being. I do not know how it was with you then, but I myself immediately babbled a few words to myself. One wants, after all, to know whether one still commands language. Then I recited the first nursery rhyme that came into my head, for one also wants to know whether one’s spiritual identity, the old self, still exists. So I said: “Lantern, lantern, above shine the stars.” Granted, in my situation that made no sense whatsoever, but from it I concluded that my former self was still present in the new chip. That reassured me considerably.

My old clothes were gone. I lay there in a nightshirt, while the ordinary street clothes of this place had been neatly pressed and set beside me on a chair. So far, so good. They had provided for everything. After a few more minutes in bed, I felt sufficiently restored and, apart from a slight pulling behind the ears, able to be satisfied with my new condition. So I swung myself out of bed. But then my old vice seized me, excessive curiosity, and drove me before the mirror so that I might inspect the newly manufactured body calmly and from top to bottom, entirely undressed. I removed the nightshirt—and then. Yes, I can hardly tell you how terrible that first sight was. I received a shock, no, a violent blow of panic when I looked down at my lower body.

“My God!” I cried aloud in horror. “They have forgotten something.”

Only yesterday I had still been a man, sixty years a man, with all that ordinarily belongs to such a state. Without that organ you would not exist either, my dear daughter. I know, your present higher existence you owe to the Smoking Heads, but they could transform you only because you first came into the world as a Gaur. Forgive me, I mention this only in the interest of scientific completeness and because the first shock of the dreadful discovery left me quite rigid. You see, my dear child, we are all creatures of habit. I simply could not grasp it—I mean that certain something between the legs, for there was absolutely nothing left there to grasp. A magnifying glass would have been of no use. Not the slightest trace of my former manhood was to be discovered. To be entirely honest, I fell into a state of complete confusion and madness at the sight—though I must also admit that the absence of the organ caused no pain whatsoever; had I not removed the nightshirt, I might not even have noticed the new anatomical arrangement.

Terrified, helpless, disoriented, I stood before the mirror.

“Well,” whispered an inner voice to me, “this is a fine beginning. Your entry into the beautiful new world begins with your castration.”

Fortunately, at that very moment I remembered that, as a newly born Cybor, I possessed a legally guaranteed access to the Cloud. A twice-born citizen need only think intensely enough of a concept, and Wikigrandia opens before his eyes, offering a precise explanation. So in my condition I thought several times in succession: procreation, prick, balls—procreation, prick, balls—and behold, Wikigrandia correctly recognized my need for enlightenment at once. Clear and distinct, though of course transparent enough that I could still move freely about the room, there appeared within my field of vision:

Among the Gaurs, a reproductive organ denotes a bodily apparatus which secures the multiplication of the species insofar as this is not, as in Cyborstan, achieved by serial manufacture. In the new world, the organ in question is not only useless but highly harmful. Because it constantly seduced the species into fornication, it brought original sin into the world and thenceforth ceaselessly undermined morality. Its total abolition in our Republic is therefore an act of sound reason. The government has, however, decided to retain secondary sexual characteristics, such as beards in men and breasts in women, since these have proven harmless and contribute to the otherwise commendable human desire for variety and ornamentation of the body.

Dear daughter, these knowledgeable explanations somewhat soothed the turmoil of my feelings, especially since I found them fully confirmed in my own person. The prick was gone and the accompanying balls likewise; I had to accept that. It helped me to see that the lower region, in any civilized land, remains under lock and key in any case, hidden beneath layers of clothing.

The little moustache, however, which I wear publicly and with some pride beneath my nose, that ornament of my masculinity, remains granted to me even in the new existence.

Only from time to time there steals over me, from behind, an evil memory. Had I still been the old Gaur among Gaurs, they would have shouted the treacherous word *eunuch* after me. You know as well as I do that among the primitives completeness matters: not a single part may be missing. A human being should on no account be hollow inside, and on the outside must be furnished with every appendage, even those hidden under clothes.

But I no longer wished to fear such prejudices. So in the end I shook off the first terror and shock entirely, stroked once more the relevant area, and instead of tormenting myself further said aloud to the image in the mirror:

“Man, be glad. Now at last you are a true Cybor, complete with everything that does not belong.”

And that, dear Hilda, is what I am thinking of now, as I follow our guide into the interior of the Zoo. What else will he tell us about our pitiable ancestors?

Listen—he has begun speaking again.

“You know,” he says, “that it was the lot of our forefathers to drag out, through all the millennia now past, a wretched existence and to bring the life of their species on the blue planet almost to catastrophe. Owing to the utterly ruinous irrationality of our ancestors, the entire globe has by now become hot, and in parts even boiling hot. Had it not been for the Great Allan—”

Here he pauses for a moment, turns to us with a pleased expression, and grants our group once more the opportunity to sing the prescribed refrain.

Allan, Allan above all...

Then he continues with equanimity.

“Had the founder of Cyborstan not succeeded, in alliance with the Scis, in transforming the great catastrophe, the terminal apocalypse, into a bubbling spring of ceaseless progress, humanity would have died out completely on this planet. The truth is as simple as it is brilliant: out of apocalypse there emerged the human being of today, and with him the unique civilization of Cyborstan.”

He delivers the last sentence with practiced ease. Presumably he has impressed visitors dozens of times with this same introduction. You know him surely, dear Hilda. At the greeting before the monumental gate he introduced himself as Cybor Superensis 78, that is to say Cybor Seven-Eight. Every one of those present understood at once that the man belongs to the high class of the knowing ones, the philosophers; and as a SuperEnsis he is moreover part of the limited edition of those employed in the noble profession of public instruction. You may imagine that the announcement of his rank filled all present with reverence and humility. By now I too know that it is only rarely granted to an ordinary citizen to meet a SuperEnsis in person and enjoy his instruction.

Do you know what I think to myself at this moment of reverent admiration? It is really the aura, I think, that first makes a personality important. It is unlikely he can tell us much that is altogether new. Every one of us here, like my own person, enjoys access to the Cloud, whose

infinite knowledge can be summoned at any moment. One intensive, questioning look at any object is enough, and all possible information appears before the inner eye.

That is marvelous, dear Hilda, certainly one of the greatest achievements of the state. But your father is not deceived by mere externals. He can even manage a little Latin and has kept one proverb firmly in mind: *Quod licet Jovi non licet bovi*. Even the ancients knew that everywhere in the world there are gods and there are oxen. A SuperEnsis may tap sources that remain closed to the ordinary citizen, because an excess of misunderstood knowledge only makes the unlearned stubborn and rebellious. In its wisdom, as you once explained to me, the government has allotted to the Guardians, the Warriors, and the Producers their own respective domains of knowledge.

This, I tell you, makes immediate sense to a philosophically educated man. The complete Cloud—all knowledge—naturally remains the privilege of the ruling philosophers. Just imagine if everyone could lay claim to omniscience. The world would be inhabited by nothing but know-it-alls. But I was speaking of aura.

Now that I see such an exalted being, a SuperEnsis, at close range, I understand its secret. It makes a mighty difference whether one receives truth from the authorized mouth of such a man or merely as a whispering suggestion from the Cloud. Let the common crowd proclaim that the earth is in truth a disc, flat and fenced around the edges: nobody listens. But if an esteemed member of the teaching estate announces the same truth, it passes instantly into the textbooks. Something similar happens to me now in the presence of this venerable man. The other members of the group seem to feel the same. His presence invigorates them; their senses are sharpened and uplifted. Looking back, I must say that none of us yet suspects how greatly we shall soon stand in need of such uplifting.

Yes, yes, little daughter, you are shaking your head once again because your father has struck a darker note. But how could it be otherwise on a visit to the Human Zoo? The past was indescribable. The gold of the new age and of the future lies over there on the Avenue of the Smoking Heads, between the Pantheon and the statue of the Founder. Here, by contrast, we descend into the grey past. Here, as the clerk from the Ministry already said, we are confronted with the old creatures of the globe and their barbarous habitat.

“Creatures,” remarks the SuperEnsis as he leads us toward the first building of the Zoo, just behind the entrance gate, “is by no means the correct word, certainly not the word sanctioned by science. Prepare yourselves, ladies and gentlemen, for the terrible truth. Evolution brought our ancestors into the world without any higher intention or insight—without reason of any kind. There was no creation involved, for they are, every one of them, the unintended, unplanned result of the stupid union between blind chance and the mindless mechanism of law. Strictly speaking, the Gaurs are the melancholy issue of a shameful meaninglessness.”

I listen to the great man in silent oppression. Now that I know you, dear Hilda, are safe, I can finally confess something that one never says openly within the family. In truth your father spent his whole life not knowing why he existed at all. Do you hear? His whole life—this unsolved riddle. But could one speak of such things to one’s family? Could one poison their good spirits and joy in life with such doubts? Certainly not. So I kept silent to this day.

And now, at last, after my second birth, I have found the solution once and for all.

You yourself had already given it to me, dear daughter, but I had not listened; I was not yet ripe for the insight. Only now, since I dwell up here, are there no longer any existential riddles for me. I exist—and all thinking people exist—because Plato, the rightful lord of Cyborstan, wills it so, and science, in accordance with his will, makes it possible. There is nothing further to say. Thought on this point is henceforth definitively at an end.

A stone falls from my soul. One cannot live a whole life burdened by an existential riddle; no human being could bear that indefinitely.

Inside the Human Zoo: the Savages and the Strttsch

But enough of philosophy. You left all that puzzle-solving behind long ago. What I want now is simply to see and experience what awaits us in Exhibition Room One.

The view opens out at once.

What a sight.

An exotic landscape of umbrella acacias and savanna stretches before us, and in the middle of it three human-like figures, half-naked and imprisoned behind a glass barrier several centimeters thick. The visitors stand there gazing at the scene with fascinated attention.

“How strange, how backward, how primitive,” I hear my neighbor whisper, while another remarks, “How tediously green those trees are. There is no color in them at all. Our tetratrees on the avenue are far more splendid.”

It is a man with protruding ears, tangled hair, and the face of a bulldog who says this, all the while smiling without interruption.

“Please take it all in carefully,” says the SuperEnsis. “More than ten thousand years ago, the entire planet looked like this. In the technical literature one speaks of father, mother, and child, and calls the whole arrangement a family. You see that none of these three beings resembles either of the others. The mother has two great balloons above her belly, popularly known as breasts. The father is flat in front, it is true, but his chest, like that of an ape, is covered all over in hair. Beside them you see a miniature version, a child, on whom, even at this distance, you can make out the hanging strands descending almost to the navel. Quite deliberately, the zoo administration has quartered these three dangerous savages in a narrow enclosure behind the barrier, but by your own observation you may verify the conditions in which they once really lived. They possessed no protection from storm, hail, lightning, or the many wild animals that then existed in terrifying numbers. At best, a fire of blazing logs gave them a little safety. Research pronounced its devastating verdict on such life long ago. The existence of our wild ancestors was lonely, miserable, hideous, brutal, and short. But the worst thing—was—was...”

Cybor SuperEnsis 78 pauses for a moment. One can see how much effort it costs him to name these crude historical conditions without softening them. Even a philosopher sometimes finds it difficult to preserve his customary calm. At last he masters himself and speaks aloud what must seem wholly unbelievable to every modern human being.

“My dear fellow citizens, dear Cybors of our beautiful new world,” he says in a low voice that almost fails him, “the worst thing I must tell you at once, and tell you plainly, is the manner in which our raw ancestors reproduced themselves.”

He inserts another brief pause, as though inwardly bracing himself for what must follow. All of us keep our eyes fixed upon him. We wait for the words—when something unforeseen, something entirely scandalous, occurs.

I believe I have already mentioned to you, Hilda, the woman with the lavish bosom, which she surely had made to such generous proportions in order to have something to pride herself upon. I also mentioned that she is leading by the hand a little chap of about ten years old. That, in Cyborstan, is by no means unusual. You know better than I that everyone here enjoys the right to incarnate himself at any age, though not younger than eight. Very small children are not tolerated, as the Cloud just informs me; with their incessant bawling and unruly ways they would disturb the harmony of society too severely. But from eight onward one may appear publicly in Cyborstan. No wonder that some are curious to know what it is like to spend a year or two as a boy, a girl, or simply neutral—that case too, I understand, is officially permitted.

Very well. Such a specimen—ten years old, I should say—has attached himself to the opulent woman, though she can hardly be his mother, nor he her child. They merely behave that way, because here, evidently, there are many people who still revere tradition.

Now listen to what happens. The boy suddenly darts forward and bangs on the glass, though that is strictly forbidden. Large letters visible to all clearly state:

PLEASE DO NOT KNOCK. GAURS ARE BY NATURE EXCITABLE AND UNPREDICTABLE.

The little brat does not care a bit for the prohibition. And as though that were not enough, he actually snatches the word out of the mouth of the SuperEnsis.

With a shrill, squeaking child's voice he utters the following sentences, which I would almost rather reproduce in writing than hear again aloud, so that you may fully grasp the enormity of them.

“Look,” he says, pointing his outstretched finger at the dirty little creature we see behind the thick wall of glass by the fire, “that savage there could be my brother. But don't worry, dear grown-ups, I can bang all I like and the pane is thick enough to protect your delicate persons from the three barbarians. If they could, they would fall on us at once, because that lies in the nature of such savages. That little one over there did not come from the arsenal of our city, the way I did and every decent Cybor does, where one is manufactured by experts according to the latest technology. No, I know exactly how that little one really came about, and I'm going to tell you, because you grown-ups always hide half the truth. You either can't bear it or don't want to hear it because it's so indecent. That little one had to be dragged out from between his poor mother's legs. Hear that? Dragged out. Yes, yes, I know, you don't like hearing it. Just look at the SuperEnsis, how pale he's become. A true philosopher—he stands so high above things that he simply can't bring the cruel truth over his lips. So someone like me has to do the enlightening.”

The performance of this small person with the golden braid over his shoulder leaves all present speechless. And not only because the truth, even a dozen meters away behind a thick pane of glass, is itself difficult enough to endure. What is really embarrassing, even repellent, is that we hear such words from the mouth of a ten-year-old child, and from so dainty and even handsome a boy at that. The ladies roll their eyes; the men wring their hands helplessly, since naturally one may not strike the little devil. That is forbidden in Cyborstan just as in every other civilized country. In other words, we all stand helpless before the phenomenon.

“A Strttsch,” murmurs the woman with the flower in her hair.

The man with the protruding ears and the eternal smile confirms the judgment.

“That’s what Strtttsch are like. It’s appalling, but nothing can be done.”

“Strtttsch?” I murmur to myself. “What sort of being is that?”

I have scarcely formulated the question before the Cloud makes itself known and projects the following message into my field of vision:

A Strtttsch is the term for a child possessing the intelligence and manner of an adult. As in the similarly rare case of albinos, the phenomenon is caused by faulty programming resulting from inadequate filtering of the degree of intelligence appropriate to the age in question. The formula, in which LK represents the life age of the child concerned, IQE the intelligence quotient of an adult in the typical age of forty years, and DK the damping factor reducing class differences to the average, produces for a ten-year-old the following expression:

$$\text{IQK} = \text{IQE} \times \text{ErfahrungKind} / (\text{ErfahrungErwa} - 30) \times \text{DK}$$

In 99 percent of cases, the filtering yields a being of the desired quality. In approximately one percent, however, for reasons not yet fully understood, not only the full adult intelligence but an excessive surplus of it breaks through and manifests itself in highly unpleasant form as psychosomatic dissonance.

Dear daughter, I can assure you that the group experiences this interruption as deeply embarrassing. Children are generally much loved, I believe among the Cybors no less than among the Gaurs, and surely regardless of the mode of their production. But such a little and precocious know-it-all, such a delicate sweet creature in the tenderest age, blurting out such outrageous things, can make a grown man like me blush with shame. Yes, I understand that the formula is wrong in his case—but tell me, how can such a ghastly error still befall the Smoking Heads in our own enlightened age? I can see well enough that the calculations are not simple. In a ten-year-old child the powers of speech are meant to be fully developed, but experience of life—no, life experience simply must not be there at that age. When you were little, my dear, your mother and I saw to it that you believed in that dear animal, the stork, though you knew it only from storybooks. We would never in our lives have sent you into a delivery room among screaming women. Such things are not fitting for that age.

Meanwhile SuperEnsis 78 has recovered his composure. He attempts to neutralize the situation in a philosophically superior manner.

“You are right, little person,” he says. “In those days the new human had to be dragged into the open from a mother’s body. That did not happen without screaming and shrieking, and yes, not without animal pain. The whole female sex was tortured, humiliated, and degraded in this fashion for thousands of years. The feminists protested early enough, but to no avail. And yet the foolish and, as we know, wholly senseless evolution had devised a more convenient solution from the very beginning. I refer, of course, to the banana, known to all of you. There the fruit is reached effortlessly by simply peeling the covering aside. No pain, no disturbing cries, everything in perfect silence and harmony. But such an elegant solution was denied to early humanity by evolution. So great was the irrationality of that happily overcome age that the Gaur remains condemned, to this day, to come into the world only under the greatest torment.”

You may believe me, Hilda, when I say that these wise and historically no doubt irrefutable words sent a shudder through everyone present. The lady with the magnificent bosom gives exact expression to what all of us are feeling.

“What a blessing that progress has freed us from such misery. How sorry I feel for the little one behind the glass. Will they ever transform him? Or is he needed here as an exhibit and therefore excluded from transformation?”

SuperEnsis answers her with a soothing smile. It is, I note with admiration, the characteristic smile of a superior sage whom no challenge can unseat. Instead of giving a definite answer, he says in a voice audibly moved:

“The exalted Council of Four can never err. Higher Reason remains eternally in the right.”

Hardly has he uttered this sentence before the visitors around me perform a strange gesture, hitherto unknown to me. They raise both hands to the head and touch the middle of the forehead with their joined index fingers, forming a little arrow, and murmur together in a chant-like tone:

“The exalted Council of Four cannot err. Higher Reason remains eternally in the right.”

To be honest, Hilda, this strikes me as somewhat peculiar, though it is undeniably a moving ritual. That solemn movement of both hands, the arrow of the fingers directed at the forehead, and then the spoken glorification of our Reason in such a firm tone. I assume the recitation belongs to the duties of a guide and his audience at the opening of the visit. Is it perhaps meant to strengthen our confidence so that the coming descent into the past, and into that world’s complete absence of reason, may not depress us too deeply? The confrontation with hairy apes and barbaric Gaur is bound to arouse profound discomfort in most visitors. In sensitive souls it may perhaps even turn into indignation or plain despair. One cannot help asking how it was ever possible—how it could ever have been permitted—that blind evolution not only conceived but actually produced creatures so pitiable.

But SuperEnsis 78 does not relent. While he regards it as one part of his task to strengthen the confidence of the group in its own superiority by means of accurately chosen words, he simultaneously hurls a challenge at us. His guidance is a continual alternation of reassurance and provocation.

“The apes,” he says, “we classify as animals. Yet who could deny that the Gaur resembles them in many respects almost to the point of interchangeability—a naked ape, in short? To admit this immediate kinship may require some effort, but the many resemblances cannot be overlooked. Like the hairy ape, his naked counterpart possesses arms and legs and a trunk carrying the skull at the top. He too boasts five fingers and five toes, and wears upon the head a dense ornament of plaits, commonly called hair. The ape must, however, arouse in us special disgust, because where the Gaur has smooth skin, the ape is disfigured by a dark and dense pelt. Nor can we feel much affection for that face with its projecting muzzle. The obvious likeness between them does not cancel our spontaneous aversion—I must insist on this for philosophical reasons. On the contrary, it intensifies it, since none of us can rid himself of the suspicion that the ape is, in truth, a caricature of the human being, a mockery and a figure of derision.”

He pauses for a moment before hurling out his next sentence in a stentorian voice.

“Thus there is nothing good to be said of the animal, the ape. But the Gaur is an even greater blunder of nature. Something great was attempted there—and what came of it? Something quite small. For the greatest shock, my dear visitors, comes not from the sight of the ignorant ape but from that of the Gaur, who in his folly imagines himself to be a knower, a *sapiens*. Such delusion fills us Cybors with pure horror. These creatures do indeed begin, in their own way, to think—but what use is it to them? None at all. It harms them, on the contrary, because for that very reason they have from the beginning been set upon a crooked path. Their supreme endeavor has always consisted in reviling one another, injuring one another, and finally even killing one another.”

Again he inserts one of his artful pauses, the better to lend weight to what follows.

“The reason for the narrowness of their reason lies plain before your eyes. Look at the unwashed man, the misshapen woman, the filthy little one. None of the three has access to the Cloud. They depend entirely upon that small amount of brain-jelly with which blind chance happened to fill their skulls.”

Dear Hilda, this sentence of condemnation from the mouth of a learned man has shaken me personally to some degree. Only two days ago I myself still counted among the Gaurs, even if I lived not in a wild savanna but in a furnished room underground. The Cloud was naturally inaccessible to me then, as to every Gaur, and yet I had been brought up in the belief that I belonged to the species of wise men, that is, to *Homo sapiens*. After all, no one likes to think himself inferior to his neighbors. I tell you plainly, this visit to the Zoo marks a deep turning point in my intellectual biography.

Nevertheless I now glance at my watch. It is exactly a quarter to twelve. So there are just fifteen minutes left until the most exciting moment of the day: feeding time. This is the event to which we all look forward with equal parts curiosity and unease.

At this point, all of a sudden, one of the ladies speaks up—a woman no longer exactly young, who had attracted my attention from the beginning because of the peacock feather bobbing artfully above her piled-up coiffure.

“But I have heard,” she says, “that the Gaurs take enormous pleasure in their own propagation. Supposedly they can never get enough of it. In the Cloud, especially in Wikigrandia, I read that it was their greatest delight. We modern humans are unfortunately deprived of that, because our reproduction—how is it called again?—auhsezzuell...”

“Asexual!” shrieks the Strttsch at once, that impertinent boy.

“The government has forbidden us that pleasure. I think it’s unfair!”

Hilda, if only you could see this scene. That insolent interruption is the last straw. The man with the protruding ears is no longer smiling.

“Something must be done now,” he says to the ample-bosomed lady. “See to that outrageously badly brought-up child at once.”

Our guide joins him in a stern rebuke.

“You must understand,” he says to the woman, “that I cannot tolerate a disturbance of public order. Bring the child to heel immediately, or both of you will have to leave the premises.”

The lady appears genuinely shaken by this reprimand. I can see how acutely embarrassing the situation is for her. All the more astonishing, then, what she does next. She draws from her pocket a little object, a glossy black object that, as I see at once, sits conveniently in the hand.

“Erich, my little one, look here. This is your Proxter. Today, just this once, you may use it in the morning. Look—there is an Angel’s Meadow, and there a Raspberry Forest, and further up you can see the Cloud Rider. He’s the one you like best, isn’t he?”

At once the child’s face becomes astonishingly meek, almost dreamy. The eyes, which just now flashed with insolence, grow soft. Greedily he reaches for the flat black device and taps with his hand upon a point on the display.

“Ah,” says the lady, “you chose the Cloud Rider. I understand. There you lie on the cloud as on a heavenly cushion and look down from above upon our splendid world.”

And indeed, a kind of blissful rapture immediately transfigures the small man’s face.

So that is a Proxter. We never had such a thing in the underworld. One sees at once that the child is now somewhere else entirely; he no longer pays the least attention to his surroundings. Around us the visitors breathe out in relief. At last, they seem to think, he will keep quiet.

Only the lady with the bobbing peacock feather does not.

“Auhsezzuell!” she insists. “The child is badly brought up and speaks far too much for his age, but he is right nonetheless. Why won’t the government allow us that pleasure?”

This renewed intervention plainly irritates the SuperEnsis. Instead of answering with calm superiority, he counterattacks.

“It is not ‘auhsezzuell,’ if you please, but *a-sex-u-al*. On so important a topic, you would do better to speak only when you possess a really solid knowledge of it. What was once called physical love, this animal process of propagation, was on the one hand indecent and immoral—which is bad enough in itself. On the other hand, it provoked thousands of wars among the Gaur. Have you at least once read of the struggle for Tooja by a certain Bommeer? No?

“So I thought. Then perhaps you should keep silent and not mislead your curious fellow citizens with confused assertions.”

After this stern correction from authority, the lady with the peacock feather falls silent. And it has just struck twelve. Our guide steps very close to the glass and points to the three archaic beings.

“The moment has come,” he says. “Look now—look carefully at what is going to happen.”

It is happening already, in this very instant. Were you here, dear daughter, you could tell that immediately from the shrill laughter of the three ladies. No, it is certainly not laughter of delight, not the laughter of a soul soothed into agreement. It is the meckering, cackling laugh of profound disturbance at something improper that is taking place before our eyes.

Inside the Human Zoo: Oral Ingestion

What is it that is unfolding before our eyes? I shall tell you, dear Hilda. You have not yet visited the Human Zoo, so you must hear it from me.

Behind the thick glass wall, high above us near the ceiling of the exhibition hall, several pieces of meat had been hanging. Suddenly—they had timed it exactly for noon—they drop down upon the three primeval humans below. Even beforehand they had been staring upward in tense expectation, evidently having sensed what was coming. Now their hands shoot greedily toward the dripping haunches, catching them almost in midair. The primitive woman holds her prey above the fire, but the father and son behave—well, I truly cannot put it otherwise—they behave like animals. Great chunks of raw flesh they stuff directly into their gaping mouths without so much as roasting them.

“Monstrous. Barbaric. Revolting,” murmurs the gentleman with the protruding ears and the tangled hair, and for once he cannot quite recover his habitual smile. “That is completely uncivilized. No better than jackals and wolves.”

An elderly man beside him appears visibly shaken by the sight. For his part, he pulls the little glossy black object—the Proxter—from his pocket and taps one of the “emotion magnets,” so that the Cloud may send him agreeable sensations with which the Proxter then floods his brain chip. There must, I assume, be a far larger selection than merely the “Cloud Rider,” the “Angel’s Meadow,” or the “Raspberry Forest.”

But why am I telling you this, my dear? For me it is all excitingly new, whereas you have known it for a long time. There are, I presume, different magnets for every taste and every age. In any case the effect is immediate. The old man’s features begin at once to relax in visible comfort. He has regained his inner peace. Perhaps he is now, mentally speaking, in the company of angels and listening to their gentle chorales.

By now I know more or less what these convenient little devices are for. It has not escaped my notice that the Proxter enjoys immense popularity among the Cybors. There is practically no one who does not carry one or even two of these things either in the hand or in a pocket. I myself received an example directly from Sister MiseCor before my transformation.

“A gift of the house,” she said. “The modern equivalent of *Man, Don’t Get Angry*.”

And in fact it works. I have already tested it two or three times on my own person. If a moment ago one was annoyed, anxious, or simply out of sorts, one need only tap, say, the “Raspberry Forest,” and at once the ugly creature or the hateful reality that had just caused irritation disappears and gives way to paradisaic landscapes. The scent of raspberries fills the air, smiling friends surround one, from whose mouths flow the loveliest compliments—in short, existence becomes bearable again. I can even report to you that that unpleasant pulling around the ears—you know the one—vanishes instantly as soon as I tap the “Cloud Rider.”

The group, incidentally, is so filled with disgust at what it has just seen that nearly everyone reaches for a Proxter, even our guide. Since at this moment I happen to be standing beside him, I catch a glimpse of his own chosen magnet. It bears the title **“Perfect Nirvana, Perfect Serenity.”**

Everyone follows the guide's example, everyone except me and one of the three ladies, whose name I shall now reveal to you. For reasons unknown to me she is called **Saint Bertha**. So the two of us alone form the exception, while all the others hold the little shining object before their faces in order to fortify themselves against feelings of revulsion. By now I know that among the ladies magnets like *Sea Murmur*, *Raspberry Meadow*, *Cream Cake*, and *Church Bells* are particularly popular, whereas gentlemen prefer *Flight of Gulls*, *Cloud Rider*, *Summit Giants*, or *Trumpet Blasts*. I look around me and witness with amazement how the extremity of horror has yielded to pure delight.

As for me, dear daughter, I am painfully aware of my past. For a long time I too seized my meals with vigor, and often enough with pleasure. On Sundays, when there was rat goulash, even with special pleasure. I make no secret of that. Still, I feel obliged to enter a protest. Did such indecencies ever prevail in our family as those now on display in this waistcoat-sized savanna? Did we perhaps shove mice and rats—or even the oft-delicious earthworm—into ourselves raw? No, that was never the case, and I can well imagine you shaking your head at the nonsense of it. Whenever we could afford it, we carefully roasted the valuable flesh over dry grass and a little heap of twigs, and then culture generally entered the picture as well—you will surely remember. Before consuming the excellent meal, I, as father of the family, used to send a few words of thanks heavenward. That was how civilized things were conducted in our home. What I am forced to witness here causes me real distress. In this manner our whole race is slandered. We were never like that.

But what is the use? Let us draw a veil over it. After one minute of emotional soothing through “Perfect Nirvana,” SuperEnsis 78 returns mentally to us and now delivers a philosophical verdict upon what we have just experienced.

“What you have just seen,” he says, assuming at these words the superior expression of the philosopher, “was what our archaic forebears called nourishment and what we Cybors call charging. There is nothing to excuse here and certainly nothing to beautify. Our Smoking Heads recognized that early on. To them we owe a rigorously scientific study of the revolting procedure. Its conclusion was this: the act consists in an oral *incorporation*—that is the technical term for the ingestion of foreign matter into one's own body. Pieces of another living being enter the interior of the homo. Unlike us, the modern human beings, who use the mouth exclusively for intellectual purposes, namely communication with our fellow beings, the Gaur possesses in it an opening that extends down to the lower end of the body and serves a purely material transformation. Through the opening in the skull, the Gaur incorporates pieces of the outer world in order to convert them into his own bodily substance.”

On the faces of those around me I read unbelieving astonishment. Spoken with such blunt directness, the words seem once again almost intolerable to some of the visitors. The gentlemen stiffen their backs, striving to display dignity and self-command. With the exception of the impudent Bertha with the bobbing peacock feather, the ladies seem less capable of such restraint. They cling once more to their Proxters and nervously search for another magnet.

Your father, dear Hilda, appears to be the only member of the group whom the spectacle behind the glass does not affect excessively. This is certainly connected to the fact that my transformation from Spice into Spicy lies only two days behind me. Until then, as you know very well, I looked forward to every feeding, and you surely did the same. I understand now, of course, that a modern human being should use the mouth only for intellectual purposes. Very well, at that time we were primitive, unenlightened Gaur, whereas you and I now belong to the race of the elect. But some time is evidently required before one is fully adjusted to the

higher culture. In any case your father is immensely proud that all his former brain substance has been reliably converted into bits and bytes.

Between ourselves, however, I must confess that I am not entirely satisfied with this visit to the Human Zoo. Granted, only recently I myself was one of the miserable creatures of blind evolution, just like these three backward specimens behind the glass. But must one therefore stage such a performance? We could not help being alive, nor wanting to stay alive. If you ask me, they should at least have placed knife and fork into the hands of the poor people behind the wall and set an electric stove in the savanna. Then they would at least behave more civilly.

SuperEnsis 78 now urges our group onward into the second exhibition area. Yet it seems to me that very few visitors are still willing—or even capable—of exposing themselves to further shocks.

And indeed, here everything looks completely different. In this second room, centuries are skipped. We are brought closer to the present—into the milieu of the peasants. Very well, one tells oneself, things should proceed rather more decorously here than among the hunters and gatherers in the savanna. One sees father and mother gathered around a circular platform of rough oak.

“Attention,” says the guide. “There you see the prototype of our modern tables. Naturally we long ago ceased to use them for communal incorporation. Among us they now serve exclusively immaterial purposes: for meetings and conferences, for spreading out upon their smooth surfaces the testimonies of our knowledge—state documents, diplomas, patents, plans, and so forth. As you may observe here, however, humanity of that time remained very, very far removed from such higher functions. Then, above all, it was a question of eating and reproduction. Besides the peasant and his wife, you see a dozen children with badly smeared faces crowded around the table.

“But now look carefully at what stands in the middle of the table: a great earthenware bowl. The peasant has not placed it in the service of mind or art. You search the table in vain for daffodils or roses. No—these figures wrapped in dirty linen are hunting in it for cooked things. In other words, for foreign matter which they push into their gaping mouths by way of introduction, exactly as previously described.”

The outrage of the visitors increases.

“I told you so—just like brainless beasts,” declares once again the little man with the protruding ears and the bulldog face. “Exactly like four-legged beasts. Though no—not entirely. A minimum of culture is already visible. These human-like creatures no longer incorporate their food with claws and paws, but use an instrument.”

“Very well observed!” says the guide approvingly. “That instrument is a ladle. Primitive man has undoubtedly climbed one rung higher. With some goodwill one might call it progress. But the principle remains the same and remains loathsome. These creatures can live and grow only if they daily incorporate a certain quantity of the outer world.”

Dear Hilda, I believe that is a fair enough description of the situation. On that all those present might have agreed. But unfortunately one must always be prepared for interruptions, objections, and unforeseen remarks. Suddenly the little nuisance speaks up again, the impertinent brat, this misprogrammed Strttsch. Apparently the emotional drug from the Proxter has just worn off.

“It’s just a zero-sum game,” he squeaks in his shrill little voice. “What the body gains, the outer world loses, and the other way around. Our government has always said the same thing. Evolution is stupid, it said, and nowhere near as inventive as our learned Scis, the Smoking Heads.”

This time the child’s remark provokes no indignation. On the contrary, people look down at him in astonishment.

“Wisdom from a child’s mouth,” says the gentleman with the protruding ears, and for once he smiles broadly.

Hmm, dear Hilda—is that your opinion too? For sixty years I bore the name Hieronymus Spice, and like every other Gaur I played that zero-sum game. The child is right, in a way: energy and matter were not lost. What the body gained, the outer world surrendered; when a body died, the outer world reclaimed its share. Yes, it was a zero-sum game, and in that sense perhaps pointless and stupid. But we Gaur by no means carried it out in a wholly mindless fashion. Our mouth was not exclusively for eating. We also used it for higher ends—for saying a kind word to one another from time to time, and occasionally for exchanging knowledge. Naturally that was mostly legends, tales, and similar things, not remotely comparable to the great learned science that fills the head of a modern Cybor; but we were not quite so stupid as the beasts either.

Wait—what can this mean? Am I going mad? Am I deceived by my senses? Dear daughter, this cannot be true. Hilda, I stand frozen before the glass and can scarcely trust my own eyes, because the man behind the pane—yes, the peasant with the ladle, fishing edible things from the big bowl—the man with the red cheeks, with that flaming redness in them, is perfectly familiar to me. I saw him with these very eyes only two days ago—at the Center for Beatifying Transsub—well, you know what I mean. I seize my head, no longer trusting even my own brain chip, and cannot tear myself away from the face of the supposed peasant. I become so agitated that, just like the disobedient Strttsch and against the express prohibition, I begin pounding violently on the glass in order to attract the man’s attention. Ah, Hilda, you know your father. When emotion overwhelms him, he ceases to be master of himself. The man behind the glass, however, does not seem to recognize me. So I cup both hands to my mouth and shout as loudly as I can.

“Brother Felix! How glad I am to see you again—but what are you doing there behind the glass among the peasants of the Middle Ages? You are no farmer; you are an indispensable helper at the Center for Beatifying Transformation! Two days ago I saw you standing before me in person, and you gave me the soundest lesson because I was so afraid. Brother Felix, I have not forgotten your kind words. So friendly, so helpful, the way you took trouble with me...”

The glass of a zoo is naturally rather thick, sometimes several centimeters. With tigers and lions this needs no explanation. Such beasts have strong paws and are known not to shrink from attack. Man is much less well equipped physically, but he possesses reason—even primitive humanity cannot be entirely denied that distinction. The peasant, for instance, might use stones or even the tree trunk visible in the background to fling himself against the visitors or to break out of the enclosure. That, at least, is how I explain to myself the considerable thickness of the wall here as well. Sound, however, the glass only partially blocks. I have noticed very well that my loud shouting produced a fleeting effect upon the man with the brick-red cheeks. He casts a second-long glance in my direction, but at once returns, with apparently unchanged composure, to the plate before him, from which he continues to fish objects one after another

with a wooden ladle and insert them, in the manner typical of the Gaur, into the opening in his skull.

He must not! I tell myself in my disappointment. He has been trained by the zoo administration! That is why Brother Felix does not respond to my greeting, although I know him as a man of fundamental kindness. Not for a single moment, dear Hilda, do I doubt that it is indeed the Brother who now, only a few paces from me, is carrying on his extraordinary existence in Exhibition Room Two of the Human Zoo.

Yet it is not granted to me to draw further conclusions from this insight or to attract the man behind the glass by any other means. SuperEmsis 78 is visibly indignant at my obstinate behavior. Looking me sternly and reproachfully in the eyes, he rebukes me before all the others.

“I must insist most firmly,” he says, “that our exhibition specimens are not to be alarmed by knocking on the glass or by violent shouting. A person called Felix, or Brother Felix, has never existed in the Human Zoo. The individuals exhibited here do not bear names at all. The administration assigns them numbers only. This man is a Gaur bearing the number 7.”

Inside the Human Zoo: Saint Bertha Wants to Embrace the Great Louis

With one last angry glance at my person, thus sharply put down by him, the guide of our group moves on into the third exhibition room.

There we see a hall such as I know only from fairy-tale books: a knight's hall, at the far wall of which, between two windows, a suit of shining silver armor leans upright. In the foreground sits a stout man facing us, and beside him two fat women with half-bare breasts. Over an open fire a whole pig is roasting.

"You need not linger over this," SuperEnsis whispers to us. "Everything here offends decency and good order in a particularly flagrant manner."

The visitors nod in agreement and follow him obediently into the next room, the fourth. Here, however, we all stop as though nailed to the floor; from several among us, myself included, a whole series of relieved ahs and ohs escapes.

Can these too still be our ancestors, those barbaric subhumans? That is what we ask one another, almost refusing at first to trust our own eyes. For in this hall we are no longer reminded of the naked or ragged primal humans of the remotest past. Before us there sits enthroned a man on a golden chair, his whole body wrapped from breast to crown in precious brocade, into which threads of gold and silver have been woven so that they glitter in the light. Dear Hilda, not even a proud and many-colored peacock could display itself more magnificently.

And look at the man's head. It is crowned with a covering of chestnut-brown shining hair, a mighty wig. His white hands just emerge from his cuffs, and his fingers are loaded with gold rings and flashing diamonds. Nor is he the only bird of paradise behind the glass. Beside him glow his wife and two lovely children beneath the bright light of splendid chandeliers.

We press close around the guide. He lowers his voice almost to a whisper, as if he did not wish to trouble the majesties behind the glass with loud words.

"That was the way of it then. The majority of the Gaurs lived in frightful primitiveness, but the alpha animals among them decked themselves out like birds of paradise."

Our guide seems to resist at once both a stir of emotion and a movement of inward disgust before continuing in his accustomed cool tone, though now a little louder.

"Do not marvel too much. Among the barbarians of his day this man was, despite everything, no more than an overdressed superior ape. He sucked all wealth and luxury out of his people only in order to adorn and fatten his own person beyond all measure. They called this man Louis the Fourteenth. He and his household wallowed in excess in a palace called Versailles, while at the same time hundreds of thousands in the countryside perished miserably of famine."

SuperEnsis pauses.

"Famine," he says then. "You fortunate beings do not even know what the word means. You would have to search for it in Wikigrandia in order to grasp its sense. When famine threatened,

the flow of matter from the outer world into the bodies of the Gaur's came to a halt. The zero-sum game was then temporarily suspended. Our ancestors shrank progressively, grew smaller and thinner, until, as they used to say, they 'gave up the ghost.' Their life-clock, as we would describe the phenomenon today in our own language, simply stopped. As you can imagine, every famine was for the outer world a significant blessing, almost a gift from heaven. No animals were slaughtered then, no plants or fruits vanished into human bellies; nature expanded while our barbaric ancestors sank powerless into their graves."

The group accompanies this historical lesson with approving nods. We must admit that even life in the time of Louis the Fourteenth cannot have been anything but full of torment. I could see the effect of the guide's words on the visitors. No, no one among them would have wished to exchange his own lot for that of the man sitting there like a peacock behind the glass while before him, on the artfully arranged table, all those unfortunate animals lie: partridges, quails, and who knows how much other flesh, which he, together with his numerous wives and children, keeps on stuffing into the unspiritual opening of his head.

And yet I have just been mistaken in telling you that no one would care to trade places with such a man. While the other members of the group express their indignation at the abuses of former times with all sorts of signs of displeasure, there suddenly sounds out once more the voice of the lady with the bobbing peacock feather. It is the same loud, unconcerned, and at this moment positively cheerful voice.

"Wonderful man!" cries the woman. "I could embrace him!"

"She cannot keep her mouth shut," whispers our guide, darting over us a look of acute embarrassment. By now I know: this is Bertha; some call her Saint Bertha. She is an artist—that much I have learned in the meantime.

The young woman differs quite noticeably from all the other Cybors present here. When we met before the monumental entrance gate, she flew toward the guide, spread her arms, and was on the verge of throwing them around him, though he, as a philosopher, clearly has no taste for such impulsiveness. She behaved in exactly the same way toward the guests standing beside him. She patted my cheek as though we had known one another for years—really an extraordinarily strange form of greeting. The woman is entirely unknown to me!

"But just look," she calls out, "this Louis had set himself a great, a lofty goal. He wanted to make all his subjects into higher beings. He wanted them all to live in palaces as he did. He wished the best for them; he even gave them knives and forks so that they would no longer dip their dirty hands into sticky sauces and then stain their splendid garments with them. This man was a model for his whole admiring people. Tell me—is it the fault of the great that they are surrounded by so many small ones? Admire the splendid clothing, the shining hair, the sparkling eyes, the golden rings on the fingers. I love this man!"

Some visitors grin; others pull a face. "An artist," I hear the man with the protruding ears murmur. "That is what happens when artists begin to speak."

Dear daughter, I believe artists do not enjoy any especially elevated reputation among the Cybors, and yet her intervention instantly improves the mood. The guide has preached nothing but solemnity to us, but the woman with the bobbing peacock feather does not care in the least for solemnity.

“A creative type!” says the man with the protruding ears, and apparently means it as a compliment.

In any case, I can testify that people even dispense with the Proxter when an artist takes the floor. Artists encourage laughter and joking. At this moment that is exactly what the company needs. When they look at Saint Bertha, the oppressive memory of the feeding we witnessed just before no longer troubles them so much; and for that reason they even overlook the fact that SuperEnsis 78 draws his forehead into steep folds whenever she so much as opens her mouth.

By now the midday feeding of the Gaurs is behind us and the afternoon draws on. But, as the proverb says with some justice, no one should praise the day before evening. One further detour still lies before us. How could we possibly suspect, dear daughter, that the administration has planned it as the pedagogical high point of the visit?

One might think, to begin with, that though there is certainly nothing to soften and still less to praise in our ancestors, they need not for that reason be condemned outright as criminals. Had not cheerful Bertha even declared herself ready to embrace that puffed-up peacock, that Louis the Fourteenth, as if he were a lovable man?

Well then, impulses of that kind, fraternizing impulses, are in no way consonant with the pedagogical intentions of the government—as we were about to learn. The Human Zoo appears to have been founded expressly with the purpose of proving to the new human being his own towering superiority, and to prove it by means of visible comparison with his ancestors, contemptible in so many respects. The aim is this: the visitor is meant to leave the Zoo in the proud conviction that his own age is not merely infinitely better than all the past—which most of them take for granted anyway. No, the intention of the central authorities goes much further still. It consists in awakening in the visitor a feeling of disgust. How, each person should ask himself upon leaving the Human Zoo, was it ever possible that our ancestors, the Gaurs, could show themselves cheerful and content while burdened with such horrible customs—one need only think of their indecent manner of reproduction and their daily ingestion of foreign substance? Was there no Ministry of Happiness and Justice in those days? Were there no Smoking Heads to put a stop to such nonsense?

Hilda, dear daughter, up to this point I had grasped only half of the government’s educational ambition. What was still to come remained unclear to me, not least because for the moment we are granted a little respite. We have just entered the fifth exhibition room. It is an open arrangement, one might also call it a treasure chamber full of the strangest figures imaginable. There are trunk-creatures, mammoths, dinosaurs, elephants; there are ancient beings that once lived in mud and sluggish waters, for example hippopotamuses and crocodiles. The guide reads all this from a sheet, for there are in addition an immense number of other creatures, all stuffed and long extinct, and we visitors nearly have our eyes falling from our heads with astonishment at such abundance. One can scarcely wonder enough that all these offspring of an unchecked and exuberant fantasy once really populated the planet. But that, of course, was long before our time. So at least one of the explanatory panels assures us, encouraging the visitor at once to ask the next question: what was the point of all this futile and senseless expenditure? All these creatures are long extinct. They simply could not survive the great heat of our present world; not one of them was fireproof.

“So why this entire senseless extravagance?” SuperEnsis turns to the group with that question, putting us almost on trial.

This time, however, the visitors scarcely listen. Senseless or not, fireproof or not—the question appears at the moment to interest no one. Instead, everyone stares like astonished children at these whimsical inventions of evolution, though evolution, we are assured, is blind and entirely purposeless. One can hardly see enough of the profusion. Your father too, dear Hilda, is fascinated. There are trunks and beaks and pointed snouts, all in the most astonishing varieties, and then those paws and claws and talons in all their endless forms. Nor has nature, it seems, been sparing with color either.

And behold, even the small man with the protruding ears and hair allows himself a remarkable statement.

“It really would be pleasant,” he says in his somewhat metallic voice—the speaker in his head is presumably badly calibrated, or perhaps this is again one of those accursed programming errors—“it really would be pleasant to have been a saber-toothed tiger once, just for fun.”

When the ladies cast him looks of horror, he adds hastily:

“One needn’t eat a gazelle straightaway.”

Another visitor, meanwhile, falls in love with one of the stuffed elephants.

“It truly wouldn’t bother me,” he murmurs, “to ride once on the back of such a giant. They eat only green things, the Cloud informs me, and were generally well disposed toward humans. That is why there were mahouts in former times, with whom they lived in close understanding all their lives.”

Then the little Strttsch pipes up again:

“And I’d have liked to be a crocodile! People would show me much more respect here!”

At such unqualified comments the guide is once again annoyed and feels obliged to make a correction.

“None of these beings,” he says in a cutting voice, “is heat-resistant. At fifty degrees Celsius at the latest they collapse, lie down, and within a short time rattle themselves to death.”

“But we still have dogs and cats,” the lady with the mighty frontage objects.

“Yes,” says the guide, “certainly. That is indeed desired by the government. But the Ministry of Happiness and Justice has them produced from fireproof materials and fitted with chips programmed by our Scis with artificial canine or feline intelligence. These are companion animals, as you know, good creatures to whose company we owe many pleasant hours and affectionate feelings, all the more because they too have been completely spiritualized. As you know, our twice-born cats and dogs are no more dependent upon oral ingestion than we ourselves are. Mother Sun charges them with spiritual energy.”

“Bravo,” I say to myself. The SuperEnsis defends himself with great determination against every relapse into the thinking of yesterday. It has not escaped him that in some of the visitors a sentimental inclination has begun to stir, a nostalgia, I mean, for these wondrous beings that once populated the earth. He rejects that nostalgia with all possible emphasis.

“I know what I am seeing,” he says, planting himself broad-legged before us. “I can see that some of you are still clinging to the old and the past, as though our reason, the reason of the new human being, were not capable of incomparably greater wonders. Are you blind, then, as you walk through our beautiful city, our unique Cyborstan? The Pantheon of the Smoking Heads has created hundreds of new beings. Four-armed drones that fan fragrance toward us and carry goods to the threshold of the house. Flying cups that bear us floating over the mountains. Robots that hop and spring and obey every command. Has there ever been such flawless creatures, such willing and industrious servants?”

These admonishing words of the guide do not fail of their effect. He is, after all, quite right, dear daughter. By now our Earth is inhabited only by peaceful beings. The old paws and claws, the antlers and horns, the dagger-like teeth in threatening jaws—all those were instruments of death and violence. We new dwellers of the Earth have reason to strike our breasts with pride. Away with the instruments of death: we have no need of them in our world, and may do without them forever.

The SuperEnsis convinces through the force of reason, which after all remains the privilege of philosophers. He tells us the truth. An age of peace has begun; one must only learn to understand it.

At last a positive feeling of proud superiority seizes those present. People turn away from the colorful circus of stuffed beasts, nod, and congratulate one another. Yes, one must concede to blind evolution a certain inventiveness—that much, certainly. With that thought the agitated minds begin to quiet themselves, and one feels one will leave the Human Zoo with the conviction that although everything is vastly better with us, not absolutely everything in former times was wholly bad.

In this mood, the visitors proceed toward the next exhibition room in something like cheerful courage. No one suspects that this very fluctuation of feeling was exactly what the government intended. At this moment none of those present has the least inkling that our visit to the Human Zoo is only in the coming minutes to rise to its true climax—a treacherous climax.

Inside the Human Zoo: Where Do the Creatives Belong?

Ordinarily, the educational purpose intended by the Central Authority is already achieved in Exhibition Rooms One through Three. By then most visitors are so shaken that—exactly as I saw with my own eyes—they reach for the Proxter to calm their agitated feelings, overlaying disgust and horror with agreeable sensations. But the Central Authority evidently regards that only as a harmless prelude to its far more ambitious pedagogical aims. It appears determined to ensure that no one leaves the Zoo without loud protest, open indignation, and at the same time the conviction that only our own age, the new age, has created the true human being and a perfected nature.

And so, dear heart of a daughter, your father now understands why one added a special building to the complex, and within it two further exhibition rooms: **House of the Hundred Dear Creatures, One and Two**. The Zoo has been designed with great care, so that one reaches the exit only after passing through both. In other words, SuperEnsis 78 need not really have burdened our consciences with so many solemn words. The visit to the House of the Hundred Dear Creatures surpasses in effect anything he could have achieved by mere admonition.

And yet we are deceived up to the very last moment.

At first one might believe that the end of this expedition into the past is to lead us to a particularly inviting, even a particularly beautiful place. The intended misdirection is reinforced by the large letters in rich red over the entrance: **ONE HUNDRED DEAR CREATURES**. At once everyone is inclined to imagine that an edifying conclusion to the visit awaits him here, that at last the barbarism before which we have recoiled so violently will be left behind us.

Ha! Dear Hilda, at that I can only laugh with bitterness. With malicious refinement the Central Authority leads us by the nose. It has saved the greatest shock for the end, so that protest and indignation may bite all the deeper.

This time, my dear child, I cannot possibly advise you to follow in your father's footsteps. Listen first, and only afterwards form your judgment. I shall now tell you exactly what happened to us there.

On a meadow, carefully fenced off from the visitors by an electric barrier, we see a whole variety of animal beings such as once populated the globe. Naturally, even here they can survive only because the administration artificially lowers the temperature to below thirty degrees. But such exceptional temperatures prevail throughout the Human Zoo. The plaques on the fence acquaint the visitor with the names of those two- and four-legged creatures of flesh and blood that have long since ceased to survive outside the Zoo. There are chickens and geese, goats, sheep, cows, and pigs.

“In the age of the Gaurs,” the guide instructs us with suspicious eagerness—for he naturally knows what awaits us—“these animals were among the most successful species, more numerous even than the Gaurs themselves. As you can see, they behave rather peacefully toward one another. Only one thing they cannot cease doing: eating. That, so to speak, is their life's purpose, it lies in their nature. For that reason they pay no attention to us, the visitors, but all the more to the meadow, for it is that part of the outer world which they ceaselessly

incorporate into themselves. This bad habit is by now familiar to you, ladies and gentlemen. After all you have already seen in the preceding exhibition rooms, the consumption of grass may indeed appear primitive and archaic, but cannot seriously arouse our indignation, especially since the grass itself does not appear to suffer greatly.”

The visitors nod at the guide. His perspective is philosophical, and in this case too it is readily comprehensible.

Thus it is that we enter the adjoining room with a certain inward composure.

But scarcely have we stepped inside when all composure vanishes at once. The ladies squeal in horror, the gentlemen groan and gasp. It is as if someone had put a knife to our throats.

Dear Hilda, I will not conceal from you that anger, horror, and disgust seize your father as well. Sixty years in the underworld lie behind me; you might therefore suppose me somewhat hardened. A man, after all, is expected to possess a certain steadfastness. But I tell you plainly: what I see here before me is crushing and humiliating to every feeling human being. The sight exceeds by far the limits of what can be borne.

Imagine it: they are the same hundred dear animals we saw before—chickens, geese, goats, sheep, cows, and some pigs as well—but in what condition! From steel hooks they hang from the ceiling; some half-plucked, their fine white feathers scattered bloodstained over the ground, others with their entrails bulging out, while the great heads of the cattle lie severed, their eye sockets empty, piled in rusty carts into little hills of skulls.

SuperEnsis is silent. He needs to say nothing more. A voice from the Central Authority, a dark bass from speakers hidden all around us, takes over the bloody work of enlightenment.

“They must be slaughtered,” the voice rumbles, “slaughtered every day in the same numbers in order—you know why—in order first to pass into the throats and then into the bellies of the primitive humans.”

“The dear animals! Ah, the dear, unhappy animals!” sounds from the group.

“I truly cannot bear this any longer,” wails one of the ladies. “This is an orgy of murder!”

SuperEnsis assumes an expression of deep oppression. But of course he knows that precisely this devastating effect has been intended by the Central Authority. He also knows that the visitors are here reaching in vain for their Proxters. The signals of the Cloud have been blocked in this area. Futilely the visitors tap with trembling fingers at *Sea Murmur*, *Raspberry Meadow*, *Cream Cake*, *Trumpet Blasts*, and a dozen other emotional magnets. They remain dead. The horror at the crimes of old humanity is meant to stay total and unmitigated.

My dear daughter, I must confess honestly that I too feel the intended effect in all its force. For the first time I recoil from my own former self. I shudder to think that until three days ago I was myself implicated in such crimes—and thought absolutely nothing of it.

And yet, you see, all at once protest rises in me as well. That is not true, I should most like to shout in the guide’s face. Never in my life did I consume a beef roulade or a pork cutlet. Goose liver there certainly never was for us, and Mother was never able to serve us a stuffed chicken. All that lies a hundred years or more in the past, in those days when our more fortunate ancestors

still lived above ground in the open air. We poor devils ate, on workdays, now and again a mouse, and on Sundays perhaps a roasted rat, but otherwise only earthworms ever made it onto the plate. And those, surely, do not belong to your hundred dear animals. So why accuse us? Why must we suffer so much contempt from you?

These are the words I ought to have flung in his face. But your father remained silent, whether from cowardice or perhaps because by now I am one of them myself. The wolf, whether born Cybor or Gaur, howls with the other wolves. No, your father is no better than the rest. After being forced to endure this hideous slaughterhouse, we want only one thing: to escape the horror as quickly as possible. When SuperEnsis opens the broad door to the next room, everyone surges past him.

And then, all at once, tones of heavenly music swell around us.

How refined, I think, how exactly adjusted to the visitor's psychology! The Central Authority has truly thought of everything. First it casts its unsuspecting guests into utter despair, opening their eyes to the hopeless inferiority of old humanity, and then it lets heavenly sounds descend as a symbol of the thoroughly transformed present. The room that now receives us festively at the end of our wanderings through the Human Zoo, under the wash of spherical harmonies gently rolling down from the ceiling, resembles an antechamber of paradise. Artificial roses, orchids, and angelic dolls delight the eye and soothe the mind. And now the emotional magnets on the Proxters, useless only a moment ago, begin blinking again. People already hold the devices before their faces. This time I too have pulled out the little black thing and am searching for *Landscape in Autumn beneath the Giant Moon*.

But against our will we are prevented from doing so.

A bright, loud, brisk voice rings out.

“Stop!” it cries. “Stop, you cowards, you weaklings and cowering souls, you look-away artists and blind fools! Does none of you realize that the Central Authority is leading you by the nose like cattle? It wants to make you docile, to persuade you that you alone are the blessed ones and that every human being before you was a senseless criminal. How simple-minded you are, how uneducated, ignorant, and unjust; too stupid even to open your mouths in protest. Listen to me. As a creative person I will tell you a truth that those above conceal—the Smoking Heads no less than the SuperEnsis accompanying us here.”

Hilda, do you know who is speaking these rebellious words while the guide stands beside her open-mouthed, speechless, and confounded? No—*stands* is not quite the word. He has leaned himself against the wall with his eyes closed, apparently completely thrown off his plan. Such a situation he has clearly never yet encountered.

It is Bertha, she of the bobbing peacock feather in the coiled hair. She stands there with arms outstretched, determined to keep the group from sitting down on one of the many benches scattered through the hall, where they would otherwise have intoxicated themselves with the emotional waves of the Cloud by means of the Proxter.

“Open your eyes at last, instead of fleeing reality through drugs!” says Saint Bertha—or rather, she shakes us awake with her voice. “SuperEnsis has told you only half the truth. It is true that all beings of that time were by nature mortal. They had a beginning—just as that has remained the case even with the Cybors. Every one of us was assembled in the arsenal by diligent

auxiliaries under scientific guidance, acting on behalf of the Ministry of Happiness and Justice. But with the Gaur there was something more: together with the beginning, there was also the inevitable end. There lies the difference between the higher beings of Cyborstan and the Gaur, together with the likewise mortal sheep, cows, and geese. The end was once the unavoidable lot of all creatures, a fate they had to endure.

“But I, as a creative and as an artist, add a message that SuperEnsis has omitted—because he and the government do not wish to know it. If things were as I have just said, if the end was the inescapable fate of all living creatures in those days, must we really be indignant that a cow, instead of being gnawed in the most disagreeable way by worms, was eaten by human beings, often festively and full of gratitude? Our government inflates this process into a crime. I object to that, and I hold up before you the truth it conceals. From a creative point of view, it was and remains infinitely better for geese, ducks, and cows to be eaten by Gaur rather than by wretched worms. A worm is a lowly creature, whereas the Gaur is a *sapiens*, even if not as wise as we in Cyborstan. As an artist, I insist that cows, goats, and their kind were fully entitled to be proud and happy that such a glorious end was granted them.”

The guide shakes his head and emits an undefined groan, while the visitors stare open-mouthed at the artist. They are so astonished and confused that they even forget the Proxters in their hands.

As for me, my dear, I am fascinated—indeed, captivated—by this woman. In sixty years among the Gaur I never heard such a provocative opinion. It contradicts everything I have hitherto been told about the difference between old and new humanity. I cannot tear my gaze away from her, nor from the feather bobbing upon her head. Somehow I feel infected by her. I sense bold thoughts beginning to boil up within my own mind, thoughts so newly stirred by that courageous woman that they almost take possession of me. Your father, whom you remember as almost always reserved, can apparently be otherwise. The words come out of him on their own.

“In those days,” I say, “all beings lived in fear of death. That fear accompanied them through life and was worse for them than death itself. Therefore they were glad when the end at last released them from that fear. Death was the longed-for redemption.”

Bertha laughs and turns toward me.

“Yes,” she says, “and equally no. You have looked into the cup of knowledge, dear man, but emptied only half of it. Everything depends on what kind of death we are considering. As a creative person I understand subtle distinctions. A sheep is only a sheep, but the *sapiens*, our ancestor, is in comparison a higher being. Now imagine, please, what happened in those days when a sheep was slaughtered and then eaten by a human being. It passed directly into the interior of a *sapiens* and was thus transformed from a lower into a higher being. For the sheep this was a blissful metamorphosis—it was the passage into a higher mode of existence, as immense as the transformation of a Gaur into a Cybor. Do you understand now why I protested, and why I called you cowards and weaklings? You have allowed the Central Authority to persuade you to see in the Hundred Dear Animals nothing but victims, instead of applauding the happiness that was granted them in the opportunity to pass into a higher form of being.”

On the faces of those thus rebuked there appears astonishment and incredulous wonder. The small man with the protruding ears and the bulldog face ventures to applaud the artist’s courageous intervention. Turning his head toward her, he says in a firm voice:

“Oh, truly. I must say, it is a great delight to live in our so blessed age. We understand now so much that was for our forebears a book sealed with seven seals. Yet it seems one must possess the intuition of a creative spirit,” he adds with a smile, “to resist the propaganda from above so convincingly. Intuition—that is the trump card of all great artists. You, dear Bertha, have never been a Gaur and certainly never a cow. You lack all experience of oral incorporation, and yet in magnificent intuition you grasp that cows, geese, and the rest were ennobled by being absorbed by and thereby transformed into human beings. The Central Authority concealed that from us. It wants to persuade us into horror, while the truth is evidently quite different. In fact the Hundred Dear Animals anticipated, in their own way, the beatifying transformation, because they perceived the higher purpose of their own lives in the opportunity to turn their substance into human flesh. And just think what became of the less privileged creatures—the rhinoceroses and mammoths, the hippopotamuses and cranes—that were not pleasing to our ancestors’ tastes or escaped this sublime transformation. They died out prematurely because they did not grasp the higher purpose of their existence. Only sheep and cows prospered right to the end.”

The man pauses for a moment, as if to collect himself.

“Personally, however, I remain very glad that we moderns no longer require the tedious matter-transformation of the Gaurs. All that eternal chewing and swallowing, all that exhausting digestion, and in the end the disgusting expulsion of the residue—on that point I entirely agree with our wise guide and with the Central Authority. We cannot spare the *sapiens* the reproach that he was a sorrowful misdesign.

“But let it be known to you, dear people,” he concludes, “that after all I have experienced here today in the Human Zoo, I am now doubly glad to be twice-born. The idea of having to provide lodging in my own body for a sheep or a cow fills me with violent disgust. But I can no more approve the manipulation of our feelings by the Central Authority. In any case, we have now honestly earned ourselves a few positive emotions.”

With that he taps his Proxter.

This Solomon-like statement is greeted by the assembled company with approving nods and even a brief outbreak of applause. For all the visitors plainly show the strain they have undergone, and they do not require a second invitation.

Your father, however, remains fascinated by the bright, loud, and brisk voice that so suddenly tore us out of the prescribed routine. *An artist, a creative one*, I keep thinking to myself. And as I turn that thought more and more intensely over in my head, behold, Wikigrandia appears at once to enlighten me fully.

An artist is the term applied to a special class of human being whose origin has not yet been fully explained. They are programmed like the philosophers and Scis of the first class. Since, however, they differ from these by certain noticeable irregularities of behavior, one assumes the existence of unknown programming errors. Artists clearly do not belong to the Producers (2001 to 5000 and beyond), because they make no contribution to the physical maintenance of the modern human being, which in Cyborstan is, as is known, accomplished by the sublime energy of the sun. They also prove unfit for the tasks of the Warrior estate (501 to 2000), namely the defense of the state against internal and external enemies. Yet their place in the first class is also disputed. The Soks, or Socratesses—that is, the philosophers (1 to 100)—do not wish to tolerate them in their midst, since reason is insufficiently stabilized in them. The Scis—in common speech, the Smoking Heads (101

to 450)—have banned them from their own ranks altogether, because, as they say, artists despise the real. Their preferred dwelling place is the imagined and possible world within their own heads. For this reason they have been relegated to the extreme end of the first class (451 to 500).

Inside the Human Zoo: A Murder and a sudden Death

So that is how it is, then. The people have settled on the benches along the walls and are drawing from the little black devices those images of confidence which at once transform themselves into a stream of positive feeling. Wikigrandia enlarges reason and knowledge; the Proxter soothes the emotions. I have enjoyed both.

Usually such a period of relaxation lasts between three and five minutes. Afterwards everyone feels reborn, rises, and resumes the ordinary business of the day. When I straighten up again after my brief excursion into a “Landscape in Autumn beneath the Giant Moon,” I notice that one of the three ladies—Saint Bertha, of all people—has already disappeared through the exit of the hall. Above it I read, in lofty red letters, the encouraging slogans:

Knowledge, Peace, Justice

How beautiful, I think, that the past dismisses us into the present and into daily life with words of consolation. Strengthened in this way, we shall now take our leave of SuperEnsis 78, our patient guide, who has been so maltreated by that little brat, the vile Strttsch. At this thought my hand glides into my trouser pocket in search of a banknote, or at least some larger coins, as I was accustomed to do in my days as a Gaur.

What a frightful stupidity, dear daughter.

Luckily I become aware of it just in time; my hand jerks back out of the pocket at the very last moment.

You miserable fool, I scold myself. Those are the manners you learned when you were still one of them, a barbarian from the underworld. In former times, a guide through a city or museum was a poor devil who, when his performance was over, stood before his guests with cap in hand—almost like a beggar or a homeless vagrant. But here you find yourself in a thoroughly transformed world. Here you have just enjoyed the company of a higher being, a SuperEnsis from the nomenklatura. For that is precisely what distinguishes our government from all former ones: no one is too exalted for service to the people. No, I tell myself in time, one must not dismiss a representative of the highest class with a tip. That would be not merely an unforgivable faux pas, but the grossest possible insult. Here I must accustom myself to elevated forms of conduct.

Dear daughter, I hope that today I am giving you at least some small reason to praise your father, perhaps even to be proud of him. Doubtless he is sometimes guilty of rash thoughtlessness—this he readily admits to you—but he has preserved his capacity to learn despite his age, and, as you know, that capacity is now conserved in him for all eternity.

Look there, now the moment has come. I observe how the two remaining ladies take leave of our guide in the refined manner customary here. They raise both hands to their foreheads before him, their index fingers elegantly joined into an arrow. I assume that in this way the energy of the higher being is directed into one’s own body. The men do the same, and naturally your father adopts the same beautiful gesture, by which the gratitude one owes is expressed not crudely in material form—for instance by means of an alms—but in purely spiritual fashion.

To distribute money, and money of all things called *tips*, that is to say money placed in the service of a vice, is after all a degrading procedure for both parties. I also bestow on our guide my brightest festive smile.

All's well that ends well?

Yes, dear Hilda, if you believe that, then this time you are every bit as careless as your father—you are making a monumental mistake. Reality rarely behaves as obediently as we human beings would like. On the contrary, it prefers to invent the most improbable events, and sometimes with something very like a stubborn passion.

Imagine it: at the same moment when I touch my forehead with both index fingers—far less elegantly, no doubt, than the two ladies who had just before us passed out into the open air—at that very same moment, I say, a scream shrills in to us from outside. The guide turns pale and rushes out through the open door. The other gentlemen push after him at once. A jolt of shock runs through my limbs. I follow with quickened step. Clearly help is urgently needed outside.

Ah, my child, if it were only help.

In truth, all help comes too late.

On that day I have experienced many things that shook me deeply, and learned much about my own past that cannot be softened even by the greatest goodwill. Incorporation, reproduction, mortality, and the rest—you know the list. But what I now see before me surpasses everything already suffered and learned that day, and surpasses it above all because it concerns ourselves, the new human beings. For there lies one of them on the ground—one of us, I mean—or rather, to be exact, one of *them*, though not just anyone. On the gravel lies a figure I had admired only minutes before, a figure that had held us all in its spell not long ago. That person stretched out there had only shortly before impressed us with courage, and with her bright, loud, spirited voice. Now she lies motionless in the dirt.

It is Saint Bertha, the creative woman with the bobbing peacock feather, only that the feather now lies trampled beside her on the ground. But not only the beautiful headpiece lies there desecrated and torn. The head itself has evidently been separated violently from its support. The murderer must have struck with enormous force, for it lies more than a body length away in the gravel, the nose turned to the sky.

My dear child, you cannot imagine what passes through your father at such a sight. I have always been disgusted by the sight of spilled blood gushing in streams from the wound of a Gaur. But what I must witness here makes me shudder far more violently. From the skull of the unfortunate Bertha there protrudes a tangle of silk-thin red, green, and yellow cables, all of them shredded, twisted, torn, and half-burned. These must surely be the remains of the artificial nervous system that joined the poor artist's precious chip to her body. I notice too that one leg has been torn from the body by force. The right arm as well has been twisted so brutally onto the back that every joint has sprung from its socket. Hilda, you know your father was never one of the oversensitive sort. I have seen more than one doomed person die without batting an eyelid. But the sight of murdered Bertha, with all those smeared cable-strands hanging in wild confusion from her skull, I tell you plainly, goes through my marrow and my bones. What sort of bestial criminals must they be who assault their fellow beings with such brutality—and a creative at that, one who surely never harmed even a fly.

I need hardly tell you that our small group stands shaken and speechless around the corpse, and around the guide, who remains equally motionless. We all understand at once that we have become involuntary witnesses to a dreadful murder just committed. The lady with the swelling bosom, who had gone out before the rest of us and whose piercing scream had summoned us, is now heard only whimpering softly. The little brat, the impertinent Strttsch at her side, has both hands pressed over his eyes and has at last fallen completely silent. The lady herself begins suddenly to sway; she would no doubt have fallen fainting to the ground had I not caught her at the last moment. You see, your father has not entirely lost his composure after all. He even manages to pull the Proxter from the woman's pocket and tap **Angel's Meadow**—a spring landscape in which lion and lamb lie peacefully together. That ought surely to provide some comfort to her soul.

What more am I to tell you of this accursed day?

Perhaps this much at least: that this is not yet the end of the calamity.

For what is uncanny is the way SuperEnsis 78 stares and stares at the dead figure on the ground with a fixed and frozen gaze. And then, all at once, something strange happens. His face hardens into a repellent grimace. A loud *Ooch!* breaks from his wide-open mouth. Then another *Oooch!*—and after that he does not stop at all, but repeats the meaningless and wholly unphilosophical sound again and again.

It is horrible, and at the same time inexplicable.

By now I have of course understood that this is a technical failure of his brain chip—a known reaction in the brain of a Cybor whenever the chip, confronted with a situation that seems utterly without solution, can no longer provide a rational alternative of behavior. In technical language, the phenomenon is called a **thought jam**. So, dear daughter, if ever you should hear such dreadful *oochs* with your own ears, you will know what I mean. It is absolutely ghastly. In a single one of those cries there is expressed the pain and madness of all humanity together.

Fortunately, such thought jams seem to occur only rarely. Strictly speaking, they ought not to occur at all, since artificial intelligence was, as I have always heard, trained from the beginning with omniscience in mind. But the murder that has just taken place has evidently overtaxed even the Cloud, and thus there arises the terrible scene with our guide.

Horror turns the man into a pillar of salt while he stares down at dead Bertha and emits those helpless *oochs*. I do not know which shook me more in that moment: the corpse of the poor creative, broken down into its component parts, or that hideous moaning.

You know, dear daughter, I imagine that such a blockage between chip and Cloud works exactly like a stroke in the old human brain. The overstrained chip becomes so hot that the mass of filler substances providing it with support inside the skull suddenly begins to smolder.

And that is exactly what happens in this moment with SuperEnsis 78. Two little but perfectly visible streamers of smoke curl upward in the bright sunlight above his head. He is becoming a **Smoking Head**, as popular speech so aptly calls the process. The rest you can no doubt guess. I see our guide sway for an instant before he falls lifeless to the ground—beside the artist's corpse.

Only a minute or two later, a deafening humming and roaring fills the air above our heads. Three drones steer directly toward the great square before the exit of the Human Zoo. The vigilant Pantheon has therefore already registered the murder. Some interruption between personal chip and Cloud must presumably have caused a red warning light to flare in the Central Authority; hence the speed of the reaction. The droning is by now terrifyingly near. How gladly I would have continued, a little longer, to enjoy the prospect from the height of that beautiful square across the valley of the dried Styx toward the Pantheon lying farther east! But the demonic squadron of drones drives the visitors away. While all the others flee across the high bridge, I strike off into the bushes and make my way down toward the river along a serpentine path.

Why do I hide, when I am innocent of the crime just committed?

You see, dear daughter, a newly arrived immigrant fears nothing so much as the state and its agents. The six heavily armed men on whom I am able to cast one last glance from my hiding place among the bushes inspire anything but confidence in me.

The Square of Heavenly Peace

Dear Hilda,

After more than half a century of mere vegetating in the dark underworld, and one day after my visit to the Human Zoo, which tore so many wounds open again and ended in horror, I have resolved, on this bright noonday, to take a closer look at the center of Cyborstan: the Square of Heavenly Peace. The exhaustion of yesterday almost compels me to do so. My spirit, my soul, my body—they are all in urgent need of recharging with spiritual energy. Ingestion, however, is no longer an option for one of the twice-born. Goose liver and pork cutlets, as with the old Gaur, or roasted rat fillets as in the underworld of our former days—I no longer mourn any of that. I want nothing more to do with it, nor even to hear of it.

On my walk through the avenue I have already seen enough that is disquieting. I assume they have not escaped your notice either, those many new posters fastened to the trunks of the tetratrees. What I am forced to see there gives me a stab straight through the soul. Two figures are shown stretched out on the ground in full body length. One of them is SuperEnsis 78; I recognized him immediately by the noble expression of his face. Even as a corpse he commands respect. The other person is horribly disfigured. Her head no longer rests on the trunk, as nature intended. It lies separately beside the body, the nose turned upward. It is, as I at once recognized, the nose and skull of the artist whom in the Zoo they called Saint Bertha. The sight is incredibly painful, all the more because a whole bouquet of blue, red, yellow, black, and water-gray wires sprouts from the open skull like some diabolical arrangement of flowers.

“Spicy,” I whisper to myself at the sight, “that is presumably what it looks like inside your own skull too, there where it is joined to the trunk.”

At that repulsive vision I realize how completely all of us are fixated on the surface. Who, after all, wants to know what he looks like beneath the skin?

A crowd has quickly gathered around one of these disgusting posters. I feel compelled to hear what the people are saying.

“That is murder,” I hear one woman murmur. “A head does not simply fall off. It normally sits immovably on its support. In my opinion this is a thoroughly criminal act.”

Another says, “Most certainly. Such a thing must not occur in our peaceful state. And there is a second dead person lying right beside her. Look at the second one—he wears only a single mark on his coat. That must be a man of the teaching estate, someone of rank.”

A man who has just joined the group gives a hissing intake of breath. “Do you see that pale apparition behind the dead bodies? It has yellow blisters on its face. That is sweat. So for me the matter is clear. It can only be a Gaur. People, those two Cybors were murdered by an underhuman!”

I am seized by a dreadful fright, dear daughter. You see, when one has only been transformed for three days, the old self is still half alive. I know perfectly well that I am no longer in danger. I cannot sweat, even though at this hour the temperature stands at seventy degrees in the shade, so no one can any longer read my past in my appearance. And yet I feel frightened and disoriented. How can the government know that the murderer is a Gaur? Does it mean to stir

up hatred against the inhabitants of the underworld? Why this agitation against the brothers of my former life, why this suspicion without a word being said of evidence? Why does the Ministry of Happiness and Justice permit such accusations?

These newly printed posters have noticeably diminished my good spirits. Yet now I am already very near the Square of Heavenly Peace, and I let both peace and heaven stream into my soul. How beautiful the view becomes before the Pantheon, where the avenue opens into the square. Seen from the avenue, the Ministry for Protection and Defense lies to the right, and the Ministry for Happiness and Justice to the left of the seat of the gods. Yesterday I hurried past all this almost without attention, from my quarters beyond the statue of the Great Allan down the long avenue, beyond the Pantheon, toward the narrow bridge crossing the Styx, so as to arrive at the Human Zoo in good time. Even there I cast only a fleeting glance down at the Styx. That mighty river of former times now lies dry for most of the year; this I knew already from my earlier existence. Only in the season of the great storms, when tower-high clouds transform the day into gloomy night, can it happen for a few hours, or rarely even for a few days, that violent floods fill its bed and overflow the surrounding valley. Then we poor cave-dwellers had to flee into the higher crypts. Those were dangerous times.

Dear daughter, how far behind you all that now lies—and behind your father as well. At this moment I stand immediately before the great square paved with gray-veined marble all around the towering Pantheon. To the right, the Street of Protection runs southward, and to the left the Street of Happiness leads just as straight northward. I admire the lofty intelligence of the founding fathers who planned the city in perfect symmetry and beauty. Defense and justice are the foundation of every state; but without happiness, human beings cannot live either, for then they soon become rebellious. Among the Gaur's there was little happiness, and for that reason so much rebellion. Here, in the upper world of Cyborstan, protection lies on the right, while happiness is placed on the left side—that is, where, when I was still a Gaur, my heart used to beat. Yet it is above all the square itself, dear Hilda, the great Square of Heavenly Peace, that fascinates me more than anything else I have yet seen.

At last I now understand your enigmatic words from one of the first secret messages that reached me below. You wrote—and as I read your words I thought I could make out the dear, dreamlike smile upon your face—you wrote, word for word, the sentence which at that time remained wholly incomprehensible to me:

“The greatest happiness in the life of a Gaur, who has known nothing but his gloomy underworld, is to behold it once—him, the Square of Heavenly Peace—and then die.”

What an extravagant outburst of feeling that seemed to me then. Do not deny it, I remember it perfectly. At the time I twisted my face into a mocking grin. There she is, I thought scornfully, scarcely become immortal and already speaking of dying. So little did I take your message seriously. But now that I myself stand before this wide, white-radiant square, I am scarcely less overwhelmed. To tell the truth, the sight takes my breath away: the gleaming whiteness of the marble-paved ground, the many lotus seats likewise fashioned from marble, upon which dozens of Cybors sit enthroned like Buddhas with blissfully meditative faces—all of it seems to proclaim one single message only: peace.

For the first time I behold the people—that eternally restless, defiant, never-satisfied human multitude—in a state of peace of soul and body such as, until three days ago, I believed only a heavenly paradise could bestow. Yet here, in the upper world at the foot of the seat of the gods,

all may enjoy it. I raise my eyes to the dome above. I wonder whether Plato, somewhere behind those heights, is perhaps conferring his blessing upon the multitude.

In this moment it becomes clear to me for the first time that Cyborstan is the state of the blessed and the just. Ordinarily we human beings are driven by cares, fears, and desires; busy and ruthless, we beat our way through life. Here, by contrast, I believe I see before me a transfigured, ideal people: gentle, utterly still. The exquisite stillness of the outer world produces in me, the observer, a marvelous calm as well. How each person remains in his proper place, no one pressing forward or sideways upon his neighbor; the distance between those seated is perhaps three meters.

The word *enthroned* rises naturally to one's lips here, for they might all be enchanted kings—or, as I have already said, Buddhas—occupying their own squares like pieces on a chessboard. Hilda, if there was a trace of mockery in my former astonishment at your outburst of feeling, it was because a Gaur is simply incapable of imagining such peace. Only now do I understand why the sight filled you with such delight. No, your father has no wish whatever to die all the same. Never in my life have I felt so reconciled with existence as in this moment. Besides, we are both fireproof now and need no longer fear death.

The people who sit there motionless in lotus posture upon white marble blossoms a meter above the equally snow-white ground are in a state of meditative transfiguration. One can see from afar that they are utterly transported, as they direct eyes and nose-tip precisely toward the point where the crossed legs meet. But why, after all, do they sit there?

I know now, dear Hilda. Wikigrandia has just told me.

On the Square of Heavenly Peace, around the seat of government, the people are permitted to charge themselves with spiritual energy, heavenly energy, which—at the expense of the government—passes through a magnetic field generated within the marble “lotus seats” into the body’s own storage system. The heavenly energy is also called “electric current” by the Scis, popularly known as the Smoking Heads.

Now at last everything is clear to me. After hours of work, exertion, and perhaps even worry—if such things still exist here—a Cybor has lost much energy and must renew himself. That, so much I now grasp, no longer happens through pork cutlets or rat ragout. Instead he charges himself with spiritual energy on the magnetic field of a lotus seat, in order to replenish his ego once more.

Dear Hilda, that sounds so simple, so almost banal, but when I look upon the transported faces of those meditating in bliss, I become aware of the inadequacy of our everyday words, so incapable are they of rendering such felicity. A Gaur never once in his whole life experienced a rapture so profound.

In one of your later messages you spoke of it too, though only in hints. In intensity, you wrote, the process of spiritual charging may perhaps be compared with the orgasm of old humanity, but stands miles above that merely bodily pleasure, because the body itself takes no part in it. No twitching, no moaning in ahs and ohs is to be observed in a Cybor during this meditation on the Square of Heavenly Peace. Instead he experiences, in a condition of complete stillness of the body, an immensely dynamic ascent of the spirit that delivers him from all here-and-now and opens his gaze onto the reaches of the cosmos. Only when the internal reservoirs are fully charged does this spiritual upswing gradually subside into a gentle feeling of bliss. Then, newly

charged, he opens his eyes in wonder, and the square appears doubly bright, as though flooded with supernal light. By then, however, the soul has already returned from the expanses of the cosmos to the place at the foot of the seat of the gods. He recollects the surrounding present, joins his two index fingers upon his forehead into an arrow while gazing with reverence toward the dome on high—behind whose mirrored panes Cybor the First watches over him day and night—then rises quietly and contentedly from the marble lotus seat and goes, strengthened in spirit and in body, about his affairs.

Oh Bliss, Oh Endless Delight

But I have not come to the Square of Heavenly Peace merely to admire it like a tourist. Mindful of your words, I mean simply to surrender myself. Everything is still so wonderfully new for someone like me, someone only recently redeemed. To look upon dozens of human beings, their faces transfigured, hovering on white pedestals—and to know that in a moment I myself shall be one of them, because after two days I too am already in need of recharging—that alone is enough to fill me with trembling anticipation. For naturally I am haunted by the worry that the reservoir within my body might at any moment be entirely drained, and what then? Every Cybor wears at the wrist a small display informing him of his present state. Mine tells me I am charged to eleven percent. But what would happen if I failed to pay attention, or in the heat of activity missed the right moment? What becomes of me if I ever fall to zero? Do I then myself become a zero?

Wikigrandia from the Cloud immediately provides enlightenment.

Then you collapse at once, powerless. The public rescue service comes and takes you to a public charging station, but an administrative fine is imposed, since the state—that is, the taxpayers—must pay for your carelessness. If you burden the commonwealth repeatedly in this way, the consequence may be the withdrawal of essential civil rights. In certain cases you may be required to wear an electronic ankle restraint that ensures you never move more than one kilometer away from the next spiritual charging station.

Pfui, I think. Spicy, why are you listening to this juristic triviality? You were always a conscientious citizen as a Gaur and you will be no less so among the Cybors. Better prepare yourself inwardly for becoming, in a few moments, one of these blissfully meditating Buddhas. “Hovering,” I call it, dear little daughter, although in reality everything proceeds by entirely natural means. Only to the distant observer does it almost seem as though they hover above the ground, because the marble blossom on which they sit tapers sharply downward. Yet without the magnetic cloud surrounding them, they would not meditate, and without meditation they would not find their peace. So here too, everything has its cause and effect, only on a far grander scale than in the dreary underworld. No serious person could compare the ingestion of mice, rats, fat worms, or roasted bugs—with which we once had to keep our bodies in operation—with the bliss the people of the upper world experience when they renew themselves spiritually in the magnetic field. In oral incorporation there was not a trace of spirit. Our bodies never truly came to rest; our arms had to be employed to shove the food into the open mouths. From beginning to end it was all a matter of matter. It was only my visit to the Human Zoo that finally opened my eyes to the primitiveness of our former existence.

Bravo, you will hopefully praise your father now. It took him long enough, but he has at last come to reason.

Dearest daughter, how right you are once again. On this first day in the shadow of the Pantheon, your father has covered an immense distance in spiritual progress, if only because his brain is now connected to the Cloud. There, like every other Cybor, he has the knowledge of all humanity at his constant disposal. Thus for the first time I know, dear child, that before this I knew nothing—no, absolutely nothing. No wonder, then, that they rated my IQ so low. *Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. I resisted the beatifying transformation far too long and far too stubbornly. For example, I would absolutely not hear of the fact that they were going to hollow out my body. How violently I struggled against the mere thought of it. The kidneys, I babbled

in my ignorance, my liver, yes, and naturally the lungs, yes, even the intestines, and whatever other ignoble organs might be associated with them—all that, I insisted, belonged to my person. How could I simply do without it?

Dear child, when stupidity once settles in the mind, it generally remains there for a whole lifetime. If only I had then been able to cast a glance at these enchanted kings and Buddhas, sitting there before me in heavenly peace. Every one of them is hollow, and yet completely happy.

Believe me, I am terribly ashamed of my former delusion. In my obstinacy I even appealed to heaven itself as witness. “Are not liver and kidneys among God’s earliest gifts?” I said. “Did not He Himself, the God in heaven, assemble us carefully out of all these pieces on the sixth day of creation?”

Dear Hilda, now I myself am as hollow as every other modern human being, and yet in excellent spirits. I look at all the blissful ones on the shining square, at the radiant dome of the Pantheon above me, and know that it is good thus. You, however, had already been wiser in those days and rebuked me with prudent words. Lungs, kidneys, intestines, and the whole remaining rubbish—so you wrote, and underlined the point with several exclamation marks in token of your indignation—had been planned by a God long since deposed and long since out of date, and brought into the world in an unscientific and inexcusably hurried fashion. Even our Smoking Heads, you added then, would never have dreamed of rushing through such a project in six days.

With deep remorse I remember how I once answered your informed admonitions with a grimace of arrogant resistance. So much I still clung, in those days, to my body as it then was—liver, lungs, heart, kidneys, even the intestines included. I resisted the higher insight of the victorious sciences, which had long since proved that the new human being no longer needs all this mortal accessory destined one day to rot so disgustingly, because they have invented a new and better body, one capable of withstanding the centuries without injury.

To be honest, even the wobbly jelly in my skull mattered to me, because I knew nothing else—not the chip, the Cloud, and the great omniscience we now draw from it.

At that time you scolded me rather sharply—do you remember?

“Please stop whining,” you wrote, “about that ridiculous little bit of outdated thinking matter. In modern terms it amounts to only a few hundred gigabytes. Yes, yes, I know: you are like all Gaur. You think far too highly of the tiny thought-apparatus in your skull. But have you ever once asked yourself what happens to it after thirty or fifty years, and certainly by the time you are in your nineties? Let me tell you exactly. The wobbly brain substance in your head”—yes, dear child, that really was the way you put it to your father—“first begins to dissolve, and then to decay from within. Then Alzheimer stands at the door, or some even worse specter, grinning at you maliciously. And what of us, your nearest ones? We must somehow drag the brainless zombie through his remaining years. Whether you want it or not, in the end we shall have no choice but to send you to a nursing home, where everyone will hope you soon depart and cease being a burden on both state and family. And when at last you go into the grave, the whole world will be glad to be rid of Hieronymus Spice, that brainless wreck. True, everyone will pretend sympathy at your grave; I too, your daughter, will shed copious crocodile tears, because that is the proper thing to do. But in reality, once you have become a walking Alzheimer, we shall all have longed for your death. And let me tell you this as well: so it has been in your old

world for millions of years. That was the supposedly unchangeable course of things. People rejoiced over the newborn little ones—how sweet, how darling!—and were annoyed by the stubborn old creatures clinging to life. Not infrequently they even advised them to commit voluntary suicide. Intuitively even the Gaurs understood that aging and death are no more and no less than the result of hideous faulty design.”

“Papa,” you concluded, once your written tirade had almost become a scream from the paper note itself, “we superior beings have for the first time overcome this whole cruel and deceitful past. As you know, I carry a reliable thinking device in my head, a Socrates chip made of the purest silicon—Philochip is the name of this special model for the philosophers among the Smoking Heads. In it my complete former self, along with all the experiences of my earlier days, is securely preserved. No one has taken my old ego away. On the contrary, in the Ministry of the Smoking Heads, of which, as you know, I now form part as an advisory member, they have conserved my former self for eternity.

“And if even that should not satisfy you, I can tell you something further. Even this triumph was not enough for our researchers. It might happen—impossible it is not—that a meteorite could smash my head. Then my self would be extinguished along with the chip. Therefore my ego, like that of every other Cybor, is also stored in the Cloud. I, your daughter Spicy 374, may thus say with confidence that I am indelible for all eternity. Do you know what that means? I will tell you, dear Papa: it means that even the destruction of the solar system poses no real problem for the modern human being. Even the end of the world itself we shall survive unharmed.

“But you? What is to become of my father in such a case? You see, I am still a silly little brat because I cannot stop thinking of my old, unteachable, obstinate father.

“And now I am giving you an order. I demand that you too finally take the step into immortality.”

When I read those harsh lines in those days, I thought I could actually see your face before me and the way you fixed me with your eyes—exactly as you did when you were still a little girl determined to get your own way.

And then the final sentences of the letter, in which you, as it were, held a pistol to my chest.

“Papa, let me tell you what I shall and shall not do if you still refuse to come to reason. I shall most certainly not attend your funeral. I will merely send a gravestone down into the underworld, and on it will be written:

**Here lies Hieronymus Spice, my father, the unredeemed.
He was too stupid for immortality.”**

Well then, thanks to your tireless efforts, he has at least been clever enough in the end. At any rate he is now standing on the Square of Heavenly Peace and looking at his watch. It is approaching four in the afternoon, and my charge has sunk to a mere minimum of five percent. It is high time that I renew myself spiritually, saturate body and mind with solar energy.

A few meters away from me there is an empty seat. I walk toward it. Perhaps that annoying pulling behind the ears has something to do with the fact that I postponed this step for so long. You see, Hilda, when they asked me before the transsub—damn it all, I never can remember the word—at any rate, when they asked me, I deliberately chose a smaller storage unit, and

specifically behind the buttocks, where it would be least obtrusive. With their considerable weight, these storage packs give the otherwise light plastic body a certain heaviness. But you know how your father always strove to cheat gravity. Light I want to be, you see, light as a bird. What use is eternity to me if miserable gravitation is forever dragging me down toward the earth? A smaller storage unit can also be recharged much more quickly—surely within a single hour.

I have just reached a free pedestal and am about to swing myself between its marble petals when, no more than ten meters away, I notice an elderly woman likewise preparing to bring her body into position upon one of the raised seats. But why is she uncovering her navel for this? Is that not improper? From the corner of my eye I look more closely and see that she is drawing out a cable with a plug from beneath the pedestal. My God, Hilda, can such a thing be possible? She presses the plug precisely into the place where, in the case of the Gaurs, the navel used to be.

That, I confess, I really would not have believed. Could this perhaps be an older model? In my own case, where the navel sat until three days ago, there is now a smoothly polished surface; no current can be inserted there. Is the woman perhaps from an older series, from before the introduction of cordless supply? Even if you do not care to hear it, I am learning for the first time that not everything in Cyborstan is gold that shines so splendidly. At any rate, I pity the woman for being obliged to expose herself in so little decorous a manner before everyone's eyes. Had she been young, one might perhaps have counted it an additional attraction of the Square of Heavenly Peace; but older series cannot, surely, be considered visual enrichments. At least she soon conceals both the plug and her lower body beneath her blouse.

Such, in the whole, quite secondary defects of progress ought not to distract me any longer. The great moment has finally come. Resolutely I swing myself onto the pedestal, cross my legs into the Buddha posture, incline my head in humble reverence before the towering Pantheon and the god in the dome, and lower my gaze to my crossed legs.

And behold, dear daughter, behold!

Only a few seconds later an exquisite warmth begins to spread through my whole body. In the head, above, there begins a seductive tingling, and suddenly a many-colored phoenix flutters down my spine all the way to the tailbone. It beats its wings so furiously that I grow hot all over and feel myself blown upward like a feather on warm winds. My body still clings to the white marble blossom. But imperceptibly I have doubled. Fused into a single being with the white marble pedestal, I am at the same time looking down upon myself from above.

And then! O bliss, O wonder, O holy trembling! An unspeakable hovering in heavenly fire-glow kindles in me a supernal love. Love for myself, this hovering angel-feather; but at the same time love for the towering Pantheon, for wise Plato, for the glowing afternoon sun, and for the whole day-bright cosmos. No—in this moment I am no longer transformed Spicy, and certainly not the wretched Spice of old. I am what I always wished to be. I am the All, the Cosmos, love, and—God. Forgive me, Hilda, I am beside myself, do you understand? No, I can no longer speak, not even to you, because no word can convey what is now happening to me. The cosmos, the love, the blissful One. In this highest instant—

At this point the thread of the ecstatic dialogue between Spicy 1101, formerly Hieronymus Spice, and his daughter Hilda 347 breaks off abruptly. That is entirely normal, for even some of the oldest testimonies of literature instruct us that the highest bliss and divine delight elude

our limited human language—even the language of the Cybors, so advanced in every other respect. From a physical point of view, nothing more is taking place than that the storage unit behind our hero's buttocks is slowly but steadily being filled. That sounds highly prosaic and says almost nothing. But the Smoking Heads have accomplished a masterpiece in transforming the dry prose of a mere relocation of electrons—from a marble pedestal into the buttocks of a human being—into the loftiest poetry, namely into a psychic ascent of indescribable fullness. There can be no doubt that no drug of the old world granted to its victims even remotely the bliss that the simple recharging of bodily storage units grants a citizen of Cyborstan.

This fact must not be omitted, for it makes Spicy 1101's behavior intelligible—by which I mean his inability to describe to his daughter, and to us, who by now are by no means indifferent to his story, the process of spiritual charging in all its details. We should gladly have liked to know more about how so simple a charging process can become, for the person undergoing it, so extraordinary a psychic experience. But surely everyone knows that even the simplest acts already eluded exact description among the Gaur—for example that act so beloved of theirs which led to their reproduction. A quantity of semen was transferred from A to B, and what happened at the same time in the brains of the two participants? They were transported, enchanted, spellbound, and some imagined they were experiencing all the happiness of the earth in that one instant. But any even moderately sensible answer you could not expect from them at such a moment. Ask a man during the act, for example, about the weather or his grandmother's health, and he will either forget all ordinary politeness and remain completely silent, or wish you to the devil, because his attention is fixed entirely on the mechanical accomplishment of the act and on his partner of the moment. The Gaur was simply programmed by evolution—some say by the dear God—in such a way that his brain, at such moments, was wholly released and exempted from all duties of explanation and elementary courtesy.

I insist on this point because otherwise even the kindly reader of these lines would scarcely be able to understand Spicy's behavior on the Square of Heavenly Peace—that is to say, in that instant when a simple physiological process transforms itself into spiritual ecstasy. Up to this point we have known Spicy as a conscientious, if at times somewhat emotional, narrator in inner dialogue with his daughter. But if at the last he merely stammers, and finally falls altogether into silence, then we must surely forgive him.

Worldviews of a Fool

They once called me Kropp—Athanasius Kropp. I am the scrap that Fortuna, eternally malicious, smuggled into the center of power. By now I have been stripped even of my former name. I am called only **the Fool**, and it is my appointed task to strengthen the self-confidence of a powerful man by means of my foolishness. The greater a fool I make of myself, the wiser he is permitted to feel—Plato, ruler of Cyborstan.

What of it? I ought almost to be grateful for my early abduction from the underworld, for life there was filthier by far. Locked with a dozen others into a dark vault, I spent the greater part of my youth upon the saddle of an iron treadmill, generating the current for the LEDs in our hothouses so that beans and tomatoes might grow. In those days I had to sustain people with my legs; now I must sustain them with my wit. In other words, I was and remain a slave—then in the old lower world, now in the new upper one.

Such reversals of fortune naturally set a man thinking. For example, do I regret having been transferred from below to above?

In one sense, yes. The transformation into an immortal Cybor was denied me. Had they made of Athanasius Kropp a new man—say Kropp 11 or Kropp 100, a philosopher—then Cybor I would certainly never have tolerated me as his constant companion. I would have possessed the same intelligence as he, the same connection to the all-knowing Cloud. The great Plato could then no longer have looked down upon little Kropp, the ignorant jester from the underworld. And that, for him, would have meant a significant reduction in psychic well-being. So he preferred me, the untransformed barbarian, and wanted only me near him. The contrast to his own magnificence—that was what mattered to him. For my sake, indeed, he had even the dome of the Pantheon cooled down to thirty degrees, lest my insignificant person at seventy degrees in the shade melt away before his eyes like a lump of butter in a frying pan, shrivel up and wilt. Yes, such is the case. Down below I had to tread in order to keep others alive; here the taxpayers must pay so that the Fool may amuse a god in the Pantheon.

And yet—fool though I am by profession, I have still observed that not everything in Cyborstan is gold which continues to glitter so brightly. The fact is that my master grows more restless and nervous with every passing day. Peace in our young state seems to him fragile. True, we only recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of its foundation, but already something crackles and creaks in the whole structure of the state. How could I fail to notice that more and more often at night he groans violently and starts from his nightmares? And he has reason enough. It has not escaped him that his people no longer allow themselves to be told what to do. The people here are all obsessed with bliss—and when they are not blissful, they demand entertainment.

“That is our right; the state has guaranteed it to us,” they say. “We want to be happy and blissful—here and now.”

That was what had been promised them from the founding of the state onward, and by no less a man than Allan the Great. He had enshrined bliss as Article One in the constitution. Ten years have passed since then, and pure bliss is still not a lasting condition. So they protest.

And this protest grows louder and louder. There you have the reason why I hear the Chief groaning more often. A crisis of state has broken out.

“Fool,” he says to me more and more frequently, “you know from your own experience how hideous life in the underground earth-caves is. Must you not admit that the people of the upper world live like angels in paradise?”

I nod to him willingly enough. How else am I to preserve his goodwill and the thirty degrees beneath the dome? Once, when I seriously contradicted him, he had the temperature raised to forty degrees. I had to throw myself to my knees before him, or I would not have survived my rash dissent. I do not wish to risk such a thing a second time for anything in the world.

On the other hand, I must not agree with him too readily, as some of his advisers do. Like all powerful men, he enjoys being called the greatest and the only one, or the divine messenger of wisdom and love of mankind. But those who may deck him with such garlands must be children, or simple-minded members of the lowest class. All others he distrusts if they try to beguile him with flattery. For his distrust is greater even than his pleasure in the kneeling of his subjects. That is why I must deploy the whole truth of folly if I am not to fall from grace.

“Lord,” I say, “the angels in paradise, to my knowledge, have not yet been asked their opinion of their condition. But that the Cybors, by reason of their heat-resistance and their access to the all-knowing Cloud, may be compared only with the inhabitants of heaven—that every reasonable person must understand, even a fool like me.”

“You are not to flatter me!” my master replies, frowning his brow. “You know as well as I do that although we are immensely progressive up here, and though by virtue of our spiritual constitution we can only think progressively, there are still—” He hesitates. “There are still these evil contradictions.”

“Do you hear?” Plato suddenly adds, with a grim, tormented expression. “Sometimes I think the contradictions are as eternal as we ourselves are.”

“That may perhaps be true,” I answer cautiously. “The contradiction has, unfortunately, been plain for some time. If the first perfect state, if Cyborstan, is to continue flourishing, people must work. The façades must be whitewashed anew, tetratrees are to be planted on the northern and southern avenues as well, the wind park outside the city is to be greatly expanded. All this requires labor, hard labor. But the people want only to be blissful, and at once. Work does not make them happy, even if the Cybor is spared the need to perform it in the sweat of his brow—that, by reason of his transformed constitution, is no longer possible. Yet he is condemned to work all the same, just as I was once condemned in my youth to tread and tread. There lies the contradiction with which the government must contend.”

“Fool,” says my master, and even hints at something like a smile, “you are only a miserable, mentally backward Gaur, without connection to the Cloud, yet it never ceases to astonish me that your head is not wholly inaccessible to the finesse of dialectic and the finer points of philosophical disputation. In the present case you have indeed reached the very core of the extremely difficult matter. You were also witness to the fact that, during the last consultation in the circle of my highest officials, I issued an historic decree. Article Two of the constitution is abolished—the abolition of pain and suffering. I have recognized that man works only when he must. Otherwise he wallows endlessly in bliss until bliss itself grows stale and unbearable to him, so that he exceeds all bounds and ultimately does not even shrink from crime. Pain is the sting he requires in his flesh, so that he may set his hand to work and our state may flourish once again. From now on Article Two is void. With the reintroduction of pain, suffering, and labor, we shall lead the people back onto the path of virtue.”

This is the moment for me to reinforce my master in his positive view of Cyborstan's future.

“Your subjects still possess one unique advantage over the Gaurs and over the whole past,” I say. “They are immortal. Even if they must devote some years of their eternal existence to labor, centuries of pure bliss still remain to them. No other constitution has ever promised its citizens so much.”

On that day my Chief had the temperature lowered to twenty-five degrees. That is his way of expressing satisfaction with me.

Coitus Interruptus: The Sudden Descent into Suffering

A great poet of the Gaur—one from the barbaric East—once taught that happiness appears everywhere in roughly the same form, while misfortune befalls each human being in its own peculiar way. This truth Spicy, whom we last left upon the Square of Heavenly Peace, was now to learn for himself.

Only moments before, he had mounted the marble lotus seat and surrendered to the bliss of spiritual charging. The experience might well have run its natural course. Gradually his reservoirs would have filled; his spirit, lifted into cosmic heights, would at last have returned like a fiery bird from the glowing vault of heaven back to the earth. Mind and body, briefly sundered, would have reunited. Spicy 1101 would once more have become that necessary unity of spirit and form required for the ordinary business of life.

But this time, the process did not reach its natural conclusion.

For the government in the Pantheon had decided otherwise.

We know that Cybor I., in conversation with a mortal Gaur, had recently proclaimed a momentous decree. It is precisely this decision—historical for Cyborstan—that now takes effect for the first time. And thus, here and now, the Square of Heavenly Peace becomes the stage of a catastrophic reversal.

It is as though an invisible command had been given: as though an entire battalion of tanks were to roll over the blissfully meditating figures and crush them beneath iron tracks.

Within seconds, peace collapses into panic.

To the untrained ear, the cause might sound trivial—almost harmless. But such judgments arise from the human tendency to confuse the simple with the insignificant. If even the simple union of two bodies can lift human beings into ecstasy, then even the dullest mind must grasp that its violent interruption produces the opposite effect. A *coitus interruptus* does not merely disappoint—it can shatter the soul.

And so it happens here.

At the very moment when the magnetic field collapses—when the life-giving current is cut off without warning—each meditating Cybor is struck as if by a blade through the heart. It is as though the devil himself had drawn his sword against them.

What unfolds on that day will be recorded in the annals of Cyborstan in black letters of mourning.

Imagine a thousand Buddhas losing their composure at once.

All those who had sat motionless, their gaze lowered in serene concentration, are torn from their trance. Their eyes cloud over; their bodies tilt and fall. Women collapse with shrill cries onto the white marble, striking their foreheads bloody, hammering their fists against the floor

in blind despair. Many of the men lose all control. They run in erratic zigzags across the square, emitting howls—raw, animal sounds that seem to belong not to the present, but to some prehistoric age.

The event may be described in a single sentence:

On this day, suffering returns to Cyborstan.

Only hours later, the unrest spreads across the city. Crowds gather. Protest marches form. Everywhere darkened faces and raised placards:

- *“End suffering, fear, and pain!”*
- *“Happiness is our constitutional right!”*
- *“Give us back our bliss of charging!”*
- *“Artists, unite for bliss!”*

The uprising had been foreseeable—but this is the first open revolt against the Pantheon, against the very seat of power.

It is crushed immediately.

To speak plainly: it is strangled at birth.

Plato calls the military class to arms. The Wehrstand, sustained by the state, fed by its privileges—by its “current,” as one now says—stands firmly with the rulers. The suppression is swift, efficient, unquestioned.

And Spicy?

He too has felt the sudden rupture—the violent cessation of bliss. He too has slid from the white pedestal, shaken and disoriented. But as one only recently risen from the world of suffering, he recovers more quickly than most. Pain and hardship are not foreign to him.

Almost at once, he acts.

He presents himself at the Ministry of Protection and Defense, ready for deployment.

For Spicy 1101 remains what he has always been:

a conscientious man.

And soon enough, we shall see what fate awaits him there.

What purpose does love still serve among the Cybors, now that reproduction has lost its meaning?

Is MiseCor defective? A subtler malfunction than previously observed? Have archaic fragments—old bits and bytes—become active within her chip, igniting a purposeless, irrational passion?

We know what transformation does to the body. Spicy himself discovered it: where once the organs of love had been, there remained only a smooth, neutral surface. The obsolete had been removed, like an appendix from an earlier age. He accepted it with admirable composure.

We must assume the same of MiseCor.

There can be no consequence in the old sense.

And yet—what we see contradicts all reason.

Felix draws her closer. He kisses her.

A gesture as ancient as humanity itself—and still effective. Her lips are cool, neither warm nor cold, for no blood flows within her. The Cybor body mirrors the temperature of its surroundings. And precisely this seems to deepen Felix's fascination. The kiss lingers longer than custom would require.

What he whispers, we cannot hear—but we can imagine.

Perhaps wonder. Perhaps disbelief. Perhaps gratitude that a being from the upper world not only sees him—but loves him.

And more than that: she descends with him.

Into the underworld.

No Cybor does this willingly. The realm below—called the Realm of Darkness, the Troglodyte Lands, the Eternal Night—is a place even spoken of with a shudder. But not for MiseCor. She follows.

That alone is astonishing.

What follows is less so.

The shadows that rise around them are not unusual. At night, when the heat subsides, the Gaurs emerge from below—first their heads, then their bodies, climbing from the deep stairways of their subterranean world. The lovers are near the main entrance now, perhaps fifty meters away: a stone slab, easily shifted, leading down into Felix's former life.

The shadows notice them.

And they understand at once.

One of the two is not of their world.

A path opens.

On both sides, the pale figures step back, forming a corridor of silent reverence. Murmurs arise—soft, almost reverent:

“Welcome... welcome...”

Thus the lovers are carried forward, as though borne on a cloud of submission.

But nights are deceptive.

And danger prefers the dark.

The warning signs go unread.

A group of youths—adventurous, restless, armed—has entered the valley. For them, prohibition is an invitation. They seek excitement, not purpose. Boredom is their enemy; danger their remedy.

They come prepared.

Knives. Firecrackers. And small, easily handled laser weapons—sold everywhere, harmless to Cybors, lethal to Gaur.

To them, it is a game.

Cybor eyes pierce the darkness with ease. Where a Gaur stumbles, they move with certainty. The terrain offers no obstacle. Their approach is silent—until it is not.

Then suddenly—

a cry.

A sharp, jubilant *hallali*.

Others join in.

The hunt begins.

Shots flash—not illuminating the night, but cutting it. Hair-thin beams, yet deadly: concentrated blades of light burning into living flesh.

Screams.

Chaos.

Bodies fall.

The valley fills with the sounds of a world long thought overcome.

More than a dozen die that night—recorded later with bureaucratic precision in the annals of the Gaurs.

Only three escape.

Two Gaurs—and one Cybor woman.

They reach the stone slab just in time, descend, and vanish into the depths before the hunters can close in.

They are:

Romeo.

Julia.

—and a man with wide-set ears and a perpetually smiling face.

We have met him before.

In the Human Zoo.

The Declaration of Love

The figures that flit ghost-like along the tunnels in this depth, passing one another or brushing by in silence, are marked above all by their pale, waxen faces. But perhaps that is due in part to the LED lamps, which cast their wan glow into the passages and onto the apparitions moving through this half-darkness. The underground shafts are not uniformly narrow. Two persons of ordinary build can pass each other without difficulty. But where the inhabitants are taller than average, the distance to the rocky ceiling is often no more than a head and a half. Anyone so formed by his genes must count himself fortunate if he belongs to the smaller specimens of the population.

Whether tall or small, however, all those who live beneath the earth know no distinction between day and night. Here the deepest darkness reigns, even while the people above bathe in glaring sunlight. In the underworld one needs illumination. How else could one exist in such blackness?

And yet that is easier thought than arranged. Light is energy, and energy is expensive. The mighty Cybors of the upper world are by no means prepared to deliver the blessing of the sun free of charge into the subterranean foxholes of the Gaurs. And one day after the still unsolved murder of Saint Bertha in the Human Zoo, and the death of the SuperEnsis that followed from it, such generosity is less likely than ever. Since suspicion from the outset fell upon the backward old humans of the underworld—who have always been suspected of every possible crime—the first in a whole series of punitive measures taken by the government consisted in cutting the entire power supply.

A dreadful measure, and an arbitrary one besides.

There is not the slightest proof that the Gaurs were responsible for the murder of the great Creative.

And what of the murders committed just now by a gang of criminal youths, who killed innocent Gaurs from a mere hunger for adventure? Do they provoke similar public outrage? That may be doubted. Such murders by adolescent rioters, it is said, arise merely from errors in programming. But the Gaurs are different. They cannot be programmed, because the spongy jelly in their skulls stubbornly resists all intervention by the Scis.

At least we can report that Sister MiseCor and her Romeo, Brother Felix, reached the underworld before the attack by the gang, and without knowing anything of it. Faster still, and with astonishing agility, the man with the sail-like ears had hurried past them. By now the two lovers have descended the steep ladder under the stone slab some twenty meters into the earth. They are safe, then—if only in a near-lightless darkness. True, there is no complete blackness in the realm of the troglodytes, but the sparse lighting from the occasional LED hanging at long intervals from the ceiling does no more than keep one from stumbling at every step or scraping head and arm against the rough walls of rock.

What Sister MiseCor cannot know, but Brother Felix has known from childhood, is that the meager glimmer from those solitary lights hanging here and there from the rock ceiling owes its existence to a labor that any modern person would wish upon his worst enemy at most. Nearly a hundred strong young men must pedal with their legs for up to twenty hours a day so that the underground dwelling of the cave-people does not sink into total darkness. It is to this

stubborn, unceasing, and, one might almost say, patriotically inspired pedaling that the Gaurs owe the pitiful light that illuminates their desolate depth. In a large vault, perhaps ten by twenty meters square, around a hundred young and powerful men sit and do nothing for hours, days, and sometimes weeks but pedal and pedal. Sometimes they sing while they do so, an infinitely melancholy song, naturally in a heart-rending minor key, keeping time with the pedals of their bicycle-like contraptions, though without moving so much as a single step from the spot. For they are not traveling toward any destination. They are merely setting the dynamos on their wheels into endless rotation in order to generate that invisible fluid which at least half-supplies the underground realm with the energy necessary for life—energy from legs instead of from the sun.

No, Brother Felix spares his companion from the upper world the sight of the hundred pedalers, half naked, tongues hanging out, bodies shining with sweat, laboring in service of the homeland. When, all the same, a few of their tones in minor drift briefly to Sister MiseCor's ears and she asks with surprise about the source of that plaintive music, Brother Felix brushes it aside as though genuinely uncertain. It must be, he says, some old electrical machine—perhaps a record player.

He conceals only the sight, not the existence, of the patriotic pedalers from the pampered Cybor woman.

“Without the patriotism of our pedalers,” he tells her, “we would not be able to take a single step through the darkness. And besides, we need the light for our vegetables. Without growing them in protected niches, we would long since have starved. Even so, we survive only by strict economy. We do have an artificial day, during which the underground galleries are more or less illuminated. But as soon as the artificial night begins—and out of habit we still cling to that distinction—so, at exactly ten o'clock, only every third lamp remains supplied with current. That is why we are walking now through half-darkness. More than one careless person has bloodied his head on the edges and corners of the rock.”

Such stories from his lightless homeland Brother Felix tells the spoiled woman from the upper world, who—the first female Orpheus—has followed him into the depth out of some incomprehensible love. What that strange compulsion, otherwise called love, can bring about! That it sometimes moves mountains is by now well known and excites no one any longer. In the end that is only an act of a purely material kind, and should therefore perhaps not be overrated. Machines in our technologically advanced age routinely accomplish physical wonders. But that a Cybor woman, a higher being, should forget herself and her elevated status so completely that she voluntarily follows a backward old human into this dark world below the earth—such an act of love, I think, deserves our highest admiration.

Brother Felix must be thinking something similar, for he suddenly grows very talkative. Well, after all, he is now in his familiar fatherland and motherland. Home easily loosens both heart and tongue in a person, however miserable that home may otherwise be.

“When I think,” he whispers in his admirer's ear, “when I think that our human species, *Homo sapiens*, matured over millions of years upon the surface of the globe, and was then driven under the earth by an apocalyptic present, I shudder.

“Yes, yes, some ignorant Gaurs say that those up above, the Cybors, are to blame for everything. With cunning and their artificial Cloud intelligence, they drove us from the upper world into this lightless depth. But there is not a word of truth in that talk. We may not lay the blame for

our terrible misfortune at the feet of you overhumans. Misfortune crept upon us from behind—slowly, yes, but irresistibly. I know well enough that the unteachable always search for hidden causes; everywhere they sniff out conspiracies and malevolent demons. What is obvious seems too everyday, too banal, too worn to satisfy them. They need plotters and merciless pursuers. But what truly pursues us is a stupid, mindless, crushing fact. Up there, in time, it simply became too hot for the likes of us. We sizzle away like a piece of butter in a steaming frying pan. We dissolve, grow smaller and smaller, and in the end one no longer sees us at all. For such temperatures Mother Nature did not make our constitution. At fifty to seventy degrees, such as prevail in your streets above, a being like me loses every wish and every love for life.

“That is the truth about us mortal humans, my lovely sister. Whether you can understand it—whether you can feel it with me—I do not know. You yourself are made from sole to crown of fireproof material. At temperatures that would mean death for me, you do not even experience discomfort; perhaps at seventy degrees you are only just beginning to bloom. I did not fail to notice the little sign you wear only a few centimeters above the navel. When I stroked you tenderly, I glanced at the inscription. ‘Survivable even at five hundred degrees Celsius,’ I read there. I know as well how proud all of you are that the state of Cyborstan gives each of you that guarantee for the road of life. Some are so proud of it that instead of wearing the little sign near the navel, they display it conspicuously above the wrist, or let it dangle from the ears as shining jewelry. I can understand that one likes to show off such proof of quality before the world.”

At these words from her beloved, Sister MiseCor suddenly stops in the dim, lonely passage and places both her arms around her Romeo’s neck. Has she, as we would say, a soft heart? No, that cannot be, for as a higher being she has been freed from heart, kidneys, liver, and all the rest of the clutter. But she is evidently programmed in a special way—or perhaps it is simply all-comprehending love, enabling her to feel sympathetically the situation of her beloved. Often enough, after all, she has seen above, in the Center, how greatly a Gaur suffers when in the heat of day he does no more than thrust his head into the blazing upper world. In the Center for Beatifying Transformation, Sister MiseCor always took pains to keep the temperature down so that Brother Felix might survive the day.

“Ah,” she says in a soft, soothing whisper, “I know that you mortal beings can endure yourselves only in your underground badger-burrows. Up above, it has to be the dead of winter before you cautiously stretch your pale heads from the tunnels into the open air. Then you creep over our brown, sun-burned, treeless earth like moon-struck creatures, lifting longing eyes to the blood-red morning sun that you otherwise know only from fairy tales. My dear one, if I carried a heart within me, it would be full of pity now. You know how deeply I am ashamed of my own kind, the arrogant Cybors, who despise you and sometimes even persecute you as inferiors. How dreadful this undeclared, secret, and yet omnipresent war between the upper and the lower worlds is! And yet are we not all truly human? It is only the material that differs. You are made of quickly rotting flesh and blood, we of costly and enduring substance. But that ought to be, for us Cybors, a reason for pity rather than for persecution. I know, most of my countrymen from Cyborstan cry murder and outrage the moment they so much as glimpse you. In their eyes you are ‘backward ghosts of the earth.’ But your MiseCor—you may be certain of this—will remain forever at your side.”

With these words, the substantial Julia draws her somewhat too ample beloved toward her once again.

He lowers his head and, very softly, as though the words themselves pained him a little, whispers into her ear:

“My love, you have a human heart, though in truth you possess none. How greatly that surprises me. For within, you are as hollow as every other decent Cybor. You will understand the misfortune that threatens us Gaurs after the dreadful murder in the Zoo. Until now your Cybors have regarded us merely as poor devils. We were your backward ancestors, creatures you placed on the same level as dogs and cats. To such beings one throws a scrap of food when they behave, and one strikes them over the head the moment they cease to be obedient. I fear that after the murder in the Zoo the great persecution will begin. These backward creatures, they will say among you, have changed themselves into treacherous enemies. Then the undeclared, secret war will become an open one.”

Brother Felix rubs his forehead in despair.

“And all the while I have done everything humanly possible to bring peace between the beings below and above. Of my own free will I devoted myself to the Center for Beatifying Transformation. Every day I walked there at your side so that my brothers and sisters might willingly become Cybors. By a sacred vow I have denied myself my own redemption to this day. First I mean to redeem all five hundred Gaurs still living from their life of suffering; only then shall I permit that step to be taken in my own person. Dear MiseCor, have I ever once groaned in carrying out that task? Have I grown weak? I tell you, it was not easy to remain faithful to that resolution day after day, because despite your loving efforts the Center for Beatifying Transformation was not always cooled sufficiently. The moment you were out of the building, I had to beg your technicians, but they merely shrugged with indifference, since they themselves do not feel the brooding heat. Without you, my love, I should never have endured it.”

“My dear one, my most beloved,” she whispers back. “You are a saint, a hero. I felt it from the beginning, and I knew it. Whatever may happen, we two will fight together.”

The Secretary

The confession just overheard may strike some as banal, perhaps even as a sentimental passage copied from a cheap romantic novel. But one should not forget that here a being of higher rank, a Cybor, is speaking in such terms to an inferior being, a mortal.

And how, for his part, does Romeo receive this declaration?

A Cybor woman without a heart loves me heartily, that is what passes through his mind. *Is that not curious—and, besides, incomprehensible?* Out of sheer love she has procured for me a sinecure in the Human Zoo, where I may eat my fill and have already put on some weight. She herself needs to incorporate nothing. Her vital force flows to her effortlessly from the socket. And yet she knows and understands my needs. Very well—an old human like me cannot truly comprehend that. But why does this woman love me, when the murder of Saint Bertha has only just ignited the tension between above and below? They say love comes out of a clear sky. In truth, however, that sky has turned pitch-black. It hangs full of severe storm clouds, and lightning flashes through it besides. How confusing all this is for someone like me, how strange, how unintelligible. For unfortunately I myself feel absolutely nothing for Sister MiseriCordia. She is empty within; externally she lacks the organs of desire, which, for a Gaur like me, are not entirely without significance. There is no organic reason and no higher reason for our love. She must have been programmed incorrectly—that is my opinion.

It had been the Sister who insisted on this excursion into the underworld.

“I do not want merely to know your person,” she had said, “but your world as well—your dwelling, your former room as a child. You must understand: everything that concerns you matters to me enormously.”

These are profound and truthful words, of a kind we should not have expected from a heartless being. For in our opinion only the Gaurians have known true love. For the lover, every object touched by the beloved acquires a kind of magical halo. It is a unique tumult of feeling and produces wonders otherwise known only from saints, legends, and fables. The heads of saints are surrounded by their traditional aura of light; for the lover, that same aura extends to all things dear to the beloved. They emit a warmth that enters the soul. Sister MiseCor is a creature of the upper world, and yet she too seems to perceive precisely such a radiance about things. How else explain that she has accompanied Brother Felix into this dark cave-world? For any other Cybor this realm would be no better than hell. For her, by contrast, it is a labyrinth wrapped in mystery, where the beloved once spent the days of his youth. She wants to explore every corner his eyes once rested on, above all the place where he lived with his long-dead parents.

For the moment they are still on the way there. A few more turns of the dim labyrinth remain, and they move through it almost by touch.

The unwilling Romeo, meanwhile, follows his own thoughts. What else is one to do when a dark underworld denies the eye all variety? Up in the Center for Beatifying Transformation, Brother Felix is perpetually occupied. He must reassure the patients, keep their spirits up, and make sure that each technical movement in the process of refinement into an overhuman is carried out properly. There is scarcely any time there for thought. But here, in the barren passages and caverns of his youth, thoughts come over him almost by assault. Whether one

wishes it or not, philosophy begins in the lightless deep, especially when nothing else is happening.

And suddenly the unwilling Romeo becomes aware of what has already happened to the Gaur.

Have we, the creatures of the depth, not gradually grown used to our wretched lot and evil destiny? Once cave-life becomes everyday and seems to most people unalterable—simply because they know nothing else—it begins to appear at last as natural and self-evident as their earlier, almost forgotten existence on the surface of the earth. Even in the lightless deep one falls in love, marries, has mortal children, quarrels, reconciles oneself—and then one is suddenly old. Then one dies at forty or fifty. Yes, earlier than before, that is true. This shortening of life has above all to do with the chronic shortage of water. All rain, whenever it falls—once or twice a year at most—is immediately diverted by the Cybors for their own purposes. Not because they drink it; only we flesh-and-blood humans do that. No, they need it solely to fill ornamental ponds and to make the many fountains in the public squares sing and leap so prettily. While they do so, we struggle over every drop of precious moisture. Our bodies absorb it because we are succulent, entirely unlike the bloodless new humans above us.

Because of this scarcity, washing our sensitive bodies is no longer even thinkable. The Cybors call us “dirty earth-ghosts,” because our cleanliness leaves, unfortunately, a great deal to be desired. Fortunately they can smell nothing, so our dirt is to them little more than a sort of folklore. We Gaur, for our part, have stopped complaining. We look on the bright side. We are perfectly safe down here, for example, from falling meteorites and stray shooting stars. And naturally from ticks and tiger mosquitoes and a thousand other enemies besides. Among us it is reported with grim mockery that such creatures like to settle in the cavities of the Cybors and sometimes establish flourishing colonies there. I must make a point one day of laying my ear against Sister MiseCor’s belly in order to examine that matter thoroughly. It is whispered, in particular, that especially aggressive among those highly heat-resistant beetles have specialized in gnawing and puncturing the chips in Cybor skulls with their pincer-like jaws—sometimes until complete failure results. But perhaps these are only spiteful rumors born of envy. No—such a level I neither may nor wish to descend to.

“Here we are!”

With those words Brother Felix stops before a roughly built door in the rock wall to the left and looks searchingly at his companion.

How will she behave when I confront her with the poverty inside? That is the understandable question Felix asks himself. We, however, ask more generally how a higher being—in this case a Cybor woman—will react when brought face to face for the first time with the shocking primitiveness of a Gaur’s life. The question is natural, but perhaps too simply framed. For much depends on the feelings that accompany such an inspection.

Since Sister MiseCor is immortally in love, no negative judgment can gain possession of her. We need not fear that her brain, at the sight of the cave in which her Romeo spent the first two decades of his existence, will be invaded by thoughts that the Smoking Heads of the upper world would call “objective judgment.” True enough: objectively regarded, the intimate sphere in which the man beside her once lived is a miserable hole. More precisely, it consists of two neighboring holes: a sleeping crypt, where child and parents shared one cot, and in front of it a so-called reception room, scarcely two by three meters, where, if pressed, four or five guests might be entertained. Nor was this by any means the poorest dwelling in the cave-world.

Brother Felix's dead father had been a doctor, his mother a nurse. That placed the family among the better-off.

Once again: love, fortunately, can manage without objective judgments. Sister MiseCor, as we already know, is attuned from head to foot to love. That is why she hurries with enthusiasm to the two old-fashioned photographs, browned with age, hanging on the otherwise bare rock wall.

"My father, the doctor," says Brother Felix modestly, almost shyly. "The woman beside him is my mother. Both, sadly, fell victim to the hunger which the upper world imposed on us. In the eyes of the Cybors, as you know, we are an inferior race. *Holodomor*—that was the word, in a language unknown to us, for the penalty of starvation. It meant death through organized hunger. At that time my parents kept the last flatbread for me, their only child. It was a dreadful time."

Brother Felix speaks these words first in a whisper, then almost inaudibly. He surely does not wish to wound the Cybor woman at his side. What, after all, can she do about what happened? The government up in the Pantheon had once decided upon the extermination of the Gaur's through a blockade of hunger and had nearly brought it to completion. It was due to a Sci named Fabricius 233 that the planned extermination was canceled at the last moment. Against the majority opinion of the Smoking Heads, he succeeded in arguing that the Gaur's should be preserved as a genetic reserve for future times. That alone is why there are still an estimated five hundred of them in the caves beside the Styx.

"It costs us no more than a little current," Fabricius 233 is said to have argued in defense of his philanthropic position, "a little solar energy, so that the troglodytes may grow their vegetables by artificial light and continue to live beneath the earth like moles. And do not forget that they even provide their own pedalers for this purpose. Our leniency toward these antediluvian creatures costs us little."

Brother Felix knows only too well that he owes his survival not to the goodwill, still less to the compassion, of the Cybors, but solely to the insatiable curiosity of science.

I am only a gene reserve, he thinks—but does not say it aloud, so as not to disturb the woman beside him. It moves him that she stands there with admiration in her eyes before the photographs of his long-dead parents.

"Entirely the son," she says, looking at the father. "That critical gaze, that upright bearing. Do you know, what they tell us up there about your kind is so frightfully superficial, so unforgivably false. Surely there must have been many great Gaur's. I believe I could have fallen in love with your father just as I did with you."

"But tell me—what is this strange thing here?"

MiseCor is standing before a massive object draped in black cloth against the bare rock. Without waiting for her companion's answer, she pulls the covering aside—and at once cries out in surprise. For now polished wood flashes toward her, noble wood, with corners and edges artfully adorned by strips of shining gold. On the polished surface stand two little towers left and right; below them drawers and tiny doors alternate in several stepped levels. The Cybor woman stands motionless before the piece. Something so delicately wrought, so like a glorious toy—though surely far too precious to be played with—she has never seen in the upper world.

“A secretary,” murmurs Brother Felix. “It must be three hundred years old. My ancestors carried it down here when they could no longer endure life above. A family heirloom, you understand. It meant a great deal to them. How they managed to get it down here undamaged, the devil only knows. I spent my youth with this wise secretary.”

“A wise secretary?” the Cybor woman asks. “Is there a Cloud hidden inside it?”

“But no. In those days we had no Cloud, nothing of the sort. But the fact that I remained alive instead of despairing and wasting the rest of my existence as a pedaler—I owe that to this piece of furniture. I would never have dared bring you down into our wretched molehill if this treasure chest were not here.”

“Treasure chest? Did you keep gold or jewelry in it?”

Instead of answering, the man opens the drawer to the left of the center, drawing it carefully forward by its brass knob until a sheet of paper becomes visible. It is too dark in the room to make the figure clearly out. It might be a condor, a sea eagle, or perhaps the mythical roc. Brother Felix offers no explanation. He merely takes his companion’s right hand and places it, with his own left, over the image.

What happens then is one of those miracles that occur only in human minds. Sometimes a single whispered phrase involving grapes and vines is enough to conjure vineyards and grape-pickers before the inward eye. Sometimes a little gurgling and smacking in the background, and suddenly one is looking at a lonely island lashed by surf. Here, however, it is only a contour—perhaps hastily sketched in pencil upon white paper—that transforms the ample Romeo into a young man running across a flower-speckled meadow toward a towering mountain giant whose head is encircled by colossal birds. They might be sea eagles or condors, but the greatest among them is perhaps the mythical roc.

Why the Cybor woman runs over the meadow with him is harder to explain. Sister MiseCor is indeed connected to the Cloud, and its signals are strong enough to reach even into this depth. But Wikigrandia ordinarily supplies only bare facts, whereas it is perfectly clear that something wonderful is happening to the Sister. Together with the beloved, she is gliding over the meadow strewn with narcissi and crocuses. Like him she is enraptured by the giant birds circling the snow-covered summit of the mountain giant. We already know that Sister MiseCor is unusually programmed—or is it simply love that produces the wonder?

“South America,” whispers the man. “We are visiting South America.”

With these words Brother Felix draws both their hands out of the little drawer to the left of center. Now he places them into the drawer to the right of center, where a colored picture shows a landscape of towers and, between them, giants with four or more arms. Hardly have their hands touched the paper before they are transported into a world where a long procession of singing people approaches them, waving palm fronds. The goal of their pilgrimage is a white-radiant city of a thousand temples, the greatest of which thrust their pointed hats up into the clouds. And from on high there descends a six-armed god. Two hands bless the singing and praying crowd. Two others draw together left and right the curtain of the world, offering protection to the people below. On the fifth hand he balances the sun, with which he makes the golden tips of the temples glow. But the sixth he places on his mouth, commanding silence.

“India,” says the man. “We have made a brief visit to the Temple of the Sun at Modhera.”

“Come.”

With that invitation he draws her hand out again and this time inserts it, together with his own, into the middle compartment after opening the two little doors by their brass knobs. The drawing inside is all overlaid with colored spots and apparently scribbled with chaotic lines. But neither he nor the woman gives it more than a passing glance, because they are instantly carried out of the dark cave into a world of surging, leaping, spraying light. No—it is rather a surging, leaping, spraying, glittering water that cools their bodies pleasantly while they ride outward upon the waves into open space. Ride? Is that still the right word? They glide out into the cosmos, but in the very next moment they are no longer alone, for they see a procession coming toward them.

At the beginning are bent figures, ape-like, their front limbs still bound to the ground. Those that follow are already standing upright. Their jaws no longer protrude; their faces are flat, some dark-black, others almost yellow, and the last of them gleam in a color like ivory. These figures form an unbroken chain whose ends vanish into infinity in both directions. But it is curious what beings meet them at the end of that chain. There are giants among them whose legs no longer resemble the stamping columns of elephants but are as spindle-thin as those of their predecessors, as if fashioned of feather-light material. Others have eyes all around the head like insects, and instead of proceeding as their forebears did, they move in enormous leaps. It is a strange thing to behold—but only for an instant, because Brother Felix has suddenly withdrawn both their hands again.

“There now, my dear,” he says, “you can see why I serve your people above. The new human being has long been announced to us by fate. The chain of beings extending from the past into the farthest future will never break—neither here, nor now, nor later. I spent my youth exploring all the continents. Every one of these drawers and compartments carried me into a different land. Without this treasure chest I should have spent my youth in spiritual darkness. Without this three-hundred-year-old grail I would have become a dull-witted pedaler.”

Romeo and Julia in the underworld might perhaps have reached dozens of other destinations. The compartments of a wise secretary are numerous enough, and each conceals another sheet, another promise, enough to transform even the bleakest crypt into a paradise.

But further explorations are denied them.

At that instant someone knocks hard at the door.

The pounding startles them both.

Tiberius Schmalz

A hundred meters away as the crow flies—if such a line could be said to exist down here, where every path twists alternately downward and upward through the underground labyrinth—so let us say instead: an indeterminate number of steps through the nocturnal dark from the place of the lovers' meeting, lies the administrative center of the underworld, the Great Council.

It is a hall intended for sessions and assemblies, though in truth it is nothing more than a somewhat larger cave, hewn with strenuous labor and the force of many arms out of the living rock. At this nocturnal hour a handful of people are sitting there, reflecting on the future of the underworld and its inhabitants. We may safely assume they are among the most important representatives of the mortal beings who live here, for the majority of mankind, as philosophy has long known, does not think very much at all. Most remain tethered to the stake of the immediate moment. Whoever casts his gaze backward into the past or forward into the future already belongs to a small company of the enlightened. In the darkness of this subterranean world, enlightenment is in any case a special grace.

Though the word must be understood metaphorically.

In the literal sense there is little enlightenment to be had. Only a few dim lamps hang from the ceiling, casting a ghostly glow over the people seated around the table. Are there five of them, or ten? One must let one's eyes adjust to the half-light before answering even so simple a question. The ear, however, is less restricted, and it notices at once that a pause has arisen in the conversation. Is it the first pause? That seems unlikely, because a second is already forming. Or perhaps it is only the prolongation of the first. Who can say? Very soon the whole thing becomes distinctly awkward. There is evidently a third pause, and then a fourth. Although the transitions between them are fluid, everyone appears to feel the danger of silence grown indecently long. Tension lies in the air. Mortal man, after all, bears it badly when silence threatens to thrust him into the void. When speech fails him, it is as though he ran headlong into a wall. He longs to flee himself, to pull some thought, however trivial, from his sleeve like a conjurer producing a hidden dove. But when even trivial thoughts remain stuck in the head because no one has anything left to say, then folly itself enters the room.

It is therefore a true deliverance for all concerned that there is no fifth or sixth pause. Out of the darkness a voice finally breaks loose—the slightly overdeep child's voice of Tiberius Schmalz.

He is a man with wide, sail-like ears and a face at first glance alarming in its bulldog heaviness, though it seems always and constantly on the verge of smiling, so that no one who looks at him ever quite manages to be afraid. The dreadful embarrassment produced by the four earlier pauses—which were in truth only one—changes in an instant to relief. For whenever Schmalz begins to speak, he brings with him calm and confidence.

“My dear companions in struggle,” he begins, “you are right. We Gaurs have been mocked and oppressed by those above as though we were some species of naked ape. Ever since the founding of their state, the Cybors have treated us as obsolete models, as mournful zombies from a distant past. Worse still, some among us have accepted their judgment. Such people spread discouragement and submissiveness—a shame difficult to endure, a disgrace to our own nest. In truth, only we Gaurs of flesh and blood are the image of the Creator of the world, who, as everyone knows, is Himself composed of flesh and blood.

“I ask you: what do the Cybors really have over us? Omniscience, some say, because they are connected to Wikigrandia and the Cloud. Immortality, say others. But who, pray, provided them with immortality? Was it not we ourselves, who discovered and collected all the raw materials they required?”

“So even for immortality the Cybors ought to be grateful to us. And can we not likewise help ourselves to eternal life? Listen to what I can report from my own research. Nearly all our replaceable parts—arms, legs, and the whole set of inner organs—can already be substituted. Only one thing remained missing from the list: the brain, that spongy, fragile, pitifully vulnerable mass that each of you carries in his skull like a sauce. I admit that the Creator of the world must have had a poor day when He ladled this substance into the bowls of our heads. No, we should not be ungrateful either, for the ways of the Lord are inscrutable. One must assume He had some purpose in this botched work. Only unfortunately He had not thought long enough. He did not foresee that the new man would one day possess the impudence simply to drain away the sauce and insert a stable chip into the skull instead.

“Bravo, I say to that—a brilliant idea, but not brilliant enough. Just look what happens to those chips when they become useless: when an avalanche buries them, a river sweeps them away, or lightning blasts the skull to ash. What remains then is a heap of scrap, polluting and disfiguring the beautiful world. Nothing but electronic refuse—a disgusting sight. Look what they have made of God’s magnificent creation! Nor is it any pleasure any longer for the proud Cybors themselves to live up there. In valleys and mountains, in backyards and playgrounds, electronic waste lies everywhere: unusable limbs, scorched chips. It is enough, one hears, that a Cybor remain uncharged for too long and cease functioning, and there before us lies an unappetizing corpse of tangled cables, worn motor-joints, and leaking reservoirs giving off toxic vapors. Not infrequently the technology fails, the update miscarries. A being thought he was about to be modernized in body and soul, brought to the latest state of the art—and what happened instead? The whole thoroughly unsuccessful human is discarded as scrap. I tell you, such a sight is pitiful...”

“Stop! Enough!”

A hammer crashes down on the table. Someone sits there with a black top hat on his head. Evidently he is the chairman of the gathering. His voice is as cracked as an old man’s.

“Have I not repeatedly warned you that I do not wish to hear any more lamentations?”

The rebuked speaker retreats at once.

“My humblest apologies. I lost myself for a moment. In truth I intended to report something entirely different: a breakthrough, a milestone of research, by means of which we, the still mortal old inhabitants of the globe, shall at last rise to the level that until now has been the privilege of the new humans.”

The chairman lets out an audible breath of relief.

“Continue, Schmalz. If you have something positive to report, you may speak as long as you wish.”

Thus encouraged, the man recovers his former composure.

“The matter is simple,” he says. “Every part of us below the head can already be renewed. Arms, legs, lungs, hearts, kidneys, intestines—all of it can be obtained from the replacement stores, assuming one can pay for it. Only one thing stood hitherto beyond our reach: the brain. But now we have removed even that final obstacle.

“The fact is this: stem cells have given us the key. The task was to grow a brain from them—but naturally the brain of a *sapiens*, not of a toad or an ape. There lay the true challenge. Our earliest attempts produced nothing but toads, or in the best case the brain of an ape. We should never have progressed further had not deep meditation finally revealed the solution.

“Please, Schmalz, be brief!”

“Mr. Chairman, I do not intend to drown us in details. The fact is that stem cells work correctly only when they unfold their natural drive toward the desired organ in the proper surrounding medium. At that point my own past came to my aid. As a child I enjoyed the fortune of growing up in great fear of God. Intuition struck me, then, like lightning out of a clear sky. At once I knew what the correct environment must look like.

“I resolved to expose the stem cells to the influence of concentrated holiness. In this spirit I created a setting consisting of Bible, Koran, Shiva’s lingam, Amaterasu’s solar symbol, a consecrated statue of Buddha, and another dozen especially sacred objects besides. Thus I could be sure that the atmosphere was saturated with holiness—one might say to one hundred percent. The breakthrough followed at once. The concentrated halo, invisible though it remained to the bodily eye, produced precisely the effect predicted by science. Instead of deforming themselves, as they unfailingly had in profane surroundings, into a miserable toad-brain, the cells generated the brain of a superhuman. In other words, our laboratory reproduced, with remarkable accuracy, the same conditions that once prevailed at the beginning of creation, when the divine spirit, unsurpassable in holiness, breathed human intelligence into a lump of clay.

“Well then, what more need I say? Not only were our expectations fulfilled—they were fulfilled in sensational fashion. For the first time, research has succeeded in producing a complete brain of *Homo sapiens* in vitro, entirely outside the human body. We have laid the foundation for a reserve store by means of which even here in the underworld immortality may one day be promised to mankind. A triumph!”

A pause follows, then another, and even a third—but this time they are all in truth only one. After so hopeful an announcement, the silence no longer lies upon those present with the pressure of embarrassment. It is the silence of awe, the stillness each person experiences inwardly when shaken to the core by an event or a message.

Tobias, the stammering student, is the first to give voice to his enthusiasm.

“At last,” he says, “we may hold our heads high again.”

We share the student’s enthusiasm, certainly, but let us not indulge in the cheap and tasteless amusement of reproducing his poor stammer in detail. I therefore continue the minutes of the session in a linguistically smoothed form.

“The Cybors,” the young man says, “will soon have nothing left by which to despise or mock us. One day I too shall be immortal. And I even have an idea. Only a small one, a tiny little idea, so to speak. Could one not perhaps produce even the brain of a god in the laboratory? One

should vary the sacred symbols at random. Might it not be the case—for example, and this is merely an example—that Germanic runes possess a special efficacy? Or the war axes of the Apaches? I mean, it is only a suggestion.”

Tiberius Schmalz nods in approval and has already begun taking notes.

“The idea of our young companion has genuine scientific merit and deserves serious attention. We could systematically test the degree of holiness proper to different systems of belief by comparing the quality of the brains cultivated under their influence. That would allow us to indicate in exact percentages how far the holiness of each deviates from the original moment of creation. As a professional scientist, I find the young man’s proposal personally most appealing.”

Had there been just a little more light in the room, we might have seen that Tobias had turned red with joy at the praise.

Then he says suddenly:

“But there is still omniscience. They still have that over us, do they not? I mean...”

The man with the sail-like ears and bulldog face puts on his brightest smile.

“Some say the Cloud beneath the Pantheon grants them omnipotence, because its knowledge is infinite and anyone with a chip can tap into it. Nonsense, I tell you. We moles of the underworld have already tunneled our way into their treasury of knowledge. And do you know what we do there day after day? We insert fakes. Endless fakes. A flood of false knowledge beyond all reckoning. That will be their undoing, because they no longer trust their own senses but only the artificial world stored beneath the ground.”

The chairman brings his little hammer sharply down upon the tabletop—the signal that the official part of the evening is finished and the unofficial part may begin. Among the Gaurs that latter part has always consisted, ever since cave-life began, of a festive meal. This evening there was to have been rat fillet and mouse shanks à la française, seasoned with home-grown garlic and parsley.

But none of that comes to pass.

For at that very moment, the oak door begins to ring.

The Summons

Before the dwelling in which Brother Felix spent his youth stands a man with unruly hair, widely protruding sail-like ears, and a face as alarming as a bulldog's. Yet he smiles at them in such a way that he seems not an unexpected intruder, not an unwelcome disturber, but rather a long-awaited friend and helper.

“Welcome to the underworld, the homeland of true human beings,” he says in a voice of boyish ease.

Who is this man? passes through Brother Felix's mind, still dazed by what he has just experienced before the secretary. *Is he a Gaur, one of us?* Yet he has never before crossed his path down here. As soon as the imperious knocking sounded at the door, Felix had reached for the edge of the black cloth and quickly veiled the secretary again. It now looks once more as inconspicuous as a stone bench or a black ledge of rock someone forgot to chisel away.

His conjectures about the stranger remain unanswered for the moment. The newcomer continues at once, and what he says amounts less to an invitation than to an order.

“The Board has learned of your visit and wishes to see you at once in the council hall. I come on higher authority.”

The lovers have no choice but to follow him into the darkness through the dim galleries. After several turns to right and left, several ascents and descents through the twisted labyrinth of underground passages, they finally reach the Alexander Tunnel.

That is the grand promenade at the center of the underworld.

Its grandeur, however, should not be exaggerated. It consists chiefly in the fact that figures of mighty rulers from the past—Alexander, Caesar, Hannibal, Cleopatra, and a few others—have been hewn from the rock and adorn both sides of the tunnel. They are reminders of a remote age when old humanity still inhabited almost the whole surface of the earth, with the exception only of barren deserts, seas, and glaciers. Besides the Alexander Tunnel, there is also a Caesar Avenue and a Cleopatra Lane. Yet only the Alexander Tunnel, by day, when all the LEDs on its ceiling are shining, really invites leisurely strolling, for it is a full ten meters wide and twice as high as the other galleries.

At this hour, however, no one feels inclined to stroll. The lighting is miserable, barely sufficient to prevent the three from colliding with one another or tripping one another up. Two hours earlier, nine out of ten lamps were dimmed, because the artificial night begins here sharply at ten. As is proper in a subterranean state, the respectable citizens have long since withdrawn to rest. Only eight hours later, at six in the morning, will the full light be restored, because then a new artificial day begins. At that hour the two hundred or so young pedalers will be hard at work again in the sweat of their brows. For the law requires that every male Gaur between twenty and forty report to the Board and place the strength of his legs in service of the state. Such is civic duty among the Gaur. Only the women are spared the pedaling, though civic spirit is by no means less developed in them. To the tireless men pumping the pedals, the girls lovingly stuff homemade pastries into their mouths, together with dried vegetables from the greenhouses the women tend with equal devotion. In that way the tenderest bonds are formed

early. In the land of the Gaurs, women concern themselves with life and love, men with electric current.

“What a beautiful division of labor,” Sister MiseCor remarks with admiration. “Without the women, you men would surely grow melancholy—or simply starve. Unlike us progressive Cybors, you old humans unfortunately cannot exist without constantly pushing something into the opening in your skulls: mouse legs, worms, vegetables, pastries, whatever it may be. That lot was assigned to you from on high. We, on the other hand, use our mouths only for speaking. At least that is a purely spiritual pleasure.”

Sister MiseCor loves her Romeo, but even so she cannot help reminding him from time to time of her racial superiority.

At this moment the portly Romeo and his ample Julia, under the guidance of the stranger with the remarkably wide ears, reach their destination: the so-called Rock Dome, or council hall. This is the actual center of power—though only a hole of unusual size, since in the underworld everything is hole, as in a Swiss cheese, whereas above in the light one would expect such a center to take the form of a tower, a palace, or perhaps a Pantheon. The lovers stand before a conspicuously high gate, decorated with elaborate carvings and lit by a wreath of glowing LEDs, which allows the visitor to admire the artistry cut into the wood. On its outward-facing side it displays a number of fabulous creatures, all proclaiming the significance of this place at the geographical center of the city.

Their guide with the unusual ears bends toward an unobtrusive microphone in the right-hand frame of the door and whispers a few inaudible words into it.

“Art integrated into architecture,” murmurs Brother Felix into his companion’s ear. “Please look at this bull—that is Father Zeus—and this owl—that is Pallas Athena. Admirable, how carefully the artist has turned the ram’s horns of the father of the gods. And here, look at this—every single feather of the owl is rendered with loving care. The owls were, so I learned from one of the lowest drawers in my treasure chest, by far the most intelligent creatures of that time. Every feather of an owl already radiated intelligence when the human brain was still only poorly developed. Our artists always knew that intuitively, long before you Cybors were invented and before anyone drew knowledge from a Cloud. And here you have a crocodile-like creature with jaws thrown wide. Before your age, such reptiles populated rivers and lakes all over the world and served us as faithful mounts on which we rode across the seas. In that way we succeeded in settling six of the seven continents. And this one here—well, you surely have never seen anything like it. The bird with the gigantic wings is called Roc. Our ancestors had trained it so that, when summoned, it would descend before them and carry them on its back over even the highest mountains. Such wonders no longer exist in the upper world. Instead there are now you...”

Brother Felix gets no further.

The two carved wings of the oak gate have opened before them. Through a small vestibule they pass to a second, far smaller and almost inconspicuous door leading into a hall that at this late hour lies in a darkness difficult to penetrate.

Faced with such poor illumination at the very center of power among the troglodytes, the Cybor woman cannot help recalling another sight entirely: the mighty Pantheon shining in the midday

sun, with the Square of Heavenly Peace gleaming white in the splendor of marble. She says nothing, but the comparison will not leave her mind.

Among the Gaur, she thinks, power appears modest. They live here below in frugality, forced to great renunciation. At any rate, these poor devils do not make anyone pedal overtime just so the council hall may blaze by night as well. The figures at the table look like ghosts; I can barely distinguish them. There seem to be five of them—and in the middle of the table stands a red object. Even in this darkness I can make it out. Perhaps a symbol? Or some fabulous creature? Art on the table.

“Ah, at last they come,” says one of those seated around the table as the three newcomers approach. “Look there—that is the man we wanted, Brother Felix. He was above, in the Zoo, when the murders occurred.”

The man who receives the group in this fashion—not as guests, but almost as suspects—wears a black cylinder-shaped hat upon his head. Is he presiding here? Is he the chief of this gloomy center of power? In any case, he has one of the recognized insignia of authority: near his right hand lies a hammer, the kind used in assemblies to silence unwelcome speakers with a blow of thunder.

“Felix,” commands the man in the black top hat, “sit down and speak. You need not spare our ears. We want to hear everything from your own mouth exactly as it was, without omission and without embellishment.”

With his usual deliberation, Brother Felix takes one of the empty places at the table, drawing the chair to his left slightly back so that his companion may sit beside him. At that moment, however, he notices the red object standing in the middle of the table and recognizes that it is a clay bowl filled with plump red tomatoes, still faintly gleaming even in the dark, as if wishing to offer the perpetually hungry man a bright welcome.

Brother Felix has surely heard the question, but with his large, childlike eyes he now sees only the tempting fruit and is evidently unable to restrain himself. He has eaten nothing all day and endured much; that should count as a mitigating circumstance when we observe that, quite without hesitation and without asking permission, he reaches at once for one of the fruits. In his case the temptation is especially strong, because unlike the Cybors, who call these fruits by the flat, prosaic name *tomatoes*, among the Gaur they are known as *paradisers*—native fruits of paradise itself.

“Fresh harvest,” murmurs one of the group. Then he adds with regret, “Unfortunately we can offer our beloved paradisers and all the other fruits only artificial light, and under that they lose something of their proper aroma. Yet at least we still have carrots, beans, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, lingonberries, blueberries, and many other berries besides, whereas above, in the heat, no herb will grow any longer, no vegetables and certainly no cherries, apples, or pears. Not even wild, rampant vine, though it asks almost nothing except a chance. But vine too is not fireproof. It now grows only here, under artificial light.”

The talkative voice belongs to Tiberius Schmalz, the researcher already known to us. Brother Felix nods eagerly in agreement. We know already that he is by nature a kindly, benevolent man. One hears as much as well in the words with which he now greets those present after having devoured the tomato more eagerly than leisurely.

“I always say that it is a great gift for every Gaur to enjoy the fruits of the field—I mean, the fruits of the cellars—without anxiety, while the Cybors are denied such bodily pleasures. They can neither eat nor drink, and yet we should not pity them for that. The new humans have turned wholly toward immaterial, purely spiritual enjoyment. As you know, the force of the sun is entirely sufficient for them. Only our wine they still need, and for that they pay us well; but they do not use it for drinking. They merely spill it out on ceremonial occasions and call that tradition.”

Brother Felix turns slightly aside, as though only now remembering the Cybor woman who accompanied him and who sits almost invisible in the darkness beside him.

“The woman who has followed me into this depth, to the place of my birth—and I wish to emphasize, of her own accord—is called Sister Misericordia, the Compassionate, and in the upper world she occupies a highly important post. In the Center for Beatifying Transformation she helps our fellow citizens to a higher existence. But she is not one of those arrogant new humans who punish us with contempt. In her dealings with the Gaurians she has come to understand that we too are full human beings, and in our own way even decent ones, though the most important marks of perfection are still lacking in us. Sister MiseCor is altogether unlike the majority of her imperious countrymen. She has understood that we Gaurians are by no means worthless, indeed that we may possess a pride of our own. Is that not so, my dear?”

How curiously he stresses those last words: *Is that not so, my dear?*

No psychologically alert observer could fail to notice that Brother Felix is drawing himself up a little as he says them. Has it perhaps occurred to him to display his precious “booty” before his countrymen—to show off this Cybor woman whom he has managed to lure down from the upper world into the realm of the troglodytes? It would be understandable enough. That a Cybor should voluntarily descend underground among the “ghosts,” as has already been said, has not occurred within living memory. Small wonder, then, if so extraordinary an event goes somewhat to the head even of so otherwise steady a man as Brother Felix, this modest assistant in the Center for Beatifying Transformation. One imagines he already sees himself entered in the annals of the city. Until now his defection to the upper world had earned him envy at best among the Gaurians, but certainly no admiration. Now, however, his true worth will at last be recognized. For beside him sits this woman, a real and immortal Cybor, sitting in the same room with the despised old humans as though there were nothing extraordinary in such proximity. For those assembled here in the center of power, that is scarcely to be comprehended.

Let us, as honest chroniclers, call the event by its proper name: it is historical. It could therefore be taken as cause for joy, even for something like a holiday spirit. Have the Cybors—embodied in this woman—finally understood that the Gaurians, though far from perfect, and indeed not even fireproof, are nevertheless fully human in their own way, so fully that one of the Cybors might even fall immortally in love with one of them?

Such joy would be understandable. Yet on this particular day the descent of Sister MiseCor into the realm of the underhumans may well produce precisely the opposite effect.

Shortly before the lovers entered, a messenger dressed in black from head to foot had stepped into the great council chamber, approached the chairman, and whispered a report into his ear, too low for the others to hear. In telegraphic brevity he told of the brutal hunt, of several victims pierced by laser beams, which had taken place near the Styx shortly after the lovers descended into the underworld.

The message had turned the old man to stone.

Can one blame him, then, if the presence of a woman whose youthful fellow beings had only just murdered some of his countrymen makes him tremble with shame and anger? Yet in the poor half-light of the chamber those feelings cannot be seen.

All misfortune comes to us from above, passes through the old man's head. The Holodomor, starvation as state policy—that dreadful memory is burned into all of us. We have not forgotten what they did to us.

And so seven people now sit together in a great dark crypt, trying in the dimness to discern what they should think of one another and of the uncertain situation. Nor are they alone in this. Around them, from the walls and even from the whitewashed ceiling, they are observed by weary or crafty, self-confident or imperious eyes. These eyes belong to the numerous half-faded and scarcely visible portraits of mythical heroes, exhausted gods, and a few heads of state from the last two generations. Almost all gaze down upon the guests with deadly seriousness. The uncertainty of the light only intensifies the effect. If one fixes one's gaze a little too long upon any one of these figures, it seems almost to come alive in spectral fashion and step as a bulky shadow from the wall. The guest from the upper world shudders before them and presses herself instinctively deeper into her chair.

How strange.

One would have thought that a woman—a modern being made of plastics and a little metal, including several very precious rare earths—fitted with a chip rather than a ghost-susceptible brain, would not be the kind of creature to suffer from mere shadows and the menace they emit. Nor does the Cloud, naturally, offer her any instruction concerning so unscientific a phenomenon. But we have already observed that the Sister suffers from digital bugs and is almost certainly misprogrammed. At any rate, the particularly bold words with which she now attempts to master the threatening situation seem explicable only in that way.

“My dear people, honored old humans, whom I unfortunately see only indistinctly in the dark, allow me to confess openly at this solemn and for us unexpected meeting why I followed this man, Brother Felix, into your realm. I admit, a certain courage belongs to it. We Cybor people are spoiled in many respects. Why should we descend beneath the earth to you, if life in the upper world is perfectly tolerable to us—even at several hundred degrees? It is not curiosity but love that has brought me here. And yet I am not the first to undertake the hard road into the underworld for that reason. As Wikigrandia in the Cloud has just assured me, I may appeal to a great example, to a man who, like you, consisted of flesh and blood and was not too proud to make just such a descent. Orpheus, they say, was a man of extraordinary courage who dared this expedition more than two thousand years ago. He loved his Eurydice with the same ardor with which I love this man, your and my dear Brother Felix.

“But wait—you must forgive me. A foolish phrase was just on the point of escaping my lips. I nearly said that I love him although he belongs, as you do, to the Gaurs. But that is by no means true. I love him exactly as he is—with all his many faults. Yes, he certainly has them. He still insists, in his own case, on refusing immortality. That is surely his worst fault, because what am I to do without him, without my beloved, if he dies one day and I must then for all eternity do without his presence? For die he must, if he will not transform himself. But at the same time I must confess that this is not only his greatest fault but his greatest virtue. Out of pure and

noble conviction he sacrifices himself for all of you, because he postpones his own transformation until the last among you has also been made a Cybor.”

Thus speaks Sister MiseCor before that committee of dark figures, and before the many observers on the walls and ceiling whose distrustful eyes look down on her. It is a fine speech, one well fitted to begin a reconciliation between the worlds below and above. And it is entirely improvised, after the eternally smiling man with the sail-like ears brought her, without asking her leave, into this center of power behind the carved oak gate.

The man with the hammer and the pitch-black top hat, however, appears not in the least impressed by the kindly words of the two guests. Again he lets the little hammer strike the tabletop with a hard blow.

“Please—no philosophy, and certainly no pity for our enemies. We expect a report. Two days ago there was a murder and a death in the Human Zoo, where our brothers and sisters are kept like apes. And shortly after you descended to us, several murders were committed directly above our heads in the valley of the Styx by bands of young hoodlums. Once again the Pantheon has imposed sanctions on us Gaur. They have cut off all our current. Now every second one of our young citizens must pedal, or else the vegetables and fruits in the greenhouses will wither, and we shall starve. The government of Cyborstan treats us as if we were slaves, to be exploited at pleasure, or animals to be hunted at whim.”

It is a terrible indictment. Sister MiseCor and her beloved both flinch at the words. Brother Felix lowers his head and replies to the tirade in a voice barely audible.

“Comrade Chairman, I beg forgiveness for the indiscretion of my tongue. It is true: twice a week I am allowed to appear in the Human Zoo, where I play a peasant from long-forgotten times, because this woman has a compassionate heart and used her influence. Nor do I dislike being displayed there and stared at by the Cybors, because the food is of excellent quality—fresh beef and turkey, of a kind we have not known down here for a century. But I assure you, I did not sneak myself into that privilege. My dear companion from the Center for Beatifying Transformation fell in love with so worthless a man as I, against all reason and all probability. That corresponded neither to my intention nor could any other human being, Gaur or Cybor, have foreseen such an improbable event. Call it love, or call it fortune—it simply happened. Since then the wonderful woman has followed me everywhere. Only in the Human Zoo may she not sit beside me behind the glass. The lower being, such is the law in Cyborstan, belongs behind the pane; the higher one before it. They say this law is rooted deep in the nature of things. But otherwise Sister MiseCor accompanies me everywhere.”

“I protest,” says a youthful voice.

It is the young student Tobias from the secret division for systematic sabotage, who conscientiously practices his stammer before the mirror because no one suspects a stammerer of subversive plans and murderous intentions. His interventions are usually of the sort that leave everyone wondering whether they are simply stupid and naïve, or on the contrary highly intelligent and revealing.

“With the Cybors, absolutely nothing happens without prior programming—not even love. I know this because, at your request, I sit inside the Ministry of the Smoking Heads.”

The chairman starts at once, for the student has revealed a state secret carelessly in the presence of this stranger. But now it is too late to undo the blunder.

As though the admission were of no importance, he instructs the young man to explain the mechanism of love.

“Then please tell us how they program love. I do not see what use such a disposition has among the Cybors any longer.”

“Nothing but tradition, nothing but attachment to old habits,” the student replies with eager seriousness. “Naturally love among the Cybors has completely lost its biological function. Reproduction among them no longer requires that archaic auxiliary. The new human being is produced in modern factories by precision machines. On the other hand, the upper humans cling with much nostalgia to tradition and custom—Plato, the great man in the Pantheon, more than any of them. Only out of devotion to tradition do they continue to live in the city’s old houses and palaces, distinguish between men and women, incarnate themselves as children or old people, and surround themselves with domestic animals which, as you know, consist mainly of metal and are therefore inedible to us.”

The chairman interrupts the young man with visible impatience.

“That is long known to everyone present. What we want to know is how they program love.”

How Does One Program Love?

After this rebuke, the young man hastens, with embarrassed stammering, to make his submission clear.

“I know exactly about that,” he says, “because I was present during the long, heated debates in the Ministry. The question was this: by what artificial triggers can love be programmed into the personal chip? You know, of course, that the Cybor by nature feels nothing at all for his fellow being—no more than a vacuum cleaner in the parlor feels for a refrigerator in the kitchen. That is why, in the early period after the founding of the Republic, there were so many incidents: unbelievable acts of rudeness, even gross violence. They feel absolutely nothing when they trample someone lying on the ground, wrench an arm from its socket, or smash a nose. And naturally the victim feels nothing from such mistreatment either. Pain and suffering were constitutionally abolished from the start. Add to that the fact that each person had the right to procure brand-new replacement parts at the arsenal not far from the Pantheon. That only increased the pleasure of destruction. During the first months after the founding of Cyborstan, one is told that severed legs, torn-off ears, smashed noses, and a great many abandoned arms and fingers repeatedly lay in the middle of the Avenue of the Smoking Heads. I am not by nature, I think, overly sensitive, but such a sight is difficult to endure. For a visitor from outer space, whose arrival one must always regard as possible, Cyborstan would certainly have made a very poor impression.”

The man in the black top hat interrupts again, testily.

“To the point, please. Personal feelings and speculation do not concern us here.”

“Ah yes. I beg the Chairman’s pardon once more. So then: in order to oppose the spreading coarsening of manners and restore at least some semblance of civic decency, the Cybors were recalibrated. ‘Reset,’ as they call the procedure. The chip in their heads was programmed so that, in encounters between strangers, the rule ‘one meter of distance’ would apply. But then the question arose: how is love to arise when such distance is enforced? They racked their brains over how to implant mutual sympathy in the new human being.

“I shall be brief so as not to exhaust the patience of this High Council with details. At first they settled on the following trigger: direct eye contact, provided it lasted longer than two seconds. This trigger was anchored, by means of a simple update, in the chips of all lawful citizens of Cyborstan. Unfortunately it soon became clear that after this there was simply too much love—and, what seemed even more dangerous to the Pantheon, it occurred indiscriminately between men as well as between women. That clearly ran contrary to tradition, to which they still insist respect is due. So they began to search for restricting secondary conditions. In the end they agreed upon mutual physical contact at the moment of intense eye contact. Once both occurred together, and provided the two parties belonged to different sexes, then—and only then—the one touched would be imprinted on the other. The idea was one that Wikigrandia had recovered from distant history. In those days there had lived a great Gaur, Konrad Lorenz by name, who observed ducklings at the moment of hatching. If they had his head before their eyes, they were at once imprinted upon him and followed him from then on at every step. Thus, in the commission of the Smoking Heads, they began speaking of ‘Konradian imprinting.’ In this way the programming of love was at last placed upon a lofty scientific pedestal.

“But allow me, Mr. Chairman, one final word. Truthfully, I must report that even this most modern kind of programming has not proved free of complications. Unforeseen difficulties continue to arise. For example, since then love occurs almost exclusively between colleagues, because mutual touch and intense eye contact occur most frequently in the course of close professional cooperation. That applies, as you see from the present case, to the love between Sister MiseCor and Brother Felix. In the Center for Beatifying Transformation they had to work in close contact every day. Thus it happened that the brave Cybor woman is now, for all eternity, imprinted upon him, the Gaur, while the reverse unfortunately does not apply, because Brother Felix is one of us and his brain can scarcely be programmed at all. That deficiency we must simply live with.”

Until now Sister MiseCor had listened with patience. At this point, however, she bursts out in passionate protest.

“Mr. Chairman, I love the man at my side without limit. What do I care how much—or how little—he thinks of my ego? I am, as you know, merely an artificial creature from a factory. But he is a son of heaven, a child of God, created by Him according to an unfathomable design. Every time my hand touches his skin, I feel as though God Himself inflames my body with waves of love. I nearly lose my mind, though the Cloud constantly admonishes me to composure. I can describe exactly how love first came upon me. It was a revelation. It happened while Felix and I were laying Hieronymus Spice onto the transformation bier. Our hands touched, and in order to coordinate our movements we looked deeply into one another’s eyes for several seconds. Even now I tremble at the memory. A lightning bolt leaped into my hand, which for that instant was short-circuited with his. That lightning was more than a bodily illumination. It seemed to me—no, I knew in that moment, and knew it forever—that from then on my life had acquired a higher meaning. That meaning, I tell you, needs neither explanation nor words. The meaning was and is he himself, my incomparable Felix. Without him I can neither live nor wish to live, no matter what he or any of you may think of me.”

At these words all those gathered in the night are moved. They cannot help smiling; even the Chairman does.

Only the student still feels obliged, in the name of science, to raise an objection.

“And yet no wholly satisfactory solution has been found. In the Department of Human Programming they still do not know whether, or how, to produce mutual love in the source code of a chip. Nor does the literature provide any usable guidance on this point. We know that in Konradian imprinting the duckling was fixed upon Konrad Lorenz, but not that Konrad in turn was fixed upon the duckling. Our sources say nothing about that man spending his life in love with a waterfowl. From this problem alone you may judge how many pressing questions in the research into the new human being remain unanswered to this day.”

“Well then,” the Chairman says in his rasping voice, “Sister MiseCor’s great love for a Gaur has explained sufficiently why our brother came to the Zoo and thus gained access to the excellent food of beef and turkey. From him we have just learned that he owes that privilege solely to the Cybor woman present here. That makes him, for us, a valuable source of information concerning the murder that occurred there two days ago. It is precisely for that reason that we invited you here into the council hall. Felix, give us now a truthful account of how that tragic incident took place.”

Brother Felix responds with obedient nodding, then says in a low voice—for the darkness does not invite one to break the silence with loud words:

“I may report that communication among the inhabitants of the Zoo functions quite well, extending even to our comrade in the fourth exhibition room, whom they dress up in the clothes of the great Louis. It was from him that I learned there is a hidden door in the room adjoining his in the direction of the entrance—a trapdoor that suddenly opened beneath one of the visitors, a man with remarkably protruding ears. Possibly—but this may of course be unfounded speculation—it was the same person who brought us today to this assembly place and is still present among us now. Yet that remains only a vague suspicion, because at the time in question I was fully occupied with the passionate consumption of beef. I was therefore able to cast only fleeting glances at the visitors behind the thick glass. But of one thing I was reliably informed. The man had lagged behind the others. According to what the great Louis told me, he never appeared in the next room. From that I conclude there is genuine reason to suppose that he vanished because the trapdoor gave way beneath him. How the murder itself happened, and who committed it, none of my friends in the other rooms saw, heard, or learned in any way. We all stand before a mystery. We—”

The Chairman cuts him off abruptly.

“That much we already know. Our people succeeded—without the Pantheon or its lackeys suspecting anything, naturally—in installing a trapdoor in the room from which the visitors then pass on to the great Louis. In that way we are always able either to insert an observer among the visitors, or, conversely, to make one of them vanish without trace. The man with the elephant ears is among our best scouts. He fetched you from your quarters and is again in our midst. The Cybors do not notice our scouts. They cannot distinguish one of us from another, because we refuse to be numbered. Without numbers, in their eyes, we are not individuals, possess no identity, are not full persons. You know how it has always been with them: numbers are everything. They were programmed that way. For that very reason it will continue to escape them that we regularly rotate men and women through the zoo enclosures, so that our people may for three or four days gorge themselves properly on juicy pork, hearty roast beef, and tender turkey legs.”

The Chairman now changes his tone. He becomes almost plaintive, nearly sentimental.

“My dear people—ah, when I think of such feasting, melancholy overcomes me. We older ones know from history that only a century ago every Gaur—men, women, even the children—could indulge untroubled in such pleasures. But now there are only a few up there in the Human Zoo.”

“Bravo, bravo!” cries a woman in a shrill voice. The outline of this person the two newcomers had until now made out only vaguely in the half-darkness. It is Monika Breinfuß, already mentioned—a young woman who by daylight would show hollow cheeks. Anyone could diagnose hunger in her from a distance, if only the room were somewhat brighter.

“I tell you again, you may exhibit me behind the glass in the Zoo whenever you like. Let the Cybors stare at me as they please, if only once in my life I may eat pork liver to my heart’s content. Once—just once—and afterwards I shall gladly bid farewell to this cruel world. Mortal I may be, certainly, but what do I care for that, so long as I may taste even a small piece of pork? In all my life that happiness has never fallen to me even once. What a useless existence I lead down here among you! I must content myself with reading in the old books and cookbooks of our forefathers about such pleasures. Reading—what a miserable substitute! Down here you

feed me only vegetarian fare, with an occasional fried worm, and a mouse only on my birthday. That is no life at all! Yet my mouth waters whenever I study the books of our happier ancestors.”

“Please,” interrupts the Chairman, stopping the flow of her complaint. “Naturally every one of us understands you. As your chairman, nothing human is alien to me. But we did not gather here to philosophize about turkeys and geese. You ought to have grasped by now that what is at stake is our survival—the survival of the Gaurs and of their culture, mortally threatened by the Cybors. Understand at last that they have placed us on the red list of endangered species. And not without reason. Above, the heat is deadly for us; but even down here we are no longer safe. The Cybors are our destroyers and oppressors. And now they charge us with a murder in the Human Zoo.”

At this point a man shoots to his feet, one who until now had accompanied the back-and-forth of thought in dark silence.

“Shame on all weaklings, shirkers, small minds, and cowards! While the pedaling youth sacrifices itself for our state, you look for compromise with the enemy. I want revolution, and it is long overdue. Far too long have we let ourselves be humiliated by the new humans. Now they even display our brothers and sisters in a Zoo like cattle. And you? I can neither hear nor endure it. You are only too glad if they fatten a few of them up there for a couple of days with fresh meat. I will no longer bear this shame. The uprising must come, the struggle to the death with the upper world. But that struggle must be undertaken for noble motives, not out of envy because some of you feel second-rate, perhaps even inferior, merely because you are not fireproof or happen to be perpetually hungry.”

That last sentence is aimed unmistakably at the emaciated woman.

“Whoever rebels against his lot for such superficial reasons should go and have himself transformed! The Chairman is right. The Cybors would like nothing better than to erase us completely from the list of living species. At best they are willing to keep a handful of us alive as exhibits in the Zoo. But here below there is no true life left. We have every reason to hate the metal men of the upper world, to fight them as our worst enemies, and to annihilate them.”

Brother Felix goes pale—though in this light no one but he himself could notice it. Sister MiseCor trembles. She knows what to think of it all, but cannot bring herself to utter a word against such an obvious distortion of the facts, this theory of conspiracy hatched by a diseased brain. The man is probably psychologically unbalanced after too many years of a hopeless mole’s life. He ought to be recalibrated, if only that were possible in the case of a Gaur. These people lack access to the information of the Cloud. That is why they do not know that it was the unbearable heat that drove the Gaurs beneath the earth; the Cybors bear not the slightest blame.

“Do not listen,” she whispers in her Romeo’s ear. “He is one of those conspiracy cranks. Out of ignorance he preaches hatred to his own people.”

Are we the only sensible ones in this room? thinks the Cybor woman, when the hungry Breinfuß now joins in from the same side.

“They up there imagine themselves something better because metal, silicon, and plastic outlast centuries, while we rot away after a few decades—even those among us admitted to the Zoo, where they feed us that wonderfully tender turkey meat. It is true enough that outwardly the

Cybors can hardly be distinguished from us old humans. But what foolishness to be proud of that! In the holy scriptures the Cybors were never declared images of God. If they were, then the Lord of the World Himself would have to consist of silicon and sheet metal. But that is not true! Whoever says so is guilty of blasphemy. I wish to say that openly in this circle.”

“Correct! Entirely correct! Applause!” cries Tobias, the student so assiduous in practicing his stammer, while the Chairman repeatedly bangs the little hammer upon the table. But no one pays him any heed. All at once there is only tumult. The young student leaps up and races wildly through the room, no longer willing to let himself be silenced.

Into the chamber, frozen only moments before in stillness, he now hurls his cry:

“The Cybor is by nature a godless being, because he is not made in God’s image, never was, and never will be. But if no God exists, then it is all the same whether we are made of flesh and blood or assembled in a factory by clever technicians out of a number of artificial substances, including metal. You fools talk yourselves hoarse here, but you have not even understood the real reason why I now curse the moment I allowed myself to be transformed. I would give a kingdom if only I could climb back into my former body of flesh and blood.

“No, do not flatter yourselves that I consider transformation into a Cybor the greatest stupidity of my life. That stupidity has nothing to do with you, but solely with them, the new humans. They are not mortal—that we know—and they are endlessly proud of it. But most of them fail to understand that a far crueler fate awaits them. Of that they do not speak; among them it is taboo. I, however, cannot be deceived any longer. The truth is that at any moment I, or any other one of them, may be erased by government order and wiped forever from the face of the earth. If the Pantheon commands that your chip be shredded and your ego deleted from the Cloud, then you never existed. The world of the living will never know that you were ever there. *Condemnatio memoriae*—that is what it is called, and it is final and irrevocable.

“You Gaurs at least die of natural causes, by the grace of a merciful God. There is no revenge in it, no malice, no will to erase. But in Cyborstan your existence hangs on the favor of the ruler in the Pantheon—on Plato personally. If one does not crawl before him, or falls from his grace, Cybor the First need only draw one red line through your name, and you or she no longer exist. I know well enough that in revealing this truth to you, I become a traitor up above.”

The Chairman lifts his black hat and says, in a voice suddenly mild and conciliatory, toward the young man:

“Your sharp reflections, Tobias, have brought us a considerable step further. They show us the society of the upper world in its true and most threatening light. The supposed immortality of the Cybors hangs by a silken thread—it hangs on the mood of the authority for the moment seated in the Pantheon. We, the race of creatures shaped by God after His own image, should be proud and glad of our inborn authenticity. I adjourn the session.”

Sister MiseCor is shaken. As though seeking some support against the dizziness that has come over her, she clutches the arm of her beloved. She sees the shadows on the walls and on the ceiling, their eyes wide open, as if they were about to spring upon her.

That man is a traitor, she thinks. He belongs to us, yet he is our enemy. It seems to her that he has robbed her of all meaning in life, and of her life’s work in the Center.

You will yet regret becoming Cybors, the man's words still roar in her ears, you will yet long to return to your old flesh and blood.

And then Sister MiseCor flees—without a word of farewell.

Her beloved can scarcely keep pace. Both of them breathe freely again only once they have reached the open air above, where Dawn with her pale pink fingers is already touching the ravine of the Styx. Panting, and at times on all fours, they crawl the last few meters upward toward the Center for Beatifying Transformation.

The Decree

Seen from the highest story of the Pantheon, a full hundred meters above the strict, chessboard geometry of avenues and streets, the city of Cyborstan can still impress any observer in love with order. Down below, exactly halfway between the Square of Heavenly Peace and the bronze statue of Great Allan, lies the Parliament, its roof undulating like a tent caught in a wind that never quite arrives. From above it looks like a bird preparing for flight. In truth, its flight is over. The bird lies stranded in the center of the city.

For that place has long since become little more than a talking shop, where citizens gather to rail endlessly against one another and against the government. Every evening they assemble there for debates in which arguments are exchanged, but eggs, carrots, and sometimes even potatoes are hurled with much greater enthusiasm at heads and clothing. It is therefore hardly an exaggeration when cynical tongues describe Parliament as a sporting arena that serves the cultivation of the body far more than the life of the mind.

Yet for the government the proceedings within its walls are of the utmost importance. The curved ceiling and all four walls have been densely seeded with hidden cameras. Such, after all, is the way of our age: a benevolent government wishes to be informed, in exact detail and at every moment, of the moods, intentions, and complaints of its citizens. Thus Parliament in Cyborstan has finally found its true function. The people chatter and reveal their state of mind; wisdom observes them with a thousand hidden eyes and later sends down its commands. For this purpose wisdom has just summoned a council of selected men and one woman.

From the height of the Pantheon one can also make out, opposite Parliament, the State Bank, proud behind its façade of Doric columns, with a golden knob perched on the roof. The knob seems to hover above the round lid of the building, as though one need only lift it to reach the treasures inside. But what are such treasures worth any longer in the new world? Paper money and bullion, that oldest of human evils, are wholly unnecessary to the new human being. When he needs replacement limbs, he goes to the arsenal. When he needs to recharge the reservoirs in his body, he takes himself to the marble seats on the Square of Heavenly Peace. True enough, money is still stored in the State Bank—not because anyone needs it, but because propriety requires that a building so stately must continue to have some purpose. In Cyborstan, for all its progress, one remains conservative in a forward-looking way. Why allow the inheritance of the past to decay merely because it has ceased to be useful? One might as well throw away half the world.

His Excellency Plato lets his gaze linger on the city spread visible at his feet. Then his eyes return to the circle of people gathered around the table below his throne-like seat. All are looking at him in silent reverence.

“You know,” he says to his guests, “that in the spirit of our founder, the Great Allan, we have removed everything superfluous by which old humanity so long spoiled and soured its life. We assign to each person what is his, and more besides. The citizens of the Warrior estate are excellent with weapons, and there they may prove themselves. The citizens of the Producer estate are well suited to pedaling and all other humble tasks, and yet we still grant them full access to happiness. Their inconsiderate chatter is painful to the ears of philosophers, however, for it lacks insight and wisdom. The two lower estates stray constantly from the path of logic and lose themselves at last in the thicket of sheer nonsense. Let them vent themselves in

Parliament. Here in the Pantheon, science, logic, and our own wisdom reign above all. We, the Cybors, invented happiness, locked away idle chatter, and abolished money completely.”

“Ha, ha!”

The cry comes from a young woman whose bobbing peacock feather demands attention before she does. She brushes a hand distractedly across her face, then points down toward the city and the bank. Her movements are oddly uncoordinated, though quick and alive. She is the only one who looks at the Lord on the throne directly and without embarrassment. Her features faintly recall someone we have met before. Who is she? And what does that sudden “ha-ha” mean, flung out of her so abruptly?

Before we can answer, she cries “ha” a second time, and then the words pour out of her at startling speed—and in rough rhyme:

Happiness invented, money like sand,
Yet whoever has it brings only disgrace to the land.
Currency vanishes, breath in the air,
Gone in a moment, yet always enough there.
Department stores trade in shadows that flutter,
Stocks crow and rattle and come to no butter.
Inflation blooms wildly all over the state,
Cardboard now dresses the millionaire great.
Let debts foam over, let soap bubbles ring,
Gold falls apart into bright childish string.
Everything flutters, everything laughs—
We have abolished both money and wants...

A man not seated at the table and not lingering near the throne, but moving freely through the room, turns toward her in astonishment. We know him. It is Athanasius Kropp, the ruler’s court jester—a Gaur, as we know, and the personal attendant of Cybor the First, also called Plato by the people. Another man is equally startled, and we know him too: Spicy, lately transformed. He still scarcely understands how it happened that, after reporting at the Ministry of Protection and Defense, a female attendant in a white cap led him through a dark passageway—a secret corridor, as he soon realized—into the Pantheon. A lift had carried him high upward beneath the light-flooded dome, into the innermost sanctuary and into the presence of the most powerful man in the new world. Until the last moment he did not understand, though he suspected that some incomprehensible fate had brought him, a small man only recently redeemed from the underworld, face to face with the ruler of everything. Now he sits among the group at the table and watches the agitated woman. He notices the little shining beads of perspiration on Kropp’s brow and instantly understands.

Outrageous, he thinks. Incredible. There is a Gaur here, in the center of power.

But he is given no time to pursue the thought. Plato’s voice thunders down from the throne.

“Stop. Be still,” he orders the young woman with an imperious gesture. Then, in a tone of reprimand: “Bertha, you cause me concern. How are we to deliberate here over the fate of the city and its citizens if your tongue insists on such undisciplined pirouettes? Rhymes or no rhymes—you are an artist, yes, and I understand that you possess a poetic vein, but your jingles are no substitute for sober statecraft. The superior intelligence of the Cloud, from which you

draw your information about our banking system, does not excuse such derailments. Stay to the point. Keep to the straight path of decorum and logic. Bring order into your mind, or we shall have to ask you to leave this gathering.”

The woman—he has called her Bertha, as we just heard—falls silent under the rebuke. The severe gaze from above is enough to command respect. He addresses her again.

“Look there, beyond the Styx—which for years now has not carried a single drop—I myself ordered the construction of a Human Zoo. Even from the far reaches of the cosmos it should be visible that we modern humans, though fundamentally transformed as a species, still provide our ancestors, the backward and therefore pitiable Gaur, with a habitat suited to their nature, where they may live undisturbed—primitive, yes, but with dignity. You, Frau Bertha, visited that zoo recently. There you were attacked, brutally and treacherously, and murdered. At my personal command the High Council resolved, by majority vote, to call you back into life. Art, we unanimously decided, must and should always exist, even if its purpose in our state, so wholly committed to science, has to this day never truly been demonstrated. It contributes nothing to the material well-being of the citizens; and yet the people recover themselves in the presence of things that have neither function nor utility. That pleasure the government did not wish to deny them. For this reason we officially ordered your resurrection and are glad now to have you once more, in full lifelike presence, among us.

“But mark this: murders are officially forbidden in Cyborstan, that is, forbidden by law. Please, Bertha—explain to us the circumstances of your violent demise, and the identity of the culprit or culprits. But remain with the facts. No new poetic rhyming. Hold fast to reason and deviate not an inch from the straight road of logic. Do not forget that you belong to the glorious First Estate of our commonwealth, the Guardians. That is both an honor and an obligation—even if, as an artist, I fear the depths of the sciences will remain forever closed to you.”

When Jupiter grows angry, mortals tremble; when the ruler in the seat of the gods rebukes one of his subjects, even a Cybor may turn pale. Holy Bertha—for it is beyond doubt her person we have here, rejuvenated by a few years—has just endured a reprimand from the mouth of the almighty. It has visibly gone under her skin. Distressed, she looks from Jupiter to the ring of men surrounding her, then lowers her head. Her otherwise winning smile stiffens into a mask.

“It must have been a bug,” she stammers. “Sometimes it just comes over me. From somewhere—I assume from the Cloud. We Creatives live in a cloud all the time; that is our fate. In the cloud there are so many omens, flickering lights, and ghosts. I fail to pay attention for a fraction of a second, and then logic catches, and suddenly a bug befalls me from behind. My tongue starts trilling all by itself. I know, I ought to control myself better. The verses especially are dangerous. Once one begins to enjoy them, they pour out of the chest on their own. They sweep one away and onward. I understand perfectly that it is unbearable; I know how dreadful it is. I humbly beg the forgiveness of everyone present.”

Her plea is not without effect.

“We must all live with bugs” says one of the men. “Let us perhaps call it play. Artists have always been fond of play. Once I read the following in a famous Gaur of early times: *Man is fully man only when he plays*. He was only a mortal Gaur, certainly, but he may very well have had your case in mind.”

The one defending the resurrected Bertha so sympathetically is our old acquaintance Herr Spicy. He looks around the table questioningly, unable to recall the name of the ancient Gaur in question. He would do better to explain what he himself, a freshly transformed member of the Warrior estate, is doing in such a circle, here at the seat of the government of Cyborstan.

Plato, however, has already turned his head aside. Then, like a shot from a pistol, words burst out from one of those present—and, yes, scarcely believable, once again from the young artist:

“Schiller, Friedrich. Born November 10, 1759, in Marbach am Neckar. Died May 9, 1805, in Weimar, of the consequences of acute pneumonia, presumably tuberculosis. Fled the Duchy of Württemberg in 1782 and was subsequently sought by warrant. Emperor Francis II ennobled the poet of freedom in 1802. The cited remark about play is attributed to this Gaur.”

“Stop, and stop again!” Plato cuts across her speech. “Bertha, you have forgotten yourself once more. That is another bug, though one without rhymes.”

This is the second reprimand from the highest authority in the state. Bertha loses all composure. Quite unrestrained, she bursts into tears in front of the men. It is extremely embarrassing to them all that a woman—and a very pretty one at that—should weep before them. The first man of the state is so disconcerted that he rises from his throne, descends in person to the resurrected Bertha, and places an arm around her shoulder.

“I see,” he says more gently. “Calm yourself, Frau Bertha. It simply comes over you. Nobody is perfect. Quite certainly there is, in your case, a programming error. Such things can happen after a resurrection—yours, after all, is only one day old. Do not be distressed. Today itself I shall inform the Smoking Heads. They are to set matters right. Presumably you need only a new chip. It is unfortunately true that, despite all undeniable progress, even in our perfect state there remains endlessly much to do.

“But let us sit down again, my lady and my gentlemen. You, Bertha, will transmit your memories of the terrible day of your murder to my people in the Ministry of Protection and Defense. For now, however, we must address a problem that threatens to shake the state itself. I have had you, my honored guests, selected by lot, precisely so that you may embody the voice of the people, which otherwise reaches my ears only as endless wrangling and shrieking through the microphones of Parliament. One among you—his name is Spicy 1101 and he therefore belongs to our praised Second Estate—was transformed only two days ago. During those last forty-eight hours he will have tasted the miracle of our new civilization in full measure. Yet his previous existence as a miserable Gaur is still inscribed in his chip. We do not simply erase the past. That must not happen, because man experiences true happiness only through contrast. I had the Human Zoo built at the edge of the city for that very reason. The younger generation must be constantly reminded of the immeasurable blessing it owes to the government. For man reaches the summit of happiness only by winding paths. Along those switchbacks he needs guidance. Together with you, my advisers—immune to all prejudice and all manipulation—I wish to walk that winding path.

“Imagine, my lady and gentlemen, at the outset the worst of all possibilities. At any moment extraterrestrials may land near our city in a spacecraft to investigate the conditions of our state. At first glance they would recognize how much, even in our happy land, remains in need of improvement. Consider, for example, the many corpses in the back courts. We have undertakers, yes, but they cannot keep up with wear and tear of our present scale. People would incarnate themselves afresh every year if they could. No wonder the old bodies disfigure the side streets

and alleyways, while beyond the city limits they have already begun to pile into hills. What are those visitors from the stars to think of us when they see such sights?”

Never before have matters in Cyborstan been spoken of so openly. The guests lower their eyes in assent. None speaks.

Then the Fool, who until now has been the taciturn wanderer between throne and council, suddenly steps before the ruler. After a brief bow he says, in a level, dragging voice, as if merely repeating an already familiar truth:

“But of course. Naturally. That is the price a modern Cybor pays for his new perfection. The Cybor feels nothing if one chops off his leg—or even his head. You know, Chief, that this was laid down expressly. It stands in Article Two, Paragraph Nine of our constitution. Man is to feel neither pain nor suffering any longer. Pain, it was said, is an invention of the devil, who wishes to make life into torment. We later moved that clause to the very beginning of the constitution. It was loudly praised as our greatest achievement.”

Cybor the First strikes the arm of his throne with his hand. Is he angry at the fact—or at the Fool?

He does not deny what was said. He confirms it.

“It is true. In that article we saw the redemption from all evils. Never back into the hell of pain—that was how we celebrated it. And now, now we have the result. Not only the back courts and alleyways are strewn with every variety of corpses—here a leg of metal and joint-motors, there a pair of hands with exposed nerve-wires, and beside them a severed skull full of silicon and PVC. And then all those ownerless noses and ears! The dead and their parts are now lying even on our showpiece boulevard, the Avenue of the Smoking Heads. What are extraterrestrials to think of us when they are offered such a sight?”

The Fool raises his hand like a well-behaved schoolboy who believes he has the correct answer.

“Lord, you know the problem was analyzed in detail by the expert council. Some specialists voted to strengthen the funeral industry so that, night after night, all corpse-parts might be gathered and sent to recycling. Then, when extraterrestrials one day visit us, they will at least be spared that distasteful spectacle.”

“Correct,” says Plato. “I rejected that proposal all the same, because the energy required for such recycling would overburden the state finances. We must think of the future.”

The Fool continues.

“The second proposal, however, you did adopt. The experts called for a reprogramming of the entire population by update. The new programming introduces an inhibition against killing. If any Cybor, regardless of estate, encounters another person wearing an exclamation mark on the chest, the program paralyzes any blow he might otherwise strike with fist, knife, or other instrument. Cases of murder and dead bodies are thereby greatly reduced.”

Plato interrupts him.

“I ordered that after the outrageous crime in the Human Zoo—the murder of the holy Bertha present here and the sudden death of a SuperEnsis. Such a thing will not happen again.”

“Very good, entirely correct,” the Fool replies at once. “But the measure did not prevent certain youths from recently hunting Gaur in the Styx valley and wantonly killing several of them. Hunting Gaur is, as everyone knows, strictly forbidden, because they stand on the red list of endangered species. The youths had indeed received the proper update; they were duly reprogrammed. But it did no good, because the Gaur wear no exclamation mark.”

“Enough!” bursts from the ruler, now openly impatient. “I can scarcely endure such criticism of our state. You are a miserable Gaur. Do you wish to make happiness itself distasteful to us—perfect happiness?”

He turns to the circle around the table.

“Do not listen to him. Bring forward your own proposals and opinions. That is why I summoned you into my presence. We have yet another evil to fight. My subjects have become addicted to pleasure. Recharging the reservoirs in their bodies is for them what orgasm once was for the Gaur when he performed the primitive union of bodies. But that old vice lasted only briefly, perhaps a few minutes a day. The new orgasm, by contrast, can last for hours, for whole days. On the Square of Heavenly Peace they wallow from morning into night upon the magnetic marble cushions. They leave the square only to pedal off a little energy, then hurry back at once to their lotus beds in order to charge themselves again. It has become an addiction that makes them forget all their duties to the state. Stupid but blissful, their gaze fixed on their crossed legs, they forget themselves and the commonwealth. Even some of my closest advisers, philosophers and Smoking Heads of the First Estate, have succumbed to the vice and wish only to live in artificial paradises.

“I ask you: what am I to do with a people that spends its days in this fashion on the cots of heavenly peace? Am I the only one still keeping a cool head?”

“Ha, ha,” cries the artist from the table once again. “That is no wonder at all. Power is stronger than any aphrodisiac. You have power, immortal Plato; we little people have only pleasure. We need the artificial paradises. How else could I have created my last great artwork? *Seventeen Times the Void* could only come into being because I lay on that couch seventeen times in succession and let myself be inspired. I shall soon exhibit the Void on the central avenue of the city, so that the people too may draw inspiration from it...”

“That takes us nowhere!” the man on the throne cuts in. “Bertha, you are straying from the path of logic once more. I, however, have followed it, and from the highest place I have made a decision. At dusk I had the current on the Square of Heavenly Peace cut off by decree. The vice had to end. The people protested, and Parliament erupted in its usual howling—but that does not yet solve our second problem. How do we stop them from murdering, from this accursed pastime that damages our reputation—this pastime in which they feel nothing because we abolished pain? I introduced the inhibition against killing through the exclamation mark. It is effective, yes. But it is useless when people kill themselves in order to arise in a fresh body. That too has now become a fashion. Suicide as the path to a new bodily experience. It is terrible. Progress has burdened us with a whole series of new problems.”

At this point Spicy takes courage. He knows his daughter Hilda would never forgive him if he let this unique moment pass unused—this moment in the center of power—mute and woolly as

a sheep. *What an extraordinary honor for a man of the Second Estate, she would say. And you did not dare seize your chance by the forelock!*

Spicy seizes the forelock.

As a member of the Warrior estate he knows himself obliged to courage, and bugs did not, so far, afflict him. He has a thought. He need only gather the courage to speak it aloud before the ruler of Cyborstan.

“There is no way around it,” he says, louder than anyone has yet spoken. All faces turn toward the unexpected voice.

“Article Two, Paragraph Nine is the problem. Pain and suffering were abolished. That was the mistake. Your subjects decay into idleness, listlessness, addiction, and sloth when the sting of pain and suffering no longer sits in their flesh. They will be grateful even for pleasure only if they know its opposite—the sharp, evil pain. You must change the constitution.”

The effect of these words from such an unexpected mouth could hardly be greater. Cybor the First is abruptly on his feet, almost springing up. He begins to cross the great hall beneath the dome in long strides, without looking down at the city or even at his guests, for his gaze is turned inward. Why do his steps accelerate although he has no destination before him?

It is an act of displacement, and holy Bertha, being an artist, grasps that intuitively at once. Wikigrandia is already trying to force its definition of *displacement activity* onto her tongue. That would be her third bug that morning, but this time she keeps hold of herself and bites down sharply on her tongue at the last possible moment.

Cybor the First, Superior Generalis of Cyborstan, stops short, lunges toward the bell near the door—the one operated by a hanging cord—and jerks at the rope with such force, as if seized by some incomprehensible fury, that the hall rings at once with a violent peal. Barely a second passes before the door is flung open from outside and a breathless servant in livery appears, evidently a man of the Second Estate, a man from the Warrior class, for he wears a sword at his side.

“Order!” cries the ruler. “Article Two, Paragraph Nine of the constitution is hereby struck at once on my command. Pain and suffering are permitted again. Happiness is no longer guaranteed by the state; each person must win it through his own efforts. The organs of the state are to ensure only the proper conditions under which citizens may obtain it for themselves by labor and discipline. Whoever wounds another person deliberately shall know what he is doing, because he, as victim, would have to endure the same pain. I want sensors for pain-perception implanted into the artificial skin of every Cybor, and those sensations transmitted onward to the brain-chip. This is my express will and command. My subjects are to refrain from disfiguring the beautiful biotope of our state with their worn-out or murdered bodies. Visitors from the stars are to be informed that a clean and decent commonwealth flourishes on our planet. We shall no longer be ashamed when extraterrestrials land among us.”

After this word of power from the highest place, all withdraw, the Fool among them. Yet as he departs there is something sly—one might almost say mocking—in his face. No sooner has he reached his room, cooled down to twenty degrees, and, as is his habit, cast a glance down at the dried-out bed of the Styx and across toward the Human Zoo—his room faces west, “so that you may feel close to your own kind,” as Plato once informed him with all the contempt of the

overhuman—no sooner has he performed this familiar ritual than he steps before the great wall mirror and does something very strange indeed.

He pinches himself in the cheek and cries out, “Ow!”

He repeats the act twice more, and each time utters the same cry of pain.

Then he murmurs to himself:

“You pitiable overhumans. You need a decree from the Pantheon in order to achieve the perfection that God—or, as others claim, dumb chance and blind evolution—gave us Gaurs from the beginning. We lower beings have always known pain. That is why one sees no corpses and torn-off limbs in our streets and courtyards. Everyone knows what suffering such things bring. Everyone therefore takes care not to inflict them on another. But the Cybors do not know; they murder with enthusiasm and know not what they do.”

Athanasius Kropp, known in the Pantheon as the court fool, lies down in bed with unusual contentment for the first time in a long while, after giving his own reflection in the mirror one last approving look—though without pinching his cheek a fourth time.

An Art Exhibition

Art is a harmless matter, so spiritually undernourished minds like to assure us. What, after all, can a canvas splashed with paint really do? What can a trumpet achieve, except whirl modulated air around our ears? And what should it matter to the average person if a poet sits for days at his desk, filing away at the words of a single line merely to hammer out a suitable rhyme or chisel an idea into language? Has any such activity ever fed a single human being? Certainly not a Gaur, and still less a progressive Cybor, who has renounced all forms of oral ingestion anyway.

And yet one must admit that the facts are curious.

For the exotic doings of people who, with all their bizarre notions, have never fed anyone at all, continue to provoke the strangest excitements. One might almost begin to suspect that the world of the Gaurs was not the product of dumb, senseless chance, nor the world of the Cybors the rational work of the Smoking Heads, but that both had sprung, fully formed, from the brains of the Creatives—as Pallas Athena was once said to have sprung in full armor from the brow of Father Zeus.

That is not said here in levity.

The reader of this present account will remember that we have met Holy Bertha before, namely in the Human Zoo, where the artist came to that notorious and horrifying end. And yet we encountered her again shortly thereafter, lively and altogether present in the celestial hall of the Pantheon, though somewhat afflicted by digital bugs. To the eye of an old human, such a rebirth would count as nothing short of sensational. Among the Cybors it excites little wonder, since every child knows that the woman's ego remained perfectly intact in the Cloud even after the destruction of her body. One needed only a new brain chip and a new body; both old components had, in the course of the crime, been more or less pulverized.

From the history of the Gaurs we know that resurrections were once celebrated as rare miracles. In earlier times such an event caused so much excitement that devout people fed on it spiritually for centuries afterward, almost as if it were manna from heaven. A certain Christos—Jesus by name—would scarcely have embarked upon his world-historical career without the resurrection attributed to him. In Cyborstan, by contrast, such miracles belong to routine. Every citizen is guaranteed by the constitution the right to his own rebirth—indeed, on request, several times in succession.

This right responds to a desire that can be traced back to humanity's earliest ancestors. Nearly every man, for example, would like at least once in his life to exist as a woman; every woman, conversely, longs just as strongly for a temporary embodiment as an invincible macho. Children naturally want to know what it is like to spend one's days as a dignified old person, though the reverse case seems even commoner. In other words, the wish for the fullest possible realization of the self appears to be congenital in mankind. One wishes to "realize" oneself at another age, in one or the other sex, or, naturally, in all the intermediate combinations and ambiguities.

Among modern humans this need has meanwhile become so pronounced that the state has felt compelled to impose restrictions. The consumption of resources threatens to overburden the public purse. Not only the manufacture of the usual spare parts—arms, legs, ears, noses, and of course the central brain chip—has spun out of control. Even full-body replacement, in which

the old worn body is disposed of and only the chip inserted into a factory-new one, has fallen further and further behind the exploding demand. The government has therefore found itself obliged to limit the private right to rebirth. Reincarnation in another sex or age is now permitted only once every three years.

Unfortunately, citizens of an enterprising cast of mind have found a simple way around this environmentally and financially necessary measure. Quite a number allow themselves to be murdered—by their own relatives, not infrequently by spouses or adopted children, which to a Gaur would still count as monstrous—because such a death, until very recently, cost no pain at all, and the law guaranteed prompt delivery of a replacement body. Such, indeed, were the conditions in Cyborstan until only a short time ago.

The impatient reader may pardon this brief glance at so dry a matter as legislation. It is indispensable, however, because from the beginning there was much whispering that Holy Bertha had not, as official propaganda claimed, been murdered by a Gaur at all, but by a friend acting on instructions from Bertha herself. She had, the rumor went, longed too intensely for a final late self-realization as a teenager younger by three decades.

If that suspicion is correct, the calculation worked beautifully. Thanks to that rejuvenation, Bertha not only lives again among us in fresh form, but her restored youth has instantly produced new creations—indeed, unique ones—which are at present on display along the Avenue of the Smoking Heads. These works consist of a series of large-format canvases, each one nothing more than an entirely empty, snow-white surface, carefully numbered: **Nothing One, Nothing Two, Nothing Three**, and so on up to the final **Nothing Seventeen**.

The response has been spectacular, and in a thoroughly characteristic way, for it proves on the one hand the greatness and power of art, and on the other the stupidity of the uneducated masses, to whom the truly great remains forever inaccessible. How can harmless stretches of pure white, which improve no one's material condition but do not in the slightest worsen it either, and which impede traffic on the avenue not at all—the boulevard is a full forty meters wide, after all, a true parade avenue—how can such monotonous objects possibly generate turbulence in the heads of sane people?

And yet turbulence is exactly what they generate. In some heads, indeed, not turbulence but full-scale storms. In that lies, to this day, the unsolved secret of great art.

From the documented reactions one thing emerges with perfect clarity. Among the connoisseurs—mostly philosophically educated people who, like the artist herself, belong to the Guardian estate—the unfolding of this newly reborn creative force has produced overwhelming effect and correspondingly extravagant praise. In this work, so runs the unanimous view, Holy Bertha has found herself completely for the first time, for behind the Nothing there lurks in truth an infinite fullness. Every superfluous line has been deliberately omitted, every dispensable daub of color withheld, every echo of predecessors and contemporaries carefully avoided. Here the essential—namely Nothing—reveals itself to the beholder with unheard-of force.

In a matter of days, dozens of scholarly essays are composed by experts on each of the seventeen revelations of Nothing, weighty “artoral explorations,” as the technical jargon has it. Bertha's supreme achievement, they explain, lies in the fact that each individual Nothing is a distinct fullness. Such richness, they insist, is clearly due to the recovered youthfulness of the artist. The specialists unanimously praise the inexhaustible *fantasiogenic* power of the works, which,

they say, reveals itself instantly to the truly informed observer by provoking within him an explosive enlargement of his own ego. Each of the seventeen encounters triggers a limitless flood of images, because before the snow-white canvas the viewer feels the irresistible impulse to fill the negating emptiness of pure Nothing out of his own inner resources. “Nothing is the world-god waiting to be born,” concludes one of the most authoritative critics.

The judgment of the experts cannot simply be dismissed. The Smoking Heads themselves, in the course of scientific examination, have demonstrated that during moments of highest artistic enjoyment the personal chip of the observer, together with the Cloud, is taxed twofold and threefold. The brain draws up from the subterranean storehouse a whole multiverse of associations, co-associations, and fusions...

But what of the exhibition itself?

Here the matter becomes especially sensitive. In the Pantheon, where every unusual occurrence in the center of the city is naturally watched with care, the exhibition of the seventeenfold Nothing goes entirely unnoticed by no one. Plato is annoyed when he summons the Fool.

“She used to be quite well-behaved, that Bertha,” he complains. “She painted those splendid tetratrees in lavish orgies of color. She immortalized soldiers leading their tigers and lions by the collar along the Avenue of the Smoking Heads. My portrait, sketched by her hand with genuine artistry, hangs in every office in my realm. I must say, at that time she knew how to express, in exemplary fashion, the characteristic union in my person of cosmic intelligence with infinite wisdom. And now this: pure Nothing, and seventeen times over!”

He turns on Kropp.

“Kropp, you owe me an answer. By what have we deserved this collapse of her creative powers? We reincarnated her as a young person, and she repays us by mocking us and all Cyborstan. Are we expected to endure this? Must I deploy the military?”

The Fool himself once had the honor of being immortalized by the industrious artist. True, she had poured over him a thimbleful of mockery, for she drew him with two clearly visible beads of sweat on his forehead and thereby exposed him as a Gaur. But he nevertheless remains deeply grateful to her, since he, being mortal, knows only too well that when he departs this world—perhaps in only a few years—his beautifully rendered character-head on the canvas may be the only thing of him that remains. Kropp is therefore little inclined to speak against Holy Bertha.

However that may be, the Pantheon must now be left immediately, because the avenue—or more precisely, Parliament—demands all our attention. While the connoisseurs, as already noted, discover unsuspected depths in the seventeenfold Nothing, the uneducated populace once again proves spiritually blind, and in the highest degree. Not only the notoriously under-endowed Producer estate, but even the somewhat better furnished Warrior estate displays with shameful clarity its lack of affinity for great art. This deficiency is now on full view in Parliament, where heated disputes over the artist and her work have broken out. As is known, the Parliament of Cyborstan has from the beginning been tolerated by the government merely as a chamber of babble and bluster, permitted only because the otherwise hard-to-control surges of popular rage and enthusiasm can be conveniently observed and monitored within an enclosed building. All doors and exits, the walls, the ceiling, and of course the speaker’s platform have, as already mentioned, been fitted with bugs and tiny cameras beyond counting, each of them with insect-like eyes. At the end of every day, artificial intelligence prepares a bulletin for

Cybor the First so that he may take the pulse of the people. Extraordinary events, like the ones now unfolding, are transmitted to the Pantheon in real time.

The first time Holy Bertha's name is uttered in Parliament, enthusiasm gives way not to admiration but to chaos. Hundreds of throats shriek, bellow, and rage themselves hoarse. They stamp with such force that some bodies begin to rattle in a disturbingly metallic way. It does not take long before arguments are replaced by material projectiles: rotten eggs and other refuse, aimed at the heads of equally excited opponents. It hardly needs saying that the freedom of opinion reigning in Cyborstan is here dragged through the mud in an undignified manner.

The stupidest shouted objections sound roughly like this:

"That's supposed to be art? My God, it's seventeen times nothing—again, again, and again nothing! She didn't even bother with a decent frame, the fraud. The emperor has no clothes, and no sane person can deny it now. Pfui! A canvas that empty doesn't even require a brush. I can do that too. Why don't you exhibit my sheet, if I produce such a Nothing? Why should her Nothing be better than mine? I can produce not just seventeen, but hundreds of them in a day. So why am I not exhibited on the avenue? I want to know immediately why the state feeds this fake artist, this expert in nothingness, with my tax money!"

Thus they howl and quarrel in competition with one another. It does no good that a member of the Guardian estate, a kindly and decent old man with flowing white hair, attempts to enlighten the ignorant. Courageously and calmly he steps before the roaring crowd, mounts the platform, and tries, with reasoned speech, to explain the secret of great art to the concrete-headed mob.

Poor man.

Naturally he fails almost at once. He is casting pearls before shrieking swine.

"There is a tremendous difference," he begins, "between one who is called by nature to art, born for it, and one whose place in the world is merely to defend or to provide."

This reminder briefly soothes tempers, since everyone takes a certain pride in his own place and origin.

"What happens," he cries, "if one of you paints such a picture and places it on the avenue? I will tell you exactly what happens. Not a single passerby stops before a canvas signed Hans 4018 or Heinz 3601. Such a name awakens nothing in the mind of the observer—no delight, not even annoyance. The gaze glides over it indifferently, because the Cloud remains mute. But look instead at the Nothing that adorns our beautiful Avenue of the Smoking Heads seventeen times. Beneath the white surface you see—and in that same instant the Cloud hidden under the Pantheon sees as well—the highly honored, highly praised name of our great Creative, dear Holy Bertha, who, after the dreadful crime committed against her person, now dwells once more among us, safe and most beautifully rejuvenated. At that point everyone stops, spellbound and profoundly blessed, before the great name and the even greater work. Whether he wishes it or not, hot shivers of reverence run down the back of the observer, because the Nothing on the violet-white canvas bears the name of the unique artist and speaks to him in secret. Seventeen times Nothing raises its mighty voice, and each time in a different tongue.

"I tell you," he concludes, tears of emotion in his eyes, "the true connoisseur sees fullness in Nothing, while the empty head sees nothing—even in fullness."

The crowd had already grown restless when Hans 4018 and Heinz 3601 were mentioned. Had he not thereby insulted the lower estates? His last words drown in tumult. His beautifully intended defense of art earns him nothing but a skull plastered in tomato pulp and egg yolk. It is his good fortune that his great age protects him from worse. At least no one trips him as he flees the Parliament building.

But this is still not the end of that sorrowful day.

For what does the foolish populace do next? And by populace I mean not merely the intellectually unfortunate Producers, but also the numerous followers of the second order who ought to be serving the protection of the state. They pour out into the avenue in front of the seventeen works and hurl at the artistic creations the remaining eggs, tomatoes, and every other vegetable fit for abuse.

The effect is tremendous.

Out of seventeen times Nothing, within minutes, there arises an equal number of new and varied creations. And a true miracle occurs: no one of the newly born works resembles any other. One gleams more strongly in the yellow of fresh eggs, another in the vivid red of tomatoes, a third in a harmonious mixture of both. Between them appear vegetable stalks and leaves and bits of gravel, lending the new surfaces a mysterious structure. One may truly say that under the active hands of a populace driven to the highest pitch of creativity, each work acquires an unforeseen individuality.

As for the state power—Plato in person—he watches the proceedings on the avenue with incredulous horror.

“This is desecration of art, this is sedition, this is revolution,” murmurs the ruler, and is already on the point of ordering in a special unit. For such occasions his soldiers are equipped with laser rifles and lead-ball cannons, ready to put down any uprising in short order. What would then have followed is obvious enough. Not that blood would have flowed, as in an action against the Gaurs; thanks to progress, that archaic phase of warfare has happily been overcome forever. No, not a drop of blood would have stained the tetratrees, the carefully swept avenue, or the palace walls. But all along the broad boulevard there would have lain metal cadavers, scattered with heads, arms, and legs—mere electronic waste. Is such a sight really any better?

To the feared clash between state power and protest-crazed people there came, Allan be praised, no such conclusion. This last-minute miracle was owed to the great artist herself—to a moment of illumination Holy Bertha experienced before her freshly bespattered works. Even the accredited connoisseurs of art would later have to admit that a genuine creative miracle had taken place.

It happened like this.

The people had gathered, jeering and hissing, before Nothing Number Thirteen, because it stood nearest Parliament, and were besieging its once virginal violet-white surface with eggs, tomatoes, and all the random dirt they could scoop up from the ground. The process unfolded in a kind of wild possession. We know that once the populace enters into a rage, a holy fury takes hold of it that nothing can restrain. Thus Nothing Number Thirteen is transformed within seconds into a fullness unrecognizable from its original state. Hardly is the last white patch covered before the crowd hurls itself upon the next Nothing with equal zeal.

Holy Bertha witnesses all this, though at first from a prudent distance, so as not to become herself the object of the collective creative frenzy. But once the egg- and tomato-throwers have completed their first work and shifted to the second, she slips forward before the transformed Number Thirteen and stands motionless before it. She stands there and stands and stands.

And then—yes, then only a single word is heard from her lips, though several times over. It is the magical word that thousands of enlightened minds before her have stammered, murmured, or shouted aloud:

“Heureka!”

The rejuvenated Bertha claps her hands. A few from the crowd turn toward her and are already preparing to treat her as they have treated the canvas. But with shining eyes she runs toward them, arms spread wide, embraces them, and keeps stammering the same word:

“Heureka, Heureka!”

Then she recollects herself and cries out:

“My friends, you dear Creatives, you have accomplished a miracle. Out of Nothing you have made our common work. My own will and yours, the will of the people, have united. This is the greatest moment of my life!”

It is this unexpected turn that prevents the order for the elite force from being given. The Fool himself appears moved, almost to tears.

“We old humans,” he murmurs, while a single tear rolls down his cheek, “we Gaurs may have been surpassed by your progress up here by many miles, but there were some things we foresaw correctly after all. Did you notice,” he asks the ruler, “how the artist went toward the crowd with open arms, and how this beautiful fraternization—no, sistering—came about? I know you despise us as lowly earth-ghosts, but in the past our greatest Creatives foresaw precisely this moment. There was once a great man named Boið. Like your holy Bertha, he freed himself of all the old constraints. Mere craftsmanship meant nothing to him. Only the right disposition mattered, and that could reveal itself just as well in an empty white surface as in a rotten egg, a tomato, or a piece of felt. For every human being, he said, is a born artist—every single human, and the whole people together.”

Even Plato, ruler of the divine seat, must overcome an impulse toward emotion. Naturally he cancels the deployment of the police at once. What had begun as desecration of high culture by an unbridled crowd has become a union with the creative energy of the people—a historic event for Cyborstan.

Nor could the connoisseurs of art refuse to accept this revolution. They are agreed that here a unique synthesis has taken place. While the artist, with her inspiration through Nothing, laid the foundation of the seventeen works, the people in their holy zeal transformed them into true fullness—and did so in a distinct way with each one, for none resembles another in coloring or texture. From that day onward Holy Bertha is praised for her closeness to the people. She has already announced her future program as well. From now on she will create only in the company of specially trained throwers of tomatoes and eggs.

Creativity, so runs her mature creed, must arise from the Nothing of inspiration and from the elemental force of the people.

Beyond Allan: The Suburb

The splendid avenue stretching from the Square of Heavenly Peace to the bronze statue of Great Allan forms the true center of Cyborstan. But one should not imagine that the world comes to an end beyond the statue. It is true that Cyborstan is surrounded on every side by desert and nothing but desert—a dried-out no-man’s-land such as one might otherwise expect only on Mars. This desiccated emptiness has spread itself around the globe; since the onset of the Great Heat, the life of the Gaurs on earth has almost entirely died out. The last specimens of old humanity found refuge only in the cave labyrinth near the Styx.

These facts and their deeper causes are known and need no further explanation for the informed reader. Whoever belongs to the new humanity has every reason for optimism, since the fireproof Cybors will soon reconquer the whole globe. Even today, the land between the city center and the encircling desert is by no means empty. Beyond the bronze statue there extends, as far as the eye can see, a spread of flat, one-story buildings, plain and loveless, made of unfired brick. Their appearance invites no one—no one except the people who live there, because they were banished from the center of the city. Even the street-cleaning service rarely ventures so far, though the narrow lanes are strewn with every kind of refuse. Everyone knows that this is the home of the lowest class, the precarious class.

There is little or no work for such people in our state, because the Cybors live in progress; among them, labor has been largely abolished. It is now almost entirely performed by obliging machines at the push of a button. A tremendous achievement, as any thinking person will grant at once.

Why, then, does the Producer estate exist at all, one might ask, if it no longer has anyone to feed? Would it not be more accurate simply to call these people “the superfluous”? No. That view must be rejected as fundamentally false. Such an error is found only among those who understand neither our material conditions nor the psychic constitution of the leading classes in Cyborstan.

Let us begin with the material conditions. Surely anyone can grasp that the sun sometimes remains hidden for two or even three weeks behind clouds dark-bellied as ships, and that the wind too may betray us. Then heavenly current ceases. The solar fields doze uselessly, the wings of the windmills fall slack. As we know, this is nothing less than a tragedy, for then the new human is robbed of his highest delight: charging himself on the lotus seats in the Square of Heavenly Peace. In order that such a calamity not occur, the state requires the precarious people from the gray suburb. At such times they must pedal the dynamos, of which every household has at least one. The suburbanites have no grounds to complain. During smaller power interruptions the Pantheon lets the Gaurs of the underworld do the pedaling anyway. But sometimes the Producer estate itself must step into the breach. Then the inhabitants of the Third Estate become pedalers for a few days. They should count themselves fortunate that, unlike so many Gaurs, they do not have to pedal for a lifetime.

That is the pressure of material necessity in Cyborstan, and by comparison it is mild enough. Yet there is a second reason, and this one lies in the psychology of the new human being.

Is it not curious—at first glance even inexplicable—that the members of the second class, the proud defenders of the state, have always insisted, in the councils of the Smoking Heads, that “as much Producer estate as possible must be manufactured”? What, after all, do these sword-

bearing peacocks gain from the existence of so many allegedly superfluous people? Strictly speaking, they gain chiefly trouble. In periods of windless stagnation and solar eclipse, they have to march out with fixed bayonets into the suburb in order to suppress by force the widespread reluctance to work—what the government calls labor sabotage. Is that what they enjoy? Do they need such martial appearances in order not to begin thinking themselves superfluous?

Perhaps, one might say. Perhaps.

But there seems to be something more at work. Suppose the Pantheon had from the outset dispensed with producing a Producer estate as the lowest class. Then—this is a conclusion no logic can evade—the Warrior estate itself would have been the lowest class. Here lies the crux. For the Warriors that would be not merely unfortunate but intolerable. All those armed dandies with their splendid domestic beasts would have lacked any ground for that immense old-maid pride with which they contemplate their elevated station. Our newly transformed and by now well-known Spicy 1101 would probably never have encountered that bold man with the tiger on the Avenue of the Smoking Heads, nor the several other equally impressive specimens of that superior class.

It is a comfort that we need not trouble our heads any further over such a possibility. The three estates—Guardians, Warriors, and Producers—have existed from the founding of Cyborstan onward. Such is the order of things. But for that very reason there also remains to this day the stark contrast between the noble center, where between the Pantheon and the bronze statue of Great Allan the two upper classes dwell, and the dreary suburb beyond Allan, where the precarious class keeps its sad home. It does not surprise us that respectable citizens of the first two classes almost never stray into this neglected, unsightly sea of houses, except in the already mentioned exceptional cases when, once or twice a year at most, a brigade of the Warrior estate marches out in order to drive the unwilling to the dynamos.

And yet—attention.

Even in Cyborstan no rule exists without its exceptions. This has to do above all with the incalculable brains of the philosophers. Among them it happens occasionally, though rarely, that they concern themselves with the lot of the less fortunate among their countrymen—not from love of humanity, perhaps, but from ungovernable curiosity. These inquisitive minds want to know everything precisely. They ask, for instance:

How does a person of the lowest stratum think? From where does he derive his ideals? Do we find in a person from the suburb anything resembling spiritual aspiration?

Out of pure thirst for knowledge, such people sometimes make their way into the remote suburb and do what all other inhabitants would never do, since they are immune to such fits of weakness. That alone explains why even well-informed citizens have little idea that behind the bronze statue of the Great Allan lurks a special kind of people: the so-called **UNScis**, or those condemned as unscientific. Decent people avoid their company, yet only the Pantheon knows that out there lives an adversary who is quietly and stealthily shaking the pillars of the state.

The UNSCIS

That something had gone wrong—utterly, irreparably wrong—was clear to Oderich 215 only when Plato’s fist came down with a crack.

“No one in the Pantheon, and no one in the Ministry of Happiness and Justice, may permit himself to trample tradition underfoot. It is our sacred inheritance, and everyone here is bound to respect it. Have I not always warned you that not every novelty is good merely because you invented it? Oderich, as of today you are an UNSCI!”

For one of the Smoking Heads in the Ministry of Progress and Happiness, that sentence was nothing less than a civil death sentence. After that outburst from the ruler, Oderich—until then an esteemed member of the institution—lost his position together with all the rights attached to his standing in the Guardian estate. Plato had degraded him from a Sci to an UNSCI.

From that point on it no longer counted that his mind had “smoked” in the highest degree, that he was almost permanently thinking, indeed that his whole life consisted of thinking, so that he had already worn through a dozen brain chips and burdened the Cloud more heavily than most. In Cyborstan—more precisely, in the Ministry of Happiness and Justice, where the cream of the new humanity has its home—customs had by now arisen not wholly unlike those that once prevailed among the Gaurs. When the old humans condemned one of their own, he was usually denounced as a traitor to the state, a fascist, a Nazi, or a heretic. Since the coming of progress, however, a new formula of damnation has come into use, and it inspires no less fear. Whoever incurs Plato’s displeasure is branded *unscientific*. The UNSCIS, as the people call these lost souls, lose at once their civic standing, their office, and the respect previously accorded them. If the condemned man had belonged among the Smoking Heads, he is from that moment no longer fit for society—not even among the lowest estate, that is Producers. Degraded for life, he is not physically eliminated, as the Gaurs used to treat their enemies; in that respect at least a certain progress is undeniable. But the degraded one must flee from the honorable center of the city to its outer edge, near the wasteland of the desert, and bury himself in the suburb.

What had roused Plato, the composed ruler of Cyborstan, to such anger that he struck the table with his fist?

It was, as so often, the endless quarrel between tradition and innovations bold enough to threaten it. Among the Smoking Heads the cautious attitude of Cybor the First—some speak of it contemptuously as timidity—has long been known. Yet from time to time rebellious reformers still spring forward with grand proposals. That is exactly what happened on the day so fatal to Oderich 215, when the daring researcher invoked Great Allan himself and thereby only sharpened the wrath of Allan’s successor.

“Great Allan never cared for rules and prescriptions,” Oderich began, and in his naivety ignored the fact that this very opening sentence was already drawing folds of displeasure across the ruler’s forehead. “We know,” he continued, “that from the beginning Allan wanted to smash the fetters of tradition. Already then he proclaimed his glad tidings to the world: if I create the new human being, I shall once and for all put an end to the Gaurs and to their hopelessly unscientific existence. If necessary, *Homo Novus* may look like an insect, or for that matter take the shape of a crocodile. That is not the point. The point is efficiency, and all the sensationally new functions that we wish to bestow on the new human as his inheritance.”

Already at these words Plato's eyes had narrowed to slits, yet Oderich still perceived nothing of the mortal danger descending on his head. Undeterred, he shattered the remaining porcelain of his reputation.

"The new human being," he went on, "Cybor communis, is in truth neither new nor, in his present form, the highest realization of human possibility. He is hardly more than a pitiable hybrid. His torso still rests on no more than two legs, although research has long since proved that four or more lower extremities would vastly improve his stability and mobility. We continue to furnish him with only two arms, though even the old Gaurs represented their gods with four or six, as in ancient India. As for the present head of the Cybor, it belongs in the junk room altogether. Everyone knows that in its present form it is nothing but a bad joke of evolution. Mouth and nose could be abolished at once, since they have lost all function now that oral ingestion itself has been abandoned. I ask you: why did we eliminate the intestines if we continue to preserve these no less useless openings in the skull? In this I can see nothing but a feeble attachment to what has been handed down, a pitiful lack of courage for radical rethinking. My Sci friends and I have long wished—"

At that point the metaphorical barrel overflowed. The dreadful crack resounded. Then Plato extended his hand toward Oderich and made that terrible sign with three fingers which, in an instant, annihilates a man socially and almost as a person: the index and middle fingers of the left hand stretched forward, while the right forefinger is laid crosswise over them as a mark of erasure. Oderich and his companions turned pale on the spot. They fled from the sky-hall in headlong panic before the ruler's henchmen could lay hands on them. It goes without saying that thereafter the Ministry of Happiness and Justice was closed to them forever.

Oderich spent that night still in his apartment, but he knew they would drive him out of it the following morning. There is only one place where an UNSCI is tolerated: the suburb at the edge of the inhospitable desert. And it is there that we see him now wandering through the lanes, not knowing where he is going. Will anyone offer refuge to the outcast?

As the former Sci, Oderich 215—who must now surrender his number, because after his degradation he no longer belongs among the philosophers and Scis—hurries aimlessly through the filthy alleys of the suburb, he notices an old woman leaning from a window and looking down at him. She has evidently recognized him at once, by his still dignified clothing, as a former Sci and now a marked man. At any rate she raises her arm and points farther south.

"Nineteen," she murmurs loudly enough that he cannot fail to hear. "Lane Nineteen. Number Twenty-Four. They'll take you in there. You won't be the first."

Again she points, toward the next corner, and adds that at the end of the street he must turn right, and then right again.

A man who has lost both direction and hope obeys any sign, even when it comes from an old witch leaning from a window. To his surprise the former Sci does in fact arrive in a lane numbered Nineteen. As he goes on, a high grimy wall stretches along his left, and in it he suddenly discovers a small door bearing the number twenty-four. There is no bell. He knocks, but no one opens. At last he presses the handle and enters a broad courtyard, before whose sight he recoils in the first instant as if he had stepped straight into hell.

For Oderich, the degraded one, now finds himself facing a mountain of corpses—an almost immeasurable quantity of discarded Cybor bodies. The head of a child lies at his feet, threaded

with bright nerve-strands. Beside it lies the body of a mature woman with violet hair, now caked with mud into ugliness. Behind, before, above, and beside them, as in a catacomb under the open blue sky, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of useless bodies are heaped up, their brain chips damaged or entirely missing. What confronts the horrified observer is the sickly green-yellow filler material in which the finest connection wires are embedded.

On the face of the UNSCI there appears, at the sight, something nameless—something until now unknown even to himself. He clutches both hands to his breast, staggers, and weeps, unable to master himself.

“They lying there,” he whispers, “some of them were in the flower of youth, and others believed themselves old and wise. The women were beautiful, the men intelligent. And now they lie here in heaps, mere waste and refuse. Where have beauty and youth gone? Where have age and wisdom gone?”

Spellbound and helpless, Oderich stares at the great mountain of electronic scrap. Yet these mournful questions come not from him himself, but from Wikigrandia, with which the Smoking Head remains connected still. It is the accumulated wisdom of centuries concerning the vanity and perishability of all earthly things that passes through his chip at this moment. For an instant he imagines the whole world collapsing before him, imagines all Cyborstan and the surrounding cosmos shrunken into one heap of trash—nothing but sickly yellow-green stuffing and a tangled undergrowth of colored wires.

Memory, even the kind stored not in one’s own interior but in an external repository buried under the Pantheon, can shake a man so deeply that every appetite for existence leaves him. Let us not forget that Oderich himself is also only a figure of plastic, a little metal, and a few rare earths. No one would find it remarkable if he were to collapse here and now before the mound of scrap and increase by one further useless body the number of corpses and body-parts already lying there.

Lane Nineteen, Number Twenty-Four

What saves the wandering fugitive is an unexpected red light flashing above the entrance to a low, crouching shed opposite the courtyard gate. Its steady blinking pulls his attention away from the hill of death behind him. Oderich moves toward the beckoning light and pushes open the door without knocking—like a man who no longer knows what he is doing.

And then, for the second time, he is rooted to the spot.

Before him opens a wide hall. At its center stands a creature—strange beyond measure. Neither animal nor human. Perhaps a superhuman. Perhaps a super-animal.

We remember: only yesterday the visitor was a respected Sci, a researcher cast out by power because his mind had dared to imagine too boldly the future of humanity. That vision has not left him. And now he knows—instantly, with terrifying certainty—that what stands before him is almost exactly the being he himself had once conceived, but had failed to force through against Plato's resistance.

Before him stands a nearly spherical creature, balanced on at least half a dozen legs. From its back rise a variety of antennae, each clearly designed to grant it hypersensory capabilities. Had he not, only recently, planned precisely such a being? Had he not been cast out for that very idea?

Oderich cannot tear his eyes away.

Yet one doubt remains. Could this be merely an imitation—some artificial reproduction of an unknown insect?

No.

He rejects the thought at once. The creature's body is not divided, as in insects, into head, thorax, and abdomen. It is a single unified sphere. A ball that contains everything. And more: it possesses a tail, curling upward in rings. Its surface is studded with organs—two eyes looking forward, two more backward, ears set laterally on either side. A nose is entirely absent. In place of a mouth, however, there protrudes from the front—a position exactly opposite the tail—a beak-like extension, sharp as a rapier.

Clearly not intended for eating.

But as a weapon? The bright red lance would serve perfectly.

Oderich's astonishment deepens when he notices a cable inserted beneath the tail—an electrical cord, evidently, for recharging the creature with heavenly energy.

“How is this possible?” he murmurs. “How has my vision—this masterpiece of human invention—found its way here, to the edge of the suburb, into such a miserable dwelling? Has someone built a secret laboratory here?”

The questions shake him.

Has he been led here by a dream? By the old woman—some witch—to mock him, to drive him mad? He presses his hand to his forehead, as though testing whether a programming fault has just occurred. Even a Smoking Head, even a mind of the highest order, is not immune to deception in this world. There had been, not long ago, the famous case of a respected Sci who suddenly believed himself to live in antimatter—where all rules were reversed. From one moment to the next he began walking on his hands instead of his feet and addressing his own dog as “Your Majesty.” A defect in his chip, they later discovered.

Oderich knows how often such failures occur.

He stands there, suspended between vision and madness—

—and is released from that uncertainty only when, at the far end of the hall, a door opens.

One after another, more than a dozen people enter.

Not only do they greet him at once with both index fingers pointed toward their foreheads—the customary sign of joyful welcome—they also begin to clap.

“Welcome among the UNSCIS!” calls one.

“Welcome among the true disciples of our immortal Allan!” cries another.

A third steps forward.

“Welcome among the revolutionaries of the future world.”

Oderich recognizes him immediately.

Peter TirLanpan.

Once known as Peter the Second—because he stood directly beneath the ruler himself, beneath Plato. He had been the first and earliest outcast of Cyborstan, condemned for advocating a radically new human being and for denouncing Plato’s rigid attachment to tradition as the greatest of political errors. Nearly half of the Smoking Heads had once gathered behind him. All of them, together with their leader, had been cast out as rightless exiles to the edge of the city.

And now they stand before Oderich.

Here. In this inconspicuous house at the edge of the suburb.

They smile at him—his brothers in disgrace.

And for the first time since his fall, Oderich is no longer alone.

Happy with Hilda?

He stands waiting before the Ministry of Happiness and Justice, his eyes fixed on the entrance, not daring to move any closer. He can hear his heart knocking against his ribs. After twenty years, this will be the first time he has seen his daughter again.

Back then she had been eighteen—still a child, and such a dear one, though headstrong, far too headstrong, he had thought at the time, for a girl that age. He had been hard on her—far too hard, as he now sees. Because she had fallen in love with that good-for-nothing, that ridiculous boy next door, he had wanted to lock her up. He had even threatened to marry her off to the baker's son from the neighboring alley, whom she could hardly bear to look at, whom she in fact despised. He had threatened her deliberately, to bring the stubborn girl, as he put it then, finally to her senses. So many foolish notions in the head of a young girl—no father with a conscience, he had thought, could endure it.

And now?

Now, twenty years later, Spicy 1101 has to admit that his foolish daughter had been wiser than he and the whole family put together. She had been ahead of her time—not merely by the twenty years he himself had needed before at last consenting to the beatifying transformation, but ahead of it altogether. As a young girl she had already understood that a new age had begun and that anyone wishing ever again to live in the bright upper world would do well to become fireproof. She alone in the family had possessed that insight. Risking her life, she had escaped from the underworld. At midnight, when the guards by the Styx had been overcome by sleep, she had slipped past them and made her way on her own to the newly founded center of Sister MiseCor. Since then Spicy had never seen her again. But now, after her father too had—late, but still in time—come to reason, she had sent him a message.

Monday, the such-and-such, I expect you in front of the Ministry of Happiness and Justice. But charge yourself fully beforehand on the Square of Heavenly Peace—I mean, come only when your whole body is green and your soul completely serene.

Spicy had thought long about why she insisted so strongly on this advice. Would it not be a blissful moment anyway, to look into each other's eyes for the first time after so many years? Why should he first recharge himself to the point that his whole body glowed a rich green of highest satisfaction? Would not the happiness of reunion suffice by itself?

Well, despite these thoughts, he had of course done as she advised. He is indeed fully charged now, in excellent spirits, green from his toes to his face. So perhaps he should stop brooding over the sense or nonsense of filial recommendations. After all, in wisdom his own child had outrun him by more than miles—by a full twenty years.

Around Spicy the square is lively at this hour, and of course a hundred or more people are again enthroned in Buddha posture upon the marble petals, drawing the sun's energy into themselves. It is a beautiful sight: the calm, the serenity in their faces. Or perhaps not quite as serene as formerly. For by now everyone knows that the government can shut off the flow of power at any moment, since even in Cyborstan there exist incurable idlers and parasites who think all day of nothing but drawing the free energy of the world into their limbs. Sometimes they rise once or twice, leave the magnetic field of the white marble beds, run like mad along the Avenue of the Smoking Heads to Allan and back again to the Square of Heavenly Peace, simply because

they have become addicted to the drug. That such people are useless to themselves and to society goes without saying. The government therefore found no better remedy than to interrupt the radiant current unpredictably—as if out of a clear sky, when no one expected it. Since then each person must reckon at every moment with the possibility that the life-giving, bliss-bestowing manna of the sun may suddenly fall to zero and his soul, in the very midst of highest happiness, be hurled into desperate confusion. Lately, however, the government has proceeded with selective prudence. Only useless creatures who charge themselves more than once a day are affected. Spicy has so far been spared that cruel experience.

Just then the broad doors of the Ministry of Happiness and Justice open. An old woman steps out, pauses, looks around. Her glance passes over him as well. Spicy turns away.

My daughter, he thinks, was eighteen back then. Surely she had herself registered for immortality at exactly that youthful age. There is no finer season in human life than the bloom of youth. Sister MiseCor made me twenty years younger. I brought her that old photograph from earlier times. The sister from the center proved herself a good soul. She gave me twenty years, and that will make the reunion easier for my daughter. Back when she left us without farewell, I was forty and she was eighteen. Now twenty years have passed, but I have been made younger by twenty. So she must be thirty-eight, while I am forty. The age difference between us has almost vanished. We now stand nearly level in years. But of course I shall recognize my dear daughter at once.

Lost in these calculations of time and age, he feels a hand touch him from behind on the shoulder. He turns and finds himself looking into the eyes of the very old woman who had just emerged from the ministry.

“Papa,” says the old woman, holding out her hand.

There are probably moments in every person’s life when the reality around him spins like a mad top and then seems to collapse into nothing. A dead man’s ghost may come grinning out between blooming cherry trees on a silent autumn evening. A red sun may suddenly tumble from its course and plunge into the village pond. Or a knife may stab through the brain so that thousands of black flies whirl before one’s eyes and one drops to the ground in terror. In short, there are moments of horror when the laws of the world, till then obediently following their appointed rules, seem all at once to have ceased to function.

And this old woman, standing before him, calls him Papa and claims to be his daughter?

Spicy opens his eyes wide, then closes them again. He stands speechless.

Then the old woman says, in a voice already somewhat brittle with age, “Now you see why I told you to charge yourself fully before coming, until you were green all over. I foresaw that you still wouldn’t understand anything. You never really understood your daughter.”

The words go under his skin. They strike to the marrow. He can feel the rich green of bliss already beginning to fade.

“You’ve grown terribly old up here,” he stammers. “Back then, when you ran off without saying a single word to us, you were only eighteen. That’s how I’ve remembered you.”

“Eighteen!” the old woman laughs, a dry, almost bleating laugh. “Did you really think they’d admit a teenager into the Ministry of Happiness and Justice? A philosopher must wear the dignity of age, so that people believe her. For us women even more than for you machos. I insisted on being at least forty. My wish was granted at the Center for Beatifying Transformation. But you, dear Papa, seem to have wanted to preserve your own youthful foolishness. I can see they made you at least ten, perhaps twenty years younger. No wonder the state can use you only in the Warrior estate. But I am very glad that you seem already to have settled in among us.”

Spicy, now standing as a youthful father beside his graying daughter, can think of nothing to say. He is utterly disoriented. Even the Cloud, which loves to soothe men by proving that every extraordinary situation has precedents and that one need not get so agitated, abandons him in his perplexity. A forty-year-old father confronted by a sixty-year-old woman who claims to be his daughter—and may indeed be—seems to be a case without precedent in the whole history of the world. One hears it in his broken stammering: he simply cannot cope.

We, however, the patient observers of this scene before the divine seat of Cyborstan, are offered at least one insight, though it is hardly a new one. Women, we learn yet again, deal far better with the extraordinary than men. In this case it may help that Hilda 98 belongs to the small and select number of philosophers in the new realm. After all, in rank of wisdom she stands only ninety-seven places behind Cybor the First. One notices it at once in her behavior. She has firmly taken her father by the hand. He allows himself to be led like a bewildered sheep into the festively animated crowd along the Avenue of the Smoking Heads.

At the moment, Hilda is clearly thinking for both of them. When one belongs to the elite of the philosophers, perhaps that takes little effort.

“Look, Papa,” says the old woman, pointing. “That man there on the pedestal, spreading his hands in blessing. In the underworld we saw such things only in storybooks. Here they stand before us in the flesh. Listen to what he’s saying.”

Spicy is grateful to turn his eyes away from the old woman who is his daughter. He now notices the man in the scarlet cap and the equally scarlet vestments.

“You see, Papa,” she says, “that is a real cardinal, exactly as in the books. You can tell by the scarlet cap—the square biretta. And for the occasion he has put on a chasuble of the same glowing red. The pectoral cross belongs there too, naturally, and do not overlook the cardinal’s ring. You must admit it all looks wonderfully authentic. Look there—even the cincture, the beautifully embroidered girdle. Every detail is right.”

Spicy nods, but remains deeply confused.

“I still don’t understand,” he says. “Why do you need cardinals in the upper world? You abolished the Church long ago in the name of science and philosophy.” He means to begin with “Hilda,” but the name does not come. The old woman beside him still feels horribly strange.

“You see,” she replies, “there are many things between heaven and earth that reason cannot fully grasp. Unfortunately, Papa, you understood so little even back then, when Mama—my mother and your wife—was still alive. You would not even allow us the few storybooks from the neighbor’s vault, because you thought they would fill the heads of your wife and daughter with nonsense. Once, while you were away, I dared open *The Thousand Nights*, which the

neighbor's boy had slipped to me in secret. For the first time I felt myself bewitched by the upper world. I saw oceans and winged lions, tumbling stars, and a god riding astride the sun through the reaches of the cosmos. When you discovered me with that book, you locked me for two days in darkness without food or drink. That was the day I swore I would flee upward into the light and have myself transformed, so that I could become fireproof like the people here and survive among the Cybors."

Spicy freezes. There can no longer be any doubt: this old woman really is his daughter. Who else could know of *The Thousand Nights* and of the punishment he gave her?

"Maria—" he stammers, then corrects himself at once, for Maria was his wife. "Hilda, dear Hilda, you were right. Back then I did many things badly, because I was nothing but an ordinary mortal. But now I am one of you. Only understand that a father must first accustom himself to the fact that his daughter is so far ahead of him in years. For the old mortal understanding, that is a hard morsel. I must digest it first. But I do see now that we are in the upper world and subject to a higher reason. Perhaps here it is quite natural that daughters should surpass their fathers not only in wisdom but in years as well."

He wipes tears from his eyes.

"Hilda," he says at last, laying his hand—still a little hesitantly—upon the shoulder of the old woman, "my dear Hilda, what you must have endured then..."

But she gives no answer. Both have turned to listen to the cardinal's sermon.

*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.
Surrexit Dominus vere, alleluia!
Gaudete, filii Ecclesiae, gaudete omnes populi, quia hodie lux perennis saeculo orta est.
Haec est dies quam fecit Dominus; exultemus et laetemur in ea.
Christus, agnus redemptor, victor a mortuis surrexit, et mors in aeternum devicta est ...
Haec est fides nostra, haec victoria nostra.
Praedicemus igitur resurrectionem Domini in omni terra, ut omnis lingua confiteatur:
"Christus regnat, alleluia!"*

Father and daughter listen in reverent silence to the solemn recitation. The Cloud has instantly informed them that the strange sounds are Latin, and that a conscientious cardinal would once have addressed such words to his congregation at Easter. Around them others too have gathered; some applaud, others finger the chasuble to test the quality of the cloth.

"Convincingly authentic," murmurs one of the onlookers. "He has attended to every detail. And his Latin is flawless."

"Bravo!" voices call around them, while the praised man extends his arms in blessing over the little crowd.

"I still don't understand," Spicy whispers. "What is he trying to accomplish? Do you have a Church here where he can rule?"

"Papa," says Hilda, "you can see from the shine of his hands and face that the cardinal has just come fresh from the arsenal. He is factory-new. How could there be a Church? He is not real. He only acts the part—though with considerable knowledge. A bored Cybor—there are many

of them—goes rummaging in the remote past in order to say goodbye to his usual ego for a little while. Only for a little while, you understand. It is simply something different. That is all these performers want.”

Spicy shakes his head incredulously. “Something different? Is he a cardinal or not? I don’t understand.”

“You still understand so little, my little Papa. At the Ministry of Happiness and Justice, acting on higher orders—Plato himself gave the command—we studied how to enliven everyday life in Cyborstan. However nearly perfect our state may appear compared with the underworld, there are always the dissatisfied and the chronic grumblers. More than one person has grown weary of the ego into which our Scis have locked him. And one can understand that. I myself transformed into an old woman because little wisdom is ever attributed to the young, and least of all to a girl. Of course it might also be pleasant, once in a while, to feel like a girl of fifteen again.

“No, don’t be afraid. Your Hilda has no intention of such nonsense. I gave myself over to wisdom, and wisdom demands gray hair. Others are less steadfast. They want, by way of change, to slip into the skin of a child, or of a Napoleon, an Einstein, or a cardinal. The government of Cyborstan is tolerant enough to allow its citizens such variations, though only every three years; otherwise the expense would be too great. The chip and the personal identity in the Cloud remain, of course, the same. What changes is only the mode of self-realization.”

“Aha,” says Spicy, eager to show off his fresh knowledge. “So it’s all a matter of costume—and at most once every three years.”

“Exactly,” the old woman replies, “and only for the Producer estate, the people of the third class. The first two estates are supposed to be free of such vulgar cravings. They are generally content with their lot. Only the lower folk want to play cardinal, pope, or Napoleon. We, by contrast—”

She does not finish. From the center of the avenue, where they are walking side by side, a powerful figure approaches, accompanied on the left by a lion and on the right by a tiger.

“Look, Papa,” whispers the old woman, and now her voice trembles with admiration. “Look closely at that magnificent specimen of a man. He belongs to the same estate as you—a representative of the Warrior class. Because of his high rank he is allowed to keep those two beasts for his protection. Similar animals are, naturally, permitted to you as well.”

Such encounters are no longer new to Spicy. On the very first day after his successful transformation he met a man on the avenue whose pet tiger had leaped over his head. He also remembers the man with the wise owl.

As they continue strolling eastward down the always festive Avenue of the Smoking Heads, a Napoleon comes riding toward them on a pale horse, wearing a three-cornered hat.

“Only an imitation,” whispers the old woman beside him. “The people from the suburb want to rise high, at least once in their lives. We’ll likely still pass an Alexander or two, and perhaps a few Cleopatras. They’re especially popular with the masses.”

She is right. Beneath the mighty tetratrees, whose artificial leaves sometimes burst into sudden rustling and crackling under a gust of hot air, a whole procession of figures from long-past ages comes toward them.

“You see, thanks to Wikigrandia it has become absurdly easy for anyone to search the Cloud for great names. Once the name is selected, AI is instructed to assemble the appropriate clothing. Then one goes to the arsenal with the instructions, and a new body is produced to measure with all the accessories.”

“But at most once every three years,” Spicy adds quickly, eager again to display his knowledge.

“Certainly,” confirms the old woman, “at most once every three years, and then only for the Producer estate. Don’t forget it. Philosophers and the worthy Warrior class are supposed to be free of such ordinary cravings.”

By now it has grown late afternoon. At this hour the sun passes over the roofs with glowing fingers, shoots itself against the windows of the houses, and the reflected rays scatter bright pools of light on the road. Spicy feels nothing any longer of the heat. He is as fireproof as the rest. Only the glare forces him now and then to narrow his eyes. If someone approaches in brilliant white clothing, the sight is almost unbearable.

Sometimes father and daughter walk in silence. Perhaps one draws nearest to another precisely when words fail and shared perception creates an unspoken accord.

She is twenty years older than I am, Spicy reflects, and infinitely wiser, since she belongs to the First Estate. As for me, I shall certainly order myself a splendid pet. Certainly. I shall not forgo the privilege of my station. Yet to the spirit of this old woman, who is my daughter, I shall never rise. The world has turned upside down, there is no doubt of that. Daughters are older and wiser than their fathers. But apart from that, everything is still incomparably better than in the underworld.

At the same moment the old woman beside him is thinking: *He is my father, and no doubt he’ll order himself some magnificent wild beast—something outrageous, a condor perhaps, or even a sea lion. For all his many weaknesses he is a dear fellow, my papa. Only he does tend toward bragging. Fortunately I did not inherit that defect from him.*

For thousands of years such thoughts in the inner chambers of a human being were as unknowable as the counsels of the gods. But since the founding of the Cloud everything is stored in the eternal memory beneath the Pantheon. That is why we too know precisely what is passing through father and daughter at this moment, while the sun sends its burning fingers across the city by the Styx and between the naked mountains.

They stop before one of the bright tetratrees, on whose yellow, blue, and pink-red leaves the sun has kindled a crackling fire of light. Yet it is not the leaves that draw their attention, but the black-and-white faces fastened in a list to the trunk.

“Faces gray as in the underworld,” murmurs Spicy with a shudder.

“Sad faces, like those from my wretched childhood,” thinks the old woman.

“You see the inscription at the bottom of the list, Papa? *The Outcast*. That is what it says, though the letters are already fading. These are the unhappy men—no women among them—who rebelled against the government. At the top stands TirLanpan the Second. He wanted to make tabula rasa of everything our great statesman Plato holds sacred. And here, at the bottom, I read the name Oderich 215, only recently banished to the edge of the city among the UNSCIS. They are outlawed exiles, a disgrace to our country. Let us move on quickly.”

With those words the old woman quickens her pace so sharply that her youthful father can hardly keep up. They are checked again only when a burst of wild shouting reaches their ears.

“Ah!” cries the daughter, and now her voice is merry again. “There at the corner, that figure with the straw-blond hair—that is SuperDumb, a legendary figure from the late age of the Gaurs, back when they still lived under the open sky. The man with the golden-yellow crest is delicious—really worth seeing. As a philosopher I don’t usually care for street spectacle, but SuperDumb is always amusing.”

Spicy sees a figure on a high pedestal, ringed by a crowd shrieking, giggling, howling with delight, made up mostly of children and adolescents. The man is speaking into a round sound-catcher sprayed with red butterflies.

“I am the greatest!” he cries. “The whole of history has not even imagined anyone like me, much less produced him. Rejoice, for this is the most wonderful day of your lives, because you are permitted to see and hear me!”

The answer is a roar from a hundred throats. At the same time marbles and small stones fly toward him. His metal chest answers with a clanging and rattling echo; the material is already covered in dents.

A few bold boys have pushed close to the pedestal and now amuse themselves by clubbing the man’s legs. The blows ring out as though they were pounding a drum. Yet the man on the platform is not in the least disturbed. On the contrary, he seems to relish the intimate attention all the more.

“I know,” he shouts into the crowd, “every one of you would like to kiss my ass. I could mow you all down here on this avenue, this Broadway, with a rifle, and then you’d love me for real. You know very well I alone was made for the good of all mankind. Your marbles are love-kisses to me, your sticks only caress me, because you want me to lead you into true greatness. Before me, everyone was a hopeless loser. I alone—”

“That’s SuperSuperDumb,” remarks the old woman. “That is simply how he is. In the late days of the Gaurs, just before the apocalypse and the retreat underground, the collected madness of the whole species found embodiment in that man. Everything was absurd in those end-times before the apocalypse, when our ancestors had to flee into the underworld. That is why SuperDumb remains so popular among the lower classes. But each model lasts only a few days. Then stones and clubs have almost torn him apart. A new one can be admired only a year later—no, since the government’s latest decree, only every three years.”

Spicy shakes his head. “They love him and beat him to pieces at the same time? How am I supposed to understand that?”

“Papa, how little you understand the common people, though they are so easy to understand. They love the fool because he wants to be the greatest, and they all want that too—once in life to be utterly great and utterly powerful. But the moment they discover that the fool is really just a ridiculous little braggart, they beat him to death at once, because he disappoints their wildest dreams and makes them ridiculous.”

They have now reached the height of Parliament, which lies to their left with its curved roof like a stranded bird.

“That,” says the old woman, “is the one place in Cyborstan where all three estates used to gather. We philosophers go there only rarely now, because demagogues and flatterers of the mob set the tone. Still, let us take a look into the babble-house. It remains a magnificent witness to our country’s architecture.”

A babble-house? The disrespectful term ought to make us pause, coming as it does from the mouth of a person who belongs to the elite of the state. But the youthful father of the old woman seems to think nothing of it. He appears to be a thoroughly unpolitical man.

The Eagle with Two Wings

The Parliament of Cyborstan is an imposing building. Alongside the bronze colossus of the founder Allan at the eastern edge of the city and the Pantheon rising nearly a hundred meters into the sky, it is the third monument of which this state may justly be proud, for even from without it compels the eye—at least the eye of anyone still capable of responding to the beauties of art.

It was built in the form of an eagle, majestically spreading its two wings.

This division into wings and head is, of course, no accident. The head is Plato with his philosophers, scientists, and artists. The two wings divide into the Warrior estate and the Third Estate, the people. In the right wing there are seats enough for the first of these, though in recent times they are rarely occupied. In the left wing, the people may spread themselves out.

That, at any rate, was the plan at the founding of the state. Yet even in the almost perfect world of Cyborstan, plan and reality coincide only approximately. Spicy must recognize as much when he enters the great hall through the doorway at the tail end of the great bird, accompanied by the old woman who is his daughter. In the opposing head of the building, at the highest point of the immense hall, he does indeed see a bust of Plato—a mighty skull, broad-browed, hair flowing in abundance, exactly as suits a great thinker. But the benches around it, which would easily accommodate several dozen of his followers, gape entirely empty.

She was right, Spicy thinks. The old woman with the brittle voice, who is beyond doubt my daughter, described the situation exactly.

He glances next toward the places in the right wing below the platform with the ruler's bust. These benches too are largely empty. Not altogether, however. One member of the Warrior estate is lounging on one of the front benches—and what lies beside him, taking up four seats all by itself?

Incredible.

What Spicy sees in this solemn place is, unbelievably, a crocodile.

Bravo, he thinks at once, approving the spectacle. After all, the Warrior estate is entitled to certain privileges. A crocodile as house-animal and guardian-beast compels respect. *I'll get myself such a creature too.*

The thought cheers him, and now he turns his attention to the left wing. There the people are seated, comporting themselves in the usual way: loudly and without restraint. Not one trace of reverent silence, not the least sign of patient attention. On the contrary, there is constant hopping, darting, springing up, flopping down, shifting, and squirming upon the benches. But what truly outrages him is the insolence with which some of them dare, every now and then, to drop themselves onto the empty but forbidden seats of the Warrior estate—if only for a few minutes.

“May their brazen behinds catch fire,” Spicy mutters indignantly. “Now I understand once and for all why we, the nobility of the land, must always go among the people in the company of defensive beasts. A bloodhound is the bare minimum. Tigers and lions—or a vicious crocodile—are plainly better. Otherwise the people lose all respect.”

A single lectern stands upon the podium before the bust of Cybor the First, but no orator has yet taken his place there. Even so, tension hangs in the air. Will a philosopher appear? Or some tribune of the people?

It stings Spicy that his glorious Warrior estate sits cheek by jowl with the common people in the broad hall below the podium, while the philosophers alone enjoy the privilege of occupying the seats upon the raised platform before the lectern.

Unbidden, his thoughts drift back to a dusty book that had somehow found its way into their two-chambered dwelling twenty meters beneath the earth. It contained a series of illustrations of so-called monuments that had once existed in the long-collapsed realms of the Gaur, in that period when they still lived aboveground. He had shown the incredible images to his little Hilda, who at the time could not have been more than ten, and to this day—yes, to this very day—he remembers the captions exactly. There were two pointed towers with a great block behind them, and beneath the image the words: *Cathedral at Cologne*. Another structure, equally splendid and vast, bore the title *Chartres*, and a third was called *Westminster Abbey*.

Yet it had really been the interior views of those mighty, hollow structures that fascinated him and his little daughter so deeply. For there, too, there had already been philosophers, only back then they were called holy brothers or priests. Wrapped from foot to crown in magnificent garments, they alone had been permitted to occupy the delicately carved stalls in the fine front part of those cavernous buildings, while the common people filled the rear upon rougher benches.

“How I’d love to sit up there too, to be one of those philosophers!” his little daughter had cried out.

Had it been those pictures that first filled her head with ideas and later drove her flight into the upper world? At any rate, his daughter is now a genuine philosopher, an honored member of the elite. She and not he would have the right to sit enthroned upon one of the seats on the platform before the lectern. His own IQ, unfortunately, had not sufficed. It was too low, Sister MiseCor had told him. He had made it no farther than the Warrior estate.

The memory still saddens Spicy. How magnificent those solemn philosophers had looked, dressed in splendor and seated in the beautiful stalls at the front of Westminster Abbey. That was where he himself had wished to be. That was where he belonged—or had once believed he did. But his deficient IQ had decided otherwise.

To suffocate the onset of sorrow in himself, Spicy pinches his finger.

“Quiet,” he whispers to himself in rebuke. “At least your child made it—this strange old woman at your side. And you, in turn, may choose an eagle, a lion, or a crocodile for your protection. The philosophers in Westminster Abbey had to do without that.”

The Human Monster in Parliament

Absorbed in thoughts that were, for a proud man, more than a little humiliating, Spicy had at first failed to notice the wildly gesticulating, furiously shouting people now pressing up the central aisle of Parliament toward the speaker's platform.

They were all young. They stormed the dais at once and gathered around the lectern while one of them seized the microphone.

"We are the people!" he shouted. "We are the people. But it is the people upon whom the government has imposed suffering. Plato has brought pain and misery back into the world. He wants to hear his people scream and complain. And what awaits us when we innocent citizens go to the Square of Heavenly Peace to enjoy happiness on the marble seats? You have already experienced it yourselves. Without warning, the Pantheon cuts off the blessing from heaven, and with a cry and a stab of pain we fall straight out of the clouds of bliss. People, you are no longer living in the heaven of the best of all worlds, as Plato would have you believe. With his decree restoring suffering, he has banished you to hell. Now you fare no better than the subhumans to the right and left of the Styx, who spend their whole lives in pain. But the very worst thing the government has concealed from you. You cannot even call yourselves immortal any longer, because the Pantheon can cut you off from the Cloud at any moment. The Gaurs die because their bodies rot after a few decades. You die because the government deletes your ego from the Cloud."

A storm of indignation broke over him at once.

"We want happiness back! We have a right to happiness!" the people bellowed.

The old woman who is his daughter leaned toward Spicy and whispered hurriedly in his ear.

"That is Oderich 215," she said. "One of the outcasts from the list under the tetratree. It is strictly forbidden for him to enter the center of the city, let alone Parliament. What is happening here is illegal. This is an uprising."

Spicy was so fascinated by the young men's appearance that he scarcely heard her. He saw only how the young man whom his aged daughter had just called Oderich threw both arms wildly into the air.

"Who did this to us?" he cried, spinning on his heel and pointing with both arms toward the bust hovering behind him.

"That man there is guilty, and you know it. He does not want to grant you the inheritance he promised—happiness. Of the hundred philosophers in the Pantheon not one thinks of you, though all of them keep their own power and their own advantage in view. And the four hundred Smoking Heads, together with the mad artists who promise you seventeenfold Nothing—are they on the side of the people? No more than the rest. And the Second Estate, the thousand-odd warriors supposedly charged with your protection? Look down into the hall. Look at the empty rows where they ought to be sitting. The Warrior estate protects only itself and its power. Only the Third Estate still gathers in Parliament, several thousand people living poor and despised in the suburb like cattle. We are the people—but the people have nothing to say. The people are meant to suffer so that those above may amuse themselves."

A young woman sprang onto the platform and tore the microphone from his hand.

“The rows for the First and Second Estates are empty, and have long been deserted. Why? Because they despise us—and because they fear us. I’ll show you how to prove to them that from now on they must reckon with us.”

She jumped down from the platform and, by way of demonstration, seated herself on one of the empty benches of the Warrior estate—wisely, however, a few seats away from the crocodile that had all this time kept its jaws open in motionless indolence.

Spicy heard the people shout *bravo* and *bravo* again, while the old woman beside him, who is beyond doubt his daughter, said in a colorless voice:

“Nothing like this has happened since the founding of the state. This is revolution.”

And now the cries of approval would not cease. At first only a few crossed from the left side to the right. Then the influx became a flood, until the empty benches of the Warrior wing too were fully occupied by the streaming masses.

The young man whom the old woman had called Oderich clapped down at them from the speaker’s platform.

“Listen to me!” he cried. “That man there”—again his outstretched arm pointed to Plato’s bust—“means to force tradition on you. He wants us to degenerate back into apes, to become as obedient and wretched as the Gaur. But everyone knows the apes are extinct, and the Gaur are pitiable misdesigns without heat resistance. We cannot learn from the past. Creation does not exist, and blind, senseless evolution got everything wrong. Life was generated at a roulette table. For millions of years—merely for amusement—warm-blooded and cold-blooded creatures, flesh-eaters and grass-eaters, bipeds, quadrupeds, six-limbed beasts, devourers and the devoured, were thrown into the world one after another or all at once. There was never reason in it, still less meaning. Great Allan was the first to see through the stupidity of this meaningless game. He wanted to renew creation from the ground up, to have pure reason think it and realize it. But Allan died before he could complete the task. Plato has squandered his inheritance because he clings timidly to tradition.

“But not all is lost. The people are rising, and they have made us their mouthpiece.

“We want the new human being—the final one, the godlike one, the perfect one!”

Oderich’s voice cracked and rang strangely hollow now, somewhat metallic in its pitch, as if it were not properly calibrated. Yet the effect of his cry was not diminished as he shouted again and again from the platform into the hall:

“People, you are the people—your will decides the future of this land. So I ask you: do you want the perfect superhuman here and now?”

From the vast hall below, a frenzy of unleashed enthusiasm came back at him. On both wings of Parliament the people leapt to their feet at once and shouted as though with a single mouth:

“We want the superhuman here and now!”

“This is revolution,” murmured Spicy, turning toward the old woman who is his daughter.

She was chalk-white, staring at him with eyes widened in fear.

“Cyborstan is experiencing a revolution,” she echoed.

And yet, strangely, the roaring in the great hall ceased as abruptly as it had begun. A silence—almost sinister—fell in its place. Why?

Spicy turned back toward the tail end of the eagle. Advancing up the middle aisle between the two blocks of benches came a group of figures dressed entirely in fiery red, pushing before them a wheeled object likewise covered in red. It looked like a catafalque, and yet, as Spicy immediately noticed, it could not be a coffin, since the thing bulged at the top in a rounded form rather than the straight lines required for a human body. Old humans and new alike, Gaurs no less than Cybor communis, resemble walking matchsticks in their outer shape. A coffin must therefore be long.

After all the uproar, the silence that accompanied the mysterious approach felt almost oppressive. The crowd, so recently howling with excitement, seemed so taken aback that for a few moments the lofty building recovered the dignity proper to its original purpose.

The fiery red cloth called up in Spicy the memory of another book from childhood, as dusty as the first but with a blood-red cover and the black jagged title *Revolution*. At the time he had not known what the word meant. He had only learned after opening the book. In a revolution, he now remembered, there is noise, murder, and beheading, because people lose their heads to a machine called the guillotine. Perhaps, he concluded from that memory, no true revolution was taking place here after all—there was no chopping machine to be seen.

Unless—

At that thought he opened his eyes wide and examined the red-shrouded object more closely.

Unless what lay beneath the cloth—

Oderich himself broke the silence.

“You want the superhuman, the perfect being, eternal happiness, immortality?”

The instant he hurled those words down at them, the roar broke out afresh. The crowd was beside itself. The agitator on the platform knew how to use the moment.

“Yes,” he cried, “you do want it. You have striven for it for thousands of years. But do you even know what the perfect human being will look like—must look like?”

“Can a perfect being cling powerless to the ground, when even the Gaurs invented winged beings called angels, who moved freely through the air like birds? A perfect being must have wings—better still, two pairs of them—for full maneuverability. Must such a being make do with only two eyes? No, I tell you—pure reason forbids it. He must have four eyes, because blind and stupid evolution failed to consider that he will not only want to look ahead, but behind him as well. Does the perfect human have only two legs, so that he goes about like a walking beanpole, liable at any moment to fall flat on his face? Certainly not. The logic of pure reason

must grant him four legs, so that he may move with the speed of a cheetah. And where are the arms? asks one among you who still thinks. Quite right. Pure reason and its logic do not stop at four—they decree six extremities. But what shall be the outward form of the superhuman? Shall he continue to present the ridiculous appearance of a walking matchstick?”

“No!” roared the crowd back at him.

“No,” repeated the man at the lectern, “you have rightly understood that only the sphere can serve as the truly perfect form for a perfect being. Only in the sphere are maximal content and minimal surface united. It is a decree of logic that the perfect human must possess the form of a sphere.

“Look!”

At this signal the figures in red swept away the equally fiery cover in a single motion of their arms. No—it was not a guillotine, Spicy saw at once, nor a catafalque, but a strange being, one he had never seen before, not in any childhood book, nor here in the new world. It stood roughly the height of a Gaur or of Cybor communis, yet it resembled a sphere split in the middle and had altogether six limbs, of which two, set at the front, might almost be taken for arms. Along both flanks lay two transparent, opalescent wings, which caught the eye at once.

Hardly freed from its covering, the being seemed to awaken from deep sleep. It stretched out four legs and rose to nearly twice the height of a man. In place of a mouth for the obsolete and undignified business of oral ingestion, it possessed a double pincer like that of a crab. That alone forbade any naturalist from classifying it among the insects.

Could this perhaps be—

The thought stuck in Spicy’s throat.

The crowd, meanwhile, had followed the unveiling in taut expectation. They did clap when one of the red-clad figures leapt up onto the platform, but it could not be denied that the first enthusiasm gave way to sudden unease.

Was this giant insect truly supposed to be the future superhuman?

A moment ago the crowd had been drunk with revolutionary feeling. At the sight of this strange creature, however, uncertainty gripped them. Some even shook their heads. Spicy could read the doubt in their faces. *Are we meant one day to incarnate as such a thing?* A man had enjoyed, after all, being reborn once as a woman, and a woman had equally enjoyed being reborn as a man. A dignified old man wanted to know what it was like to live as a child; a child wanted just as much to become an old man. Such wishes were understandable, even natural. But who would willingly become a repellent beetle? In truth each person clung to familiar form, to inherited habit, to his own face and body. Beneath all their amazement, the crowd felt a deep and genuine reluctance.

This did not escape Oderich’s people. It was precisely for that reason that, together with the unveiling, one of the red-clad figures had sprung onto the dais. As he did so, the red toga fell open at his chest. A long vertical exclamation mark became visible—but with a cross-stroke through it. At once everyone understood that this man had once belonged to the ruling class.

The old woman's voice behind Spicy sounded agitated and doubly brittle as she whispered, so low that only he could hear:

“Papa, look at the cross-stroke through the vertical sign. The man is an outcast, a degraded heretic from the ranks of the Smoking Heads. That mark can never be erased. I know him—I was present when he was driven out of the Pantheon. It is Peter TirLanpan 2, a dangerous agitator and heretic. Plato banished him to the suburb years ago.”

One generally imagines an agitator as a savage. But the heretic with the crossed-out exclamation mark on his breast behaved with surprising civility. He did not even attempt to conceal the brand. He did not shout like his predecessor either, but spoke in a measured, self-possessed voice. Though branded and cast out, he still carried the aura of the upper estate about him. The calming effect of that aura impressed Spicy as well. He turned, seeking some sign of agreement from the old woman who is his daughter.

But when he looked back, he saw that his dear Hilda—once the sweet child, now the terrifyingly aged daughter—was no longer standing behind him.

He straightened, looked over the heads of those around him, but the old woman was nowhere to be seen.

She shuns the presence of a branded man, he thought, because such company is incompatible with her high station. Is this perhaps a hint meant for me too—that I ought to leave as well?

Homo Superbus

And yet Spicy remains rooted to the spot — the oldest of all human passions, curiosity, holds him fast.

TirLanpan II has just interrupted his speech with a brief pause; testingly he surveys the crowd, as any good speaker does before steering toward the climax of his message.

“We come as your liberators; we bring you the long-awaited messiah and superhuman, the glad tidings and the ultimate goal of all desire. But the government tramples upon the will of the people. In thanks for the great project that we are at last carrying out in the name of our founder Allan, they have driven us into the suburbs and drawn this slash, this brand-mark, across our breasts.”

As he says this, the man flings back his cloak wide, while from the agitated crowd there rises a swell of outraged grumbling and growling.

“They meant to condemn us, the outcasts, to death. The chips in our heads are denied all access to the Cloud.”

With a gesture designed to arouse pity, the man touches his temple with his index finger.

“But do not believe that because of this we lose heart or for a single moment lose sight of our great task. This chip” — now the man places his entire hand upon his forehead — “is of the very highest quality and endowed with a phenomenal IQ; shortly before his death, the great Allan designed it for his closest friends and followers. With it we have created the superior being who stands before your eyes. It is the first perfect human, brought forth in strict accordance with the rules of pure reason and incorruptible logic. It is *Homo dronensis superbus*. Do not be afraid, even if his super-earthly nature frightens you at first glance. From this day onward Superbus will stand at our head and lead us into a better future. Before this very day is over, he will conquer the Pantheon for you, for he is mightier, more intelligent, stronger than any Cybor.”

The people in the hall are no longer roaring; all shouting has ceased. The crowd seems frozen into speechless astonishment. The speaker is not disconcerted by this.

“Look very closely at this perfect creature. Make yourselves familiar with him! Now and forever Superbus brings to an end the endless line of failed precursors. First there was the ape-faced Neanderthal — as you know, he died out thousands of years ago — then came the Gaur, who, as you likewise know, now vegetates only in ever-shrinking numbers in a few earth-caves beside the Styx. Then came the Cybor, who is indeed fireproof and nourishes himself solely upon the rays of the sun. In that respect we may behold in him the child of a timid progress and a dawning reason. Only this progress was soon smothered in the cradle, namely by the reactionary regime of Cybor the First, which to this day cannot free itself from the prison of tradition.

“I ask you: why must we Cybors still be ashamed of our ridiculous appearance? Why has Plato allowed it that the new human too should still move like an upright worm, when everyone knows that only the sphere is a perfect form, and that one reaches one’s goal much more securely on more than two legs? And why must we remain helplessly stuck to the earth,

incapable of rising into the luminous spheres? This backwardness is by no means your destiny; it is merely imposed upon you to this day by the Pantheon.”

At this, loud muttering rises again in the mass. A cluster of gawkers has gathered in front of the platform around the six-legged being with its opalescent pairs of wings.

The outcast whom his elderly daughter Hilda had just called TirLanpan continues to enlighten the people about Superbus.

“We had only perfection in view, and nothing but perfection, also where the extremities were concerned. Two of the six legs can be used in the manner of our arms, yet they can also be employed for accelerated running. Superbus is capable of moving in leaps of several meters across the roughest terrain; no Cybor achieves such momentum and such lightness. Naturally, special attention was paid to the head. As a gross defect of all previous hominids, whether Gaur or Cybor, our constructors regard the fact that eyes have always been skimmed on, and that they appear only on the front side of the skull. For millions of years this creative stinginess has left our forebears extremely vulnerable to treacherous attacks upon their rear side. We had the choice between permanently mounted eyes — two directed forward and two backward — and a rotatable skull that would continue to make do with two eyes.”

“Oh Mama, Mama, listen!” comes a bright child’s voice from the crowd. “Mama, I always wanted eyes on my back!”

“Shh, be quiet,” the mother admonishes.

TirLanpan bestows his friendliest smile upon the little girl.

“How true, how right, and how clever, my little lady. And how natural, how self-evident is the unforced wisdom of children! By nature they are as unprejudiced as the great Allan himself was until his dying day. Trust only the mouths of children — they tell you the truth!

“But back to the decision our constructors ultimately made concerning the arrangement of the eyes: namely, the fixed installation of two eyes in front and two behind. For a technician it is always a matter of keeping the number of moving parts as small as possible. Through such considerations, dictated only by logic and pure reason, we achieved the decisive breakthrough to perfection. As in a crocodile, we let the four eyes sit directly upon the dorsal carapace, where they grant the new human a splendid panoramic view in all four directions of the compass. Yet with wise deliberation we dispensed entirely with the previous appendage of the trunk, namely the skull. Let us be honest; let us finally confess the truth! It was an original sin of evolution that it placed the brain, this most important part of the human being, at the very highest point of the matchstick, and therefore in the most endangered position. For Superbus such stupidity is out of the question. He carries the chip beneath the armor, where it is safest.”

Thus far the recorded, by no means yet inflammatory words of the outcast man concerning *Homo dronensis superbis*. But then something unheard-of occurs. TirLanpan II concludes his speech with a cry.

“Attention!” he shouts, and once again: “Attention! Superbus, show us what you can do!”

What follows seems so incredible, so fantastic, that even a man as many-times-tried as Spicy believes in miracles for the first time in his life. And that is saying something. Whoever has

followed the course of this man's life thus far will admit that Spicy 1101 has lived through and experienced more in a single lifetime than people of former ages in the course of several generations. First the beatifying transformation, which against his will made him a member of the military estate; then the encounter with a woman twenty years older than himself, whom he must nevertheless regard as his own daughter. One would think that a man compelled to endure and survive such things could be astonished by nothing any longer. Yet Spicy is a man who again and again puts our expectations to shame.

For at this moment he follows what happens with mouth agape in astonishment.

It is strange enough that Superbus, the perfect human, possesses the form of a gigantic beetle — but now it is shown that this being surpasses him with its phenomenal agility and nimbleness. A Cybor can reach the platform, raised two meters above the ground, only by the two stairways at either side. But the six-legged creature overcomes the height in a single leap. In fright, the gawkers surrounding it scatter right and left.

Now Superbus sits there upon the platform in a posture of alert readiness, with upper body erect, while he crosses the two forearms — which are at the same time his forelegs — before his armored chest.

TirLanpan II, the outcast from the suburb who, in defiance of all prohibitions, has ventured in broad daylight into the parliament at the very center of the city, cries an encouraging “Bravo!” The people must first recover from their fright and amazement; then, however, they hurl this bravo back with a many-fold echo from a thousand throats.

Now the outcast draws a small black device — to Spicy it resembles a Proxter. He jerks his right arm upward and, in a kind of machine language, gives the spherical being a curt command.

At once the wide hall is filled with a mysterious humming and whirring that seems to come simultaneously from all directions, though in reality it proceeds from the spherical being Dronensis Superbus itself, for upon it there unfold two pairs of transparent wings that carry the over-being in a single sweep up beneath the ceiling of the great hall.

And immediately thereafter the unbelievable occurs, the never-before-seen: dozens of glowing red arrows the being shoots in every direction against the walls, where at every point struck by those beams the stone begins to glow in red firelight.

“Laser guns,” flashes through Spicy's mind, “latest technology and the highest skill!”

After this display of demonic mastery, Superbus returns almost noiselessly to exactly the place from which he had shot upward shortly before.

In breathless silence the people have watched the flight and the laser bombardment. But now they erupt in cries of enthusiasm.

“That's a dino,” one hears; “a berserker,” “a Lucifer,” “an avenging angel.” “Superbus the Irresistible. Plato and his soldiers are no match for him. Superbus will bring the people to power.”

Spicy, however, is almost petrified with fear by this demonstration.

“Incredibly precise — and how perfectly aimed!”

While the people still sway between fear and the frenzy of wild enthusiasm, the outcast has remained quite calm. Now he slowly raises his right arm with clenched fist.

“As yet,” he says in a very soft voice, but one of eerie penetration, “as yet Superbus is no more than a robot, to whom we have programmed a handful of tricks, so that you may form some conception of his extraordinary physical abilities. As yet he still lacks the victorious spirit that lifts him high above all Cybors, yes, high above Plato himself, the usurper. That spirit is here in my fist.”

The outcast now lowers his arm until his fist is before his chest. Deathly silence reigns again in the otherwise so noisy parliament. All eyes are fixed upon the tiny little object they can see glowing within the outcast’s fist.

There is no doubt: it is a real glow that shines from the object, small as a diamond. Even at a distance the people cannot fail to see it. The man at the lectern keeps his own gaze fixed upon it just as spellbound as the crowd that fills the great hall to the last seat.

“This here is the spirit of our great Allan, bound into this chip. As you know, Allan was the last mortal, though it is to him that we owe our immortality. His body lies safely preserved in nitrogen ice. But we have evaluated his DNA, examined his life and his ideas down to the smallest detail, and programmed and stored all of this in this chip. Allan has earned a new body — the perfected body of a Superbus. Now and here his perfect spirit is to unite with this perfect body!”

The hall is silent again, mouse-still, so riveted are all eyes upon TirLanpan II, the outcast whose first name, it is said, is Peter. He steps up to the being and opens a tiny hatch upon its armored back.

For a few seconds longer he holds the little shining thing in his hand, so that the onlookers may duly admire it; then he lets the diamond-chip glide into the being’s body, where on striking within the interior of Superbus it gives off a dull yet clearly audible thud.

“Now,” cries the outcast to the crowd, “now bow before the superhuman in reverence, for in this moment spirit and body are finding one another!”

TirLanpan himself is now overwhelmed. One can hear a stammering and swallowing in his voice. “Honor,” he mutters only, “and glory to Allan risen again — risen again now and here!”

In the crowd the people bow their heads reverently, and when they raise them again they follow what happens with inward trembling, for they are becoming witnesses to an unheard-of transformation.

Superbus — from this instant onward a reborn individual bearing the name Allan; a man we already know, because in bronze he stands at the eastern end of the city upon a high pedestal — Allan straightens himself before all eyes to his full height and displays himself to the audience in all his superhuman magnificence. He seems at once to be conscious of his own perfection; at any rate he immediately uses the two pairs of legs and the two arms set above them for a fascinating demonstration.

While he folds the two hindmost legs together in tailor-fashion, so that the body rears upward almost vertically, he uses the arms for a proper greeting to the audience, and that in the

customary manner of the land. The index fingers of his right and left hands he lays together into an arrow exactly in the middle between the two eyes peering just above the rim of the carapace. As everyone knows, that is the usual salute among the Cybors.

The crowd is, naturally, enchanted and at once begins to applaud frantically. Yet immediately afterward Allan shows that there is in him far more than ordinary politeness. For with the middle pair of legs he simultaneously draws upon the full reservoir of enthusiasm that fills him as a consequence of his resurrection. One of the two forelegs, now acting as an arm, he shoots out again and again horizontally with hand outstretched — a leader's salute, as was once customary among the Gaurs in the distant past. The other leg, likewise now serving as an arm, he moves at the same time in a twitching back-and-forth. Allan, the risen one, is visibly beside himself.

“That is understandable,” thinks Spicy. “When I awoke from the coma after my transformation, it too took some time before I came back to myself and grew calm again.”

The outcast now speaks once more.

“Dear Allan, here and now we shall begin the Reconquista. The program for the conquest of Cyborstan already lies finished in my pocket.”

He draws a sheet of paper from his coat.

What now occurs is recorded in the annals of the city in red letters. Among the Gaurs an ancient proverb goes about: *Man thinks, but God directs*. It proves its validity here as well, though in adapted form: *TirLanpan thinks, but Superbus, the superhuman, directs*.

For the outcast has committed a grave error of thought. When he drew the paper from his pocket, he still believed himself to possess power over the creature that he and his people had created in Nineteenth Alley, Number Twenty-Four. Does not the creator always stand above his creature? so they must have thought. Yes — in the old world perhaps it was so. But only there. For it runs contrary to all logic to suppose that an imperfect being could direct a perfect one at whim. Is it not precisely part of perfection that it submit to no one — not even to its creator?

The gawking, astonished crowd assembled in parliament has learned this truth just now. Superbus is no longer a dull robot and no mere bronze figure upon a stone pedestal at the eastern edge of the city — he is the reincarnation of a great man who now self-consciously plants himself upon his six legs and looks about him on every side.

What the over-being does next stands in no program and certainly not upon TirLanpan's sheet of paper. For no one foresaw this performance. Allan suddenly runs at TirLanpan — but with no trace of reverence. Instead he simply shoves his creator over the edge of the platform, so that with a cry of pain the man plunges two meters into the depth below. He does the same with the score or so of people loitering around the lectern. Most of them, in terror, leap down of their own accord. Yet Allan is not content even with that. At last he charges against the lectern itself and hurls it crashing from the platform. The crowd watches all this in utter horror.

Now the stage is clear. Superbus alone occupies it.

Then once more he rises to his full height — and then?

Then Allan, risen again, begins to speak.

The Resurrected Allan Speaks from the Structure of the World, Declaring That He Is a God

“Citizens of Cyborstan, assembled people, all of you are waiting for deliverance. On the Square of Heavenly Peace you will lift your voices toward the divine seat and cry: *Plato! Where is the lord of the world, where is God?*”

“And Plato will answer: *There is no God.*”

“And then the first man of the Pantheon will say: *I passed through the worlds, I climbed into suns and flew with the Milky Ways through the deserts of heaven; but there is no God. I descended as far as being casts its shadows, and looked into the abyss and cried: “Father, where are you?” But I heard only the eternal storm, ruled by no one, and over the abyss there stood a shimmering rainbow without any sun that had created it, dripping sharp balls of ice into the depths. And when I raised my eyes toward the immeasurable world in search of the divine eye, it stared back at me from a bottomless, empty socket; and eternity lay upon chaos, gnawed at it, and chewed it over again. Cry on, then, discords, shriek down the shadows, for He is not there!*”

“And as your ruler heard the discords shrieking ever more fiercely, the trembling walls of the temple drew apart—the temple sank—earth and sun sank after it—and the whole structure of the universe, in its immensity, fell away beneath him. And up there on the summit stood Plato himself, gazing down into the world-building pierced by a thousand suns as into a mine where suns burned like pit lamps and the Milky Ways ran like veins of silver.

“And when he saw the grinding crush of the worlds, the torch-dance of the heavenly will-o’-the-wisps, and the coral reefs of beating hearts, he raised his eyes toward the void and said: *Rigid, silent nothing! Cold, eternal necessity! Mad chance! When will you shatter the structure and shatter me as well?*”

“Then Plato, lord of the Pantheon, looked down into the abyss, and his eyes filled with tears, and he said: *Ah, and yet once I had been content. I had enough with my two arms and two legs, enough with the two eyes at the top of my head and my delicate chip, safely lodged in its solid skull, cushioned by foam against every blow. Cheerfully I believed I could walk through life, all the more because I honor tradition and gave strict orders to the Smoking Heads that in their drunken research-frenzy, in their wild urge to change and improve your world, they must not overreach themselves. Many a time I lifted my hands to you and said: “Father, let me complete your work, but preserve me from disfiguring it.”*”

“*But now I have understood that you, Father, do not exist, because you are an invention of the primordial humans, the Gaurs, who could not endure their miserable lives without you. They placed you into being and time because you promised them a better life up above among the many rising suns. To the very end the cave-dwellers refused to see that they are the wretched offspring of blind and senseless chance in league with dull, stupid laws that no one wishes or is able to change. And I, Plato, must confess before the whole world that I have been timid, cowardly, mistrustful—a poor ruler of the new world.*”

“I did not wish to believe it for so long. I, lord of the Pantheon, shut my eyes to the truth. But it is true that the perfect human had already been envisioned a century ago by Allan the Great. Back then, surrounded by a few unsuspecting friends in the heart of New York, in an inconspicuous bar, he invented Homo Superbus Dronensis, sketching him first in a rapid outline on a beer coaster. With prophetic genius the founding father of the New World saw Superbus before his inner eye.

‘He will endure one hundred below zero and three hundred above without batting an eye,’ Allan told his friends at the time, ‘so that as the rightful conqueror of the cosmos he can live on Mars. He shall no longer require oxygen or ordinary food—we will put an end once and for all to the disgusting ritual of oral incorporation. The fire of the sun shall sustain him materially and spiritually, here on earth no less than on Mars and on the thousand other planets he will one day colonize. Look, I am already adding not only two arms but two pairs of legs; this will make him far more agile on uneven ground. And I will by no means forgo two pairs of sturdy wings. I do not want the perfect being to remain glued helplessly to the ground while every sparrow lifts itself effortlessly above him into the air. First among his kind, he must become Dronensis.’”

“My people, my subjects! Plato was mistaken. There is a god. I myself am God, because I planned myself by my own power. Here and now my vision has become reality in this form. At this very moment, when I stand among you for the first time, the great trembling and chattering of teeth begins up there in the Pantheon.

Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa, Plato will wail, though he will weep with joy at having finally grasped the great and ultimate truth. Up there he stands alone in the heavenly hall beneath the dome of the Pantheon, for even Athanasius Kropp, the fool, has abandoned him. All have abandoned him. He failed to read the signs of the coming age. Now he must witness the sun calmly tossing the reflection of its evening red to the little moon, and next morning rising in glowing aurora so that at last it may cast its splendor upon the final and first true human—upon me, Superbus—who now takes possession of the world.”

At this point the new six-legged, four-eyed man, pressing his insect wings like two opalescent daggers against the sides of his nearly spherical body, ends his speech.

Everyone understands that this is an open mockery of Cybor the First, directed not only at the ruler himself but at the whole government and the entire order of Cyborstan. Here stands the newly created perfect human and makes a spectacle of the almighty lord of the city. Even the most innocent among those present grasps that this is a call for the overthrow of the government and of the ruling class.

For the length of a breath there is stunned silence.

Then the earlier uproar returns with double force. The crowd screams, claps, and rages. Even Spicy cannot entirely resist the general madness. He too claps. But then, quietly, he turns around, presses himself to the wall, and begins to slip away toward the exit of Parliament.

He knows that, as a member of the Warrior estate, he ought never even to have heard such words of revolt.

Reflections on the “Little Baptism of Fire”

It might have been a day like any other.

Look there: the people seated in lotus posture on the Square of Heavenly Peace, quietly meditating while they recharge. And yet a thorn now sits in their flesh, for all the while they are gnawed by the fear that, on higher orders, the current may fail at any moment. Paradise is still there for every Cybor, certainly—but expulsion from it remains possible at every second, and usually when one least expects it. Ever since Cybor I, whom the people also call Plato, reintroduced pain and suffering, no one can be sure that happiness will not suddenly be cut short, painfully, like a lash across the skin.

But human beings—even modern ones—are made as they always were. Whatever disturbs them, they drive from consciousness; they clutch even at the frailest straw of deceptive certainty. And so on this day as well, the crowd once again strolls the magnificent Avenue of the Smoking Heads in apparently festive cheer. Even now, just at this moment, some grand specimen of the Warrior estate is coming toward us. The man lets his heraldic beast, a cheetah, race up and down the avenue in mighty leaps, while the exquisitely trained cat again and again flies with elegant bounds clear over groups of pedestrians.

What colorful bustle. In Plato’s and Allan’s realm there is always something especially exciting going on.

And then those splendid, glittering tetratrees on both sides, with their gaudy splendor. Do they not tell every beholder at once what imperishable beauty Cyborstan’s great artists have achieved? Do they not rise more majestically than anything evolution ever produced as a miserable substitute for our primitive ancestors, the Gaurs? Their blossoms and fruit gleam blue, scarlet, and sun-yellow at one and the same time. Compared with them, everything the old world managed seems meager.

That is so, thinks Sister MiseCor, who is enjoying her day off today. Still, one should not think too harshly of our friends from the underworld. All things considered, the old humans deserve our respect as well. They cannot help having been denied so many advantages by fate. Better that we ourselves should simply be glad to have progressed so wonderfully far.

The mere sight of the street is uplifting.

There, coming toward her in the middle of the avenue, is another remarkable being: an actual philosopher, white-bearded, with an owl perched upon his right shoulder.

Sister MiseCor makes a reverent half-bow.

“Pallas,” she murmurs, “what a dear and beautiful animal—and infinitely wise.”

She stretches out her right hand. She would so like to stroke the bird’s feathers.

“Careful—not like that,” the white-bearded old man rebukes her sharply. “Madam, you should not trifle so lightly with philosophy. Please do not forget that Pallas Athena also knew how to handle a sword. One must approach philosophy with the greatest caution, and with even more intelligence. Mere affection and petting are not enough.”

“Forgive me,” Sister MiseCor breathes. She bows again before the old man and his clever bird, then goes on her way, a little hurt. The Sunday courage has suddenly left her. Painfully, she feels the absence of her beloved. All at once she is lonely.

How unfortunate that Brother Felix cannot accompany her on such a glorious morning. Naturally she knows that all pleading would be useless. At seventy degrees in the shade, her dear, good-hearted Felix would simply dissolve in the heat—yes, exactly so, she herself had seen it once—like a pat of butter in a frying pan. One moment it still sizzles there, and the next it is gone, vanished before the searching eye. At least she has seen to it that her dear man spends the fine day well fed. If he knows nothing of the blessed delight and incomparable raptures that every Cybor can daily grant himself on one of the lotus seats around the divine throne, he enjoys in his own fashion the archaic incorporation to which he may give himself in the human zoo as much as he pleases.

I have often said to his face that I find it disgusting and improper, she reflects, but I know the Gaur's cling to that custom. In any case, I now believe him when he solemnly assures me that without incorporation he simply cannot live. To tell the truth, I can even confirm it from observation.

Before she found him that sinecure in the zoo, he had once had to live thirteen whole days without eating—“to go hungry,” he called it.

How ghastly he had looked by the thirteenth day—barely recognizable. Completely pale in the face, a wreck: that is surely the better word. The sight had so shaken her that she secured him the recently vacant post in the zoo immediately afterward. Why not? After all, he is a genuine, original Gaur, even if he devotes himself with touching zeal to transforming his unredeemed fellow creatures.

Two days among the wild ones in the human zoo and five days with her at the ZBS—thus their arrangement had settled itself. Since then, her dear man has put on some fat again. No, not merely some: quite a respectable amount. As far as his outward appearance goes, one can now very well be seen with him. Brother Felix is a substantial figure.

It is only such a pity that so handsome a specimen of manhood can survive in the upper world only in the chilled zoo and, of course, in the Center, because she sees to it that the temperature at his workplace never rises above thirty degrees.

At this thought Sister MiseCor shakes her head involuntarily.

How difficult it is for a compassionate heart to care for other human beings—human beings whom others avoid or despise merely because they do not have the same complexion, the same brain chip, or the same fire resistance.

Fire resistance, fireproofing, love of fire. Among us Cybors everything revolves around fire, as if that in itself were something extraordinary.

And there—there it is again. Another little bonfire between two tetratrees. A whole family has gathered around the stacked wood. Where people find all that wood is anyone's guess. Plants, it is said, no longer grow anywhere near the city. There are only naked sand and stone deserts. At best one can still scavenge some dried trunks and branches from the old vegetation, though

one must venture miles out into the waste to do so, and the government has long forbidden it. Plato, however, does not bother much about infractions of that kind.

My dear Felix, she thinks, so much escapes you. You do not even know this fashionable pastime among us—but I shall explain it to you. The blazing woodpile is one of the people's amusements now, and the children are especially mad for it. In a moment they will set it alight here between the trees. And then, once the fire is really going, the whole family—man, wife, children—will climb into it one after another.

Of late it has become a typical popular entertainment. She herself admits that it is rather stupid, and forbidden into the bargain. But the people are absurdly proud of remaining in the flames as long as possible and letting themselves be licked and wrapped by the fire. Thereafter they boast before others about the quality of their bodily construction. To be fair, the progress in fire resistance recently has truly been breathtaking. The oldest generation of Cybors—many of whom she herself had still seen and of whom Felix had transformed several with his own hands—had been made of decidedly inferior material. They rarely endured the pyre test longer than a minute. But the children—those dear children—bathe in the flames for a full five minutes and squeal with delight at the end.

The Smoking Heads, after all, had worked strenuously to ensure that in the newest series only flame-tested support material, DIN AQ713, surrounds the precious skull chip.

That, she thinks, is a genuine victory for humanity.

Ah, if only Felix could see it. The little fellow there has wedged himself at his mother's side and remains right in the middle of the flames while she is already sounding the retreat. He is still squeaking with delight and waving his hands like mad. The darling will be proudly boasting of his baptism of fire to his playmates for weeks.

And yet—on the other hand—the waste of fuel is disgraceful, even if she must admit that traditions can have something attractive about them. Some people simply like it hot. The Gaurus must respect that too, though of course they cannot understand it, given how backward their bodily constitution remains.

But wait—this goes too far.

What she catches sight of in the burning heap gives her a sharp stab. It looks very much as though an old piece of furniture is splintering there in the flames. Some brass glitters at the corners and edges. It must once have been a valuable object.

So perhaps the malicious rumors are true after all: that among us there are a number of uneducated barbarians who saw up antique furniture from the palaces on the avenue merely to provide their offspring with a "Little Baptism of Fire," as they call it. Priceless historical documents have reportedly gone up in flames too, simply because they make such a pleasing crackle.

Now she understands all the better why her beloved Felix keeps that precious secretary desk hidden beneath a black cloth. He is so conscientious. Naturally he wants to preserve that costly piece for posterity. He is right. It would be shameful to sacrifice the finest witnesses of the past to some foolish fashion.

Again Sister MiseCor sighs deeply.

For of course she knows that the deplorable pleasure of the Little Baptism of Fire is closely linked to another bad habit explicitly tolerated by the government. Every Gaur willing to be transformed may, by personal decree, determine the age at which he wishes to be reborn. If he can present photographs from the desired period, he is free to be reborn as seven, seventeen, or seventy. Sister MiseCor herself has never approved of this indulgence. So far as lies in her power, she does everything she can to dissuade transformation candidates from choosing rebirth as children. Yet unfortunately the desire for rebirth at a tender age is especially widespread among her own sex. They were so much prettier then, so much fresher, so much more alive—she hears it over and over.

“Be careful, please,” she always objects. “High expectations are regularly, and often cruelly, disappointed. Someone may indeed be reborn with the body of seven years, but unfortunately with the mind of seventy. In that case we are dealing with dwarfing. We have a Strttsch on our hands, a kind of misbegotten being caused by faulty programming. No adult then comes along stroking his hair and saying, ‘How sweet, how darling, the little one.’ No—from such a malformed dwarf everyone turns away in visible distaste. How is one supposed to find a little old man lovable?”

The Smoking Heads, she knows, have not yet mastered this problem. They speak of resistant programming.

For her part, she urgently advises anyone against setting rebirth younger than twenty-five. Sometimes she simply refuses to carry out such a transformation. She knows that in their progressive state self-realization through different ages, and also rebirth as man, woman, or any of the twelve intermediary genders, counts among the elementary rights of every full citizen. But one cannot simply ignore the dangers.

And besides, even in Cyborstan things have grown so much more expensive. In any case, the days are clearly over when every Cybor might, if he happened to feel like it, choose a new form once a year—man, woman, hybrid, child, adolescent—just to sample everything. Then it had all been so wonderfully simple. One went to the armory, the existing chip was implanted into the previously ordered new body, and there you were, a new person. Self-renewal had been almost cheap then.

Great Allan, she thinks at last. *As if this world had no higher aims.*

Her dear Felix had often complained that we Cybors were, in some respects, sadly decadent. But soon, she consoles herself, there will be no need to get upset about that. Rising prices will set everything right. Materials are becoming scarce. A Cybor of the Third Estate may now permit himself a new personality only once every three years—and even that will soon count as luxury.

Encounter with an Alien?

Great Allan—what on earth is this now?

Sister MiseCor is jolted out of her pensive reflections as if by an electric shock. A procession is coming toward her from the direction of Parliament, but not one she has ever seen before. At its head—surely this cannot be right—what kind of being is that? Sister MiseCor has never in her life encountered such a monster. Never has she transformed a Gaur into anything remotely like it, and she cannot remember any oversized contraption of this sort ever daring to enter the Avenue of the Smoking Heads. Has some extraterrestrial just arrived from the surrounding cosmos on a visit?

The giant beetle lurching toward her on six legs, with two bulging frog-eyes in front and—can it really be?—two more at the far end of its armored shell, looks not merely strange but positively menacing. What business has such a creature on the promenade in the very center of Cyborstan? One thing is clear: it is no heraldic pet belonging to a gentleman of the Warrior estate.

And then the matter truly gets under the woman's skin.

The beast is speaking like a human being.

Sister MiseCor stops dead in disbelief. We do not hold it against her that her mouth hangs open. Her disgust at this fantastical being is written plainly across her face, which is also understandable enough. Healthy common sense is offended everywhere; some would call it the deeply rooted instinct of the people revolting against such an outrageous intrusion. The Cybors are no different in that regard from the backward Gaur. A six-legged monster with four symmetrically arranged frog-eyes on its shell will overwhelm the native sense of order anywhere, at any time—and when the monster can also speak like a man, then healthy reason itself feels insulted.

The monster stops a few paces from her, right in the middle of the avenue. It settles back on its hind legs and begins to address the crowd.

The crowd now consists not merely of flaneurs in Sunday spirits. At sight of the creature, many have already pulled out their proxters and loaded one of the many emotional magnets from the Cloud—"Angel Meadow," perhaps, or "Raspberry Grove," "Cloud Rider," "Eyes of St. John," according to taste. When reality turns ugly, modern man flees into dream; people know how to use technology.

Sister MiseCor, however, cannot flee into beautiful feelings. She searches vainly in her handbag for her proxter. She has forgotten it. With alert but startled senses she listens to the monster's words.

"Beloved people of Cyborstan: 7zebv-metaklengg-apo9minusgeigersam345. Transkommensal, tablo-fect93671##. Konsektiv, phizetaalphastern."

A very short speech.

Sister MiseCor is already completely overwhelmed by “7zebv.” Her chip works under maximum strain, desperately trying to pull the necessary explanations from the Cloud. But since the Sister belongs only to the serving class, that is, to the Producers, her access to the resources in the deep bunker beneath the Pantheon is strictly limited. The deeper meaning of these utterances therefore remains closed to her. Perhaps it is the language of beetles or insects, spoken somewhere in the cosmos by extraterrestrials. Though she finds the almost spherical being anything but likable—indeed, with its four protruding frog-eyes it strikes her as profoundly inhuman—she still feels it her duty to understand the foreign. If she can manage the Gaur, backward as they are in so many respects, then surely she ought to be able to accept a creature with six legs and four eyes.

At any rate, the brief address does not leave her untouched—perhaps precisely because she has understood nothing. At such moments the Sister becomes painfully aware that she belongs only to the common run of people, to whom everything higher will presumably remain foreign forever and ever.

At this thought she shakes her head involuntarily, though this time out of sorrow for herself. Then she retreats. We see her hurrying with quick steps toward the Pantheon so as to make her way back to the Center for Beatifying Transubstantiation. The unfamiliar has frightened her so badly that she longs to return at once to her daily routine and well-loved habits. She would most like to forget the uncanny visitor from the cosmos, that oversized beetle. But above all what draws her back to her post at the Center is the certainty that she will soon have her dear Felix beside her again—Felix, well fed after his excursion to the human zoo, where he has once more been allowed to indulge that ineradicable Gaur vice, daily incorporation of foreign matter. After all she has seen today, she can hardly wait for the moment of reunion.

So eager is Sister MiseCor to return to the Center after her brief encounter with the six-legged monster that she notices absolutely nothing of the historical event soon to unfold on the Avenue of the Smoking Heads, that harbinger of coming ruin.

Instead we now encounter SuperEnsis 78, who only a few days ago guided us through the human zoo. As we know, he died during—or shortly after—the brutal murder of Saint Bertha. Great placards still hang from the tetratrees denouncing that crime and directing suspicion, only too plainly, toward the Gaur as the probable perpetrators. In truth the murder and the death of the SuperEnsis remain unsolved. One looks in vain for any published information about the killer or killers and their backers. There is, in our opinion, an obvious reason why the Pantheon prefers to leave everything in darkness, to let the Gaur bear the indirect blame, and otherwise to waste no further resources on clarification.

Great Allan, why should it? Murder in our age is no longer a tragedy in the old sense. Every full citizen of Cyborstan knows that his identity is safely preserved for eternity in the stores of the Cloud.

And yet murder is not entirely a trifle. At the very least, it inflicts upon its victim a temporary collapse of consciousness; with brutal force it interrupts the continuity of existence. Being and time are, for a while, simply switched off. Afterward, however, the brutally deceased receives a new shell of fireproof material and a newly formatted chip programmed from his personality data in the Cloud. He becomes exactly what he was before—only refurbished, in somewhat improved condition overall. In that respect, modern civilization does deserve some praise. It has at least made the unfortunately persistent human habit of killing one another somewhat more tolerable. And when one considers, moreover, that ordinary personality refurbishment is

now granted not yearly but at most once every three years because of scarcity of resources, then to some self-realizers a murder committed a little ahead of schedule may even come as a convenience. They receive their renewal immediately, without the usual bureaucratic nonsense.

All this should be said in advance, so that the informed reader will not be unduly surprised to meet a recently deceased man a second time—namely our already familiar guide from the zoo—not merely fully alive again but still fully in possession of his mind. In short, SuperEnsis 78 is entirely himself again.

At this moment he too casts a critical glance at the giant beetle standing in the middle of the Avenue of the Smoking Heads. He sees the monster advancing straight toward him at the head of a jeering mass of people.

The World Formula

We have already admired SuperEnsis 78 as a man of the highest cultivation. By virtue of his rank as a philosopher, he enjoys unrestricted access to the Cloud. His brain chip draws upon the accumulated knowledge of centuries, swollen without interruption.

At a glance he understands that the being before him must be far more than an overgrown beetle.

Clearly—so he grasps at once—this is no animal. Blind and mindless evolution has never succeeded in producing forelimbs with five fingers in insects. Artificial intelligence leads SuperEnsis 78 to a different conclusion: this must be a human being refined a hundredfold, one who for the first time in history has received a body of desire, a form that meets the highest demands of mobility and defense.

Six legs—to overcome any obstacle in a single leap.
Adhesive pads—to run along vertical walls.
Five-fingered hands—for the full range of craft and manipulation.
Two pairs of wings—to make the air itself a habitat.

If such a being were endowed with the superior intelligence of a Cybor—so concludes SuperEnsis—then it would be invincible.

The philosopher stands in genuine amazement before the creature, which at this moment raises its upper spherical body, flattening its lower half and folding its hind legs crosswise beneath its green abdomen, like a tailor at rest. It appears about to proclaim something.

“Beloved people of Cyborstan,” begins the super-being, “7zebv-metaklengg-
apo9minusgeigersam345. Transkommensal, tablo-fect93671##. Konsektiv,
phizetaalphastern.”

As already noted, SuperEnsis has full access to the Cloud and to artificial intelligence. This privilege of his rank allows him to penetrate the mysterious message instantly.

The Cloud informs him that this sequence of symbols, inscrutable to any layman, is nothing less than the long-sought cosmic formula—the world formula—pursued for so long and until now in vain by the Smoking Heads, by science itself. Here, in a handful of signs, lies Alpha and Omega: everything, truly everything, explained.

There it is! flashes through SuperEnsis.

The world formula reveals the innermost essence of reality, as it discloses itself to the human mind raised to godhood in a moment of pure illumination. That such illumination is granted only to the knowing—and only with the aid of artificial intelligence—is easy to understand. Even the first seventeen symbols, the brief sequence *7zebv-metaklengg*, would overwhelm an untrained brain.

But SuperEnsis possesses a trained one. He belongs to the small company of the knowing.

He feels his head and body warmed by a cosmic beam of bliss. Trembling to the marrow, he senses his heart beating faster, his gaze expanding beyond the deserts surrounding Cyborstan

to the distant shores of the seas. He sees their wide surfaces shimmering silver in the light of the moon. With the rising suns, islands emerge here and there, alive with multitudes of brightly clothed peoples. The expanses of space dissolve into the expanses of time.

There are crowned heads and others wearing turbans or pointed hats. Lions race across savannas stretching endlessly before his eyes, while elephants pass him in majestic stride, greeting him with the trumpet of their trunks.

And then—

Suddenly he feels a pull on his body. A cold wind seizes him, trying to tear him from the ground.

SuperEnsis throws his arms around the trunk of a baobab tree—but in vain. The wind lifts him, carries him upward into the cosmos, beyond all moons.

“Stop!” he cries. “Space and time are only relative! Stop, please—you cannot treat a philosopher like this!”

But he is already flying toward the pale-white moon. From afar it had looked at him almost kindly—but as he rushes past, it is nothing but a piece of rotten wood. Then he is flung onward toward the sun—and that is only a withered sunflower. The stars—mere golden insects, pinned like prey upon thorns.

“Great Allan!” he cries into the vastness. “You promised us Mars. Show me what Mars truly is!”

At once the breath of the cosmic storm sweeps him toward the red planet. But when he arrives, it is nothing but a glowing bed of coals.

The warm beam of bliss turns into an icy wind. Illumination becomes darkness.

The world formula will destroy us.

The thought fills the composed leader from the human zoo with such overwhelming terror that he turns his back on the humanlike beetle, his face contorted with horror.

Now he understands why Cybor the First—whom the people call Plato—after yesterday’s upheaval in Parliament, where the superhuman first appeared, ordered all those present, as far as the cameras mounted on walls and ceilings could identify them, to be erased: their personality data deleted forever from the Cloud.

Such a brutal measure had never before been carried out.

Once the chips of the erased cease to function, they will no longer exist. From eternity they are cast into nothingness.

SuperEnsis 78 had not approved of this annihilation. We have come to know him as a benevolent man. He knows that the mortality imposed from above will torment those condemned, damage their chips prematurely, and hasten their end. And yet the false illumination he has just experienced—the true darkening—has shaken him to the core.

The world formula, spoken by the supposed superhuman, makes him understand why Plato crushes the uprising with all his might.

He has already turned his back on the monster and is hurrying toward the Square of Heavenly Peace.

But at that moment he sees a phalanx approaching from that direction: armed soldiers and officers of the Warrior estate.

SuperEnsis realizes that within minutes there will be fighting.

He presses himself along the wall, slipping past the advancing troops toward the Pantheon—where the crowd stands packed, black with people. There they are gathered around a new announcement:

the list of the erased.

The Proscription List

On this day—destined to decide the fate of Cyborstan and its inhabitants—almost everyone is on their feet.

No wonder. A list like the one now being scanned with wide eyes at the foot of the Pantheon has never existed before. Half of Cyborstan—young and old, men and women, and all genders in between, of which the progressive state now recognizes twelve—press and shove around the placard beside the great gate.

Nearly a thousand names stand there, tightly packed, stacked in a dozen lines: the proscribed.

Those who from this moment onward exist only as living corpses—zombies, because their lifeline in the Cloud has been severed by decree of the government.

Some bureaucrat among the Smoking Heads in the Ministry of Happiness and Justice must have received the order from the highest authority—very likely from Cybor the First himself—to erase these people from the number of aspirants to eternity.

No, thinks SuperEnsis—and it is his only positive thought that day—*no, they need not fear hanging, burning, drowning, suffocation, or any of the older methods of bodily torment*. No physical pain will be inflicted.

Cyborstan is modern.

The lethal attack is directed solely at the psyche.

And yet—is that not also a terrible pain?

Hundreds of the proscribed now live with the certainty that their brain chip may fail at any moment. The material—silicon, gallium arsenide, tungsten, cobalt, germanium, indium, tantalum—has been fused by the Smoking Heads into a structure of supreme but delicate complexity. The greatest danger lies in overheating: in thinking too intensely, too persistently.

Thus the typical reaction of the condemned.

In order never to heat their chip—never even to risk it—they abandon thought altogether. They sit apathetically at street corners or withdraw to solitude, vegetating in deliberate emptiness.

As already said, half of Cyborstan has gathered before the list. Some know they were present in Parliament the day before. Others come only to be sure they have not been mistaken for someone else and wrongly included among the condemned.

At the bottom of the list, however, the decree is unmistakable:

“The uprising against the sacred order of our state is punished by the withdrawal of eternity.”

Only those identified by the hidden cameras in Parliament are affected.

Among the crowd stands also Saint Bertha, whose successful resurrection after her brutal murder we have already noted with gratitude. She, too, casts a glance at the list, though she has nothing to fear—she was not in Parliament.

But artists are extravagant beings—and therefore always in danger.

Today she has dressed herself with particular extravagance as the Queen of Sheba, though she has dispensed with the swaying peacock feather. A rose-colored blouse with exaggerated breasts, a matching hoop skirt that nearly doubles her girth—thus she approaches the list.

The crowd makes way for her with respect. She belongs to the upper class of the Philosophers—though at its lowest rank, for in the eyes of the Smoking Heads artists suffer from a defect. The reason that binds the scientists to their model, the great Allan, appears in artists weakened, distorted. Primitive feelings dominate them, feelings that evade control and sometimes eclipse reason entirely.

So it seems to be today.

For what has a Queen of Sheba to do in Cyborstan?

Microscopic impurities in the base materials of the brain chip—that, say the Smoking Heads, is the cause of such irrational passions. Had it been up to them, these defective chips would long since have been removed and discarded. Art and artists would have vanished with them.

It was Plato himself who stopped them.

Tradition, he insisted, must not be lightly discarded. Artists belong to the cityscape.

An outrage—never had such an unscientific opinion been heard from the mouth of the Great Allan. Yet even his most faithful adepts did not dare oppose the command from above.

At least the artists, alone among the highest class, are forbidden to lead living heraldic animals through the city. Owls, unicorns, rats—those wise creatures with which philosophers parade—are denied to them. Likewise the savage beasts of the Warrior class.

The Pantheon fears that the creative, prone to frivolity and driven by feeling, lack the discipline to govern such creatures.

Bertha turns away from the list without visible outrage.

The common people, in her view, are receiving their just reward for the illegal uproar in Parliament. Why must these perpetual rebels always disturb the peace? Is not the world far too beautiful for revolution?

Since humanity attained perfection, it has become doubly beautiful.

Look there—at the edge of the marble beds on the Square of Heavenly Peace: a unicorn with its feathered rider. What a sight! Philosophy itself on horseback. Only philosophers may ride unicorns, for it is the purest and most sacred of animals.

Bertha throws the rider a kiss.

He does not return it. He passes her with head held high—haughty, unmistakably so.

The slight wounds her.

“We artists,” she murmurs aloud, “we possess a powerful creative vein. We deserve more respect. The philosophers—especially the Smoking Heads in their sterile laboratories—think little of us. They deny us even our own animals. We are lucky we are not forced to go naked like the common people.”

The people wear only the three exclamation marks on their chests—the sign of their lower status.

“We, at least, may dress as we please. Clothing is the luxury of the higher classes. But I will not accept that we are denied animals. I will fight against that all my life.”

She has worked herself into agitation.

So absorbed is she in her indignation that she fails to notice the phalanx of soldiers now blocking the avenue before the Pantheon. She walks past them along the narrow path, lost in her own thoughts.

“I would choose,” she says now more loudly, drawing glances from passersby, “a yellow insect—six-legged, able to see in all directions at once, with multiple pairs of wings to carry it in a single leap to the tops of the tetratrees, where it would sing a triumph-song like the birds once did among the Gaurs. Yes—such an insect I would create, and lead it on a leash, so that all Cyborstan might see what artists can do.”

And then—

The imagined becomes real.

In the middle of the avenue she sees it approaching: a colossal beetle, six-legged, with four protruding frog-eyes set in its green-scaled shell, scanning the world in every direction.

Behind it surges a shouting, gesticulating crowd.

Bertha is struck motionless.

The people should tremble before such a work of nature! she thinks. *It is new, complex—and yet enchanting.*

How delicate the blinking eyes, how fine the probing feelers, how the folded wings shimmer in the colors of the rainbow.

And now the being rises, as if to address her personally.

She listens, spellbound.

“7zebv-metaklengg-apo9minusgeigersam345. Transkommensal, tablo-fect93671##.
Konsektiv, phizetaalphastern.”

She understands nothing.

Her chip—impaired by polymorphic misprogramming—cannot access pure logical reason. And yet she listens, deeply moved. The melodic rise and fall of the sounds touches her.

“A divine child,” she whispers. “Speaking to us in wondrous words.”

We must hold this enthusiasm in mind—together with her resentment at being denied an animal—to understand the irrevocable act she is about to commit.

Behind her, only a few meters away, the troops from the Ministry of Protection and Defense advance, fully armed, ready for battle with the super-being and the rebellious crowd.

Suddenly the artist stands between the fronts.

We know she belongs to the ruling class—even if she lacks the privilege of a heraldic beast. For a member of the Teaching Estate to cross over to the enemy would be unheard of.

And yet—

There are moments when a person falls in love with her own creation.

And in such a moment, perhaps, even a state may begin to fall.

Spicy — The Erased One

For Spicy 1101 the day had begun in the night, which he had spent in the quarters assigned to him, bent over sketches of his own making, now all scattered across the floor. On each of them he had dashed off, in a few strokes, some impressive fabulous beast. A man of the military estate, if he possesses any pride at all, may and must have a heraldic beast — of that the newly minted Cybor is firmly convinced. But this animal, he feels, ought not merely to be painted on a piece of cloth or on the rock wall of a castle, as had been customary for centuries among the Gaur; it must be a real, living creature, and yet at the same time obediently trained to the will of its lord.

Most of all Spicy would have liked a unicorn, a beast as slender as a horse, yet with its dagger-like horn upon the brow as fearsome as lion and tiger. Unfortunately unicorns are reserved for the philosophers. Unlike chamois, buffaloes, or bulls, which bear a double truth upon their foreheads, the single horn stands for the one, exclusive, final truth, beside which no second truth can exist. Since that is how things stand, Spicy must choose some other creature.

In his last designs he had come ever nearer to the crocodile, although at the beginning he had inclined rather toward the leaner alligator. Yet a crocodile requires water, for on land it moves upon its stubby legs with only the greatest awkwardness. As every citizen of Cyborstan knows, water is unfortunately a rare element which in these latitudes scarcely exists at all — save for the occasional cloudbursts that the unpredictable sky hurls down upon the city once or twice a year.

So a crocodile, Spicy concludes from this insight, is also out of the question. But had he not always wanted to swing himself into the air, to command a view from above after sixty years lived only in the depths? The idea upon which the man of the warrior class at last falls so enchants him that once more he begins to speak to his absent daughter, though in doing so he prefers to remember her as she looked sixty years before.

“Ah, Hilda, if only you could see what splendid creature will soon accompany me along the Avenue of the Smoking Heads. You will still be proud, very proud of your old father.”

“Old father?” That expression at once casts him back into reality. It tears the man, so delighted with himself, abruptly out of his dreams. Painfully he becomes aware that his little daughter now looks more like her own mother. At any rate, that is how she appears. Spicy twists his face into a tormented grin, yet the sight of the sketch lying before him restores his good humor after all.

Contentedly he gazes at a reptile to which he has given the legs of a springing cheetah and the wings of an eagle. It is a dragon with a fire-spitting mouth!

“Yes, that’s right, that suits me,” wells up from Spicy’s lips. “My heraldic beast must in any case be swift and nimble. But as a welcome addition I shall give it this fearsome maw with its saw-like teeth. This creature is a real masterpiece. Evolution has not accomplished in thousands of years what I, Spicy 1101, bring forth in a single night.”

“Well then, we are somebody again!” Spicy pats himself — metaphorically speaking — upon the shoulder. “They cheated me of my IQ in the Center for Beatifying Transsub— to hell with that unpronounceable name! — but this creature no one shall take from me. With it I shall cut

a striking figure everywhere. One can see the progress of our civilization in this beast at first glance. With its powerful legs it will serve me equally well on dry land and in the dampest element.”

There is admittedly rather too much boasting in all this, but we should not begrudge our hero such lofty flights of ego too severely. Fate, after all, is about to test him in a very special manner on this historic day.

The fact is that at dawn he leaves his quarters in the very best of spirits, walks from there toward the Pantheon, enjoys after his successful night the charging of himself on the Place of Heavenly Peace all the more keenly, and only an hour later presents himself at his new post in the Ministry of Protection and Defense. Since he has already completed his recharging, his body shines in a rich green, and the two exclamation marks upon his chest prove to all he meets that he is a member of the second-highest class, the class of warriors.

And it is a joy even for us to behold the newly transformed man strengthened in body and soul. Let us grant him this fleeting moment of happiness yet, for only a few minutes later the man is shattered and crushed to the ground — a world, the whole world, collapses for him.

How is that possible? How can such a thing happen?

One moment, please! The reckless reader must be checked at this point. Words like “shattered to the ground” or “a whole world collapses for him” are easily tossed off by those who belong to the Gaur and have never experienced the uplifting of the soul that the beatifying transformation, the rebirth into a new human, necessarily brings with it. Nor should we forget that Spicy in particular long and stubbornly resisted the metamorphosis. He had undertaken the greatest gamble of his life only under the urging and threats of his daughter Hilda.

That since his recent meeting with her he had been forced to witness Hilda’s deliberate transformation into a mature woman, twenty years older than himself — this had indeed struck him with a profound shock. Somehow the old intimacy between daughter and father had suffered because of it. But over that deficiency he had finally been helped by the consciousness of living as a higher being in the midst of a radically new humanity.

And now this frontal assault upon his very existence!

What Spicy must learn today exceeds not only his human strength — it exceeds, one may well say, all human strength. Plato himself has aimed the cudgel of damnation at his head. From this moment onward Spicy 1101 is neither a new human nor a Gaur. He stands upon the list of the Erased. The Pantheon has passed a death sentence upon him because a hidden camera discovered him yesterday in the parliament and thereupon deleted the profile of his personality stored in the Cloud.

Staggering and swaying with uncertain step, as otherwise only a Gaur does after an excessive indulgence in alcoholic liquids, Spicy tears himself away from the crowd gaping at the list.

One and the same thought circles and circles unceasingly through his brain — or rather, through the chip that is thereby at once overtaxed and rendered unserviceable for the foreseeable future.

“I shall die, I shall die a slow and agonizing death, because my profile has been annihilated. I shall die because my chip will gradually fail in its service, perhaps even quite suddenly fail if I

overheat it by thinking too intensely; and for one proscribed no replacement is fundamentally available. So in the best case a creeping dementia will set in; in the worst there will suddenly be a *krr* or a *pschrr*, because a stroke of the brain will put an end to my life — I shall die!”

The feared overheating might already occur very soon. Who among us can keep a cool head after such a blow of fate? And who, one must further ask, is still capable in so perilous a situation of thinking clearly and rationally?

The perilous situation he dreads is now immediately before our desperate hero. At some distance along the Avenue of the Smoking Heads there is approaching him a crowd following a bizarre creature, a thing indescribably strange. From afar it resembles a giant beetle flattened below but spherical above. Spicy has never seen such a being, not even in fairy-tale books. His desperate state would surely have prevented him from surrendering to frivolous curiosity, yet his way back to his quarters leads him straight toward the approaching monster. Thus the man just condemned to death reels and totters forward involuntarily toward the apparition.

The creature suddenly stops, rises upon its hind legs, and delivers an address — just like a human being.

“7zebv-metaklengg-apo9minusgeigersam345. Transkommensal, tablofect93671##. Konseku-tiv, phizetaalphastern.”

“That is philosophy,” thinks Spicy with the utmost aversion. “Philosophy — Plato himself — has just now cut my lifeline to the Cloud.”

But while he is thinking this, the creature suddenly begins to speak in intelligible words.

“Revolution here and now! Down with Plato and the deep state of the Smoking Heads!”

Martially the creature thrusts forth these rebellious words from a broad mouth. And as though in answer to them, Spicy hears at his back the blaring of trumpets and the rolling of drums. He turns around. Behind him there approaches a phalanx of men from his own estate, all highly armed warriors, some of them with their beasts — lions and cheetahs — upon leashes.

At that moment things grow dangerously hot in Spicy 1101’s head, for the chip must decide for him an existential question. *Shall I or shall I not* — that for him is the question. Shall he return to a world that has erased him and condemned him to death, or shall he run over to the common people and the rebels?

The poor man clutches his head and is still aware of how terribly hot it has grown within. But what follows is already no longer conscious to him.

He does not notice that an old woman — presumably his daughter — darts past the warlike phalanx toward him, has seized his arm in order to pull him back into the camp of law and order. He does not notice it because, there amid the howling, roaring mass of people in front of him and the silently advancing phalanx of warriors behind him, everything suddenly turns pitch-black before his eyes.

For his brain-chip has heated to a red glow.

Anyone in that dramatic moment who still had enough attention to spare for such a trifle might observe how from both ears of Spicy 1101 black smoke rises into the air in artfully winding spirals — smoke from the smoldering filler material within the skull of the man only recently reborn. Spicy does not merely sway; he falls like a tree struck by lightning.

Requiescat in pace.

Spicy, formerly Hieronymus Spice, was a brave and upright man. Such a shameful end, in our view, he most certainly did not deserve. With the best knowledge and conscience we can assert: this man was never in his life a terrorist. Curiosity alone — a positive quality, all things considered, to which we owe much that is great in this world — drove him into parliament. But does not the very visit to a parliament correspond to a profoundly democratic desire that ought to be rewarded accordingly rather than punished by decreed deletion from the Cloud?

By now, at the latest, the reader of this documentary account will scarcely remain free of doubt whether in this new state all is really as it ought to be. Did Spicy, by moving from the underworld to the upper, in the end draw the worse card?

Had Spicy remained in the grotto deep beneath the Styx, then surely the same fate would have overtaken him as all other Gaur — death. Such an end is a scandal, an unforgivable error of evolution; no one disputes that. Yet at least natural death is no punishment for true or alleged terrorism. What at some point inevitably overtakes each of us is usually borne without great resistance; indeed, one even comes to terms with it to a certain extent. But with the arbitrary punishment of a government that simply annuls your ego — and with it the eternity previously promised to you — by decree, thereby blotting you out of life so utterly as though you had never existed in this world at all: with that no thinking human being can reconcile himself.

We, the chroniclers, must openly confess that we deeply lament the death of this man.

Epilogue

There is a specific reason why the final bloody conflict between the defenders of tradition and the radical proponents of unlimited progress is not further described in the present documentation: it never occurred. The experiment was terminated by higher authority. This was not the first such intervention, although even historians know little of earlier cases.

According to the account of a certain Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a man named Heinrich Johannes Faust—who obtained the title of Doctor through rather dubious publications—entered into an alliance with the Devil, who assumed the more refined appearance of Mephistopheles. The functional purpose of this alliance soon became evident. The Devil, traditionally regarded as a subordinate agent within the divine order, had consistently criticized creation and proposed its systematic improvement.

Within this framework, Dr. Faustus, under diabolic guidance, produced the first artificial human: the Homunculus. This entity was conceived as a purely intellectual being, free from the material constraints that had historically bedeviled human existence. While Faust personally benefited from this undertaking—most notably by gaining amatory access to Helena—the project itself must be classified as a failure. The Homunculus lacked viability. The supreme authority stepped in and ended the experiment at once.

Subsequent attempts followed. The adversarial principle persisted in its assessment that creation remained fundamentally flawed and required further optimization. A new collaborator was identified in an individual referred to as Allan (alternatively spelled Allon, Ellun, or Elon). Some have claimed this figure is a reincarnation of Dr. Faustus or even Faust himself. Such assertions lack empirical foundation and we must therefore reject them within our scientific documentation.

What can be established, however, is that Allan—together with his associate—demonstrated an outstanding level of initiative and transgressive ambition. At the same time, their work exhibits a remarkable degree of technical sophistication. The Cybor, as developed in this second experiment, represents a substantial advancement over the earlier Homunculus. Like its predecessor, it is a purely spiritual being; but in contrast to the Homunculus, it achieves functional stability and operational efficiency!

The conditions that drove this development are well documented. Increasing planetary temperatures have rendered large regions of the Earth progressively uninhabitable for biological humans. After all, they simply cannot survive in a frying pan. Under such circumstances, the creation of a heat-resistant form of existence constitutes a rational response. The principal challenge lay in the execution: the establishment of an experimental site beyond detection. Where on this increasingly crowded planet can one still find a quiet, secluded, or even unknown place? After all, satellites watch from above with eagle eyes, peering into even the most hidden corners.

True, but what if you own most of those satellites yourself, like our Allan? Then you can go ahead with the experiment without any worries. In any of the world's many deserts, for example, you could build a new city from the sandy ground without anyone ever finding out. Indeed, no one—not even social media—has noticed that the greatest experiment in world history to date has just been carried out there.

No one? You're wrong. Shame on all of you, you unbelievers, you nihilists, and you sad materialists! Once again, you have failed to reckon with the Lord of the world, who is certainly open to innovation but will not tolerate revolutions against his work. He silently let thousands of experiments take place, which evolution has been trying out here on earth for millions of years, and even approved of most of them, but what Allan, Plato, and the UnScis ultimately did to human beings, his favorite creatures, was simply too much for him. Pure bliss is to remain the privilege of the heavenly ones and the redeemed—such is his firm will. That is why the experiment was called off.