

Foreword & Acknowledgements

This short story is a continuation of my first try in the genre, *The Notice*.

We are now a few weeks after the conclusion of *The Notice*, which can be viewed as a first chapter and general introduction to the timeline. I believe that I now have enough data to carry on with the story. This second essay will be twofold: giving some scientific basis for my assumptions and introducing or withdrawing characters and plots, which I will endeavour to achieve in two separate chapters.

Please, do not hesitate to send your feedback and comments at the email address below:

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Enjoy!

Jean Desbiens

Cornered

Tsien was relieved; apparently there had been no unpleasant aftermath to the incident and he congratulated himself for his swift action to quench any rumours. He was therefore in a rather good mood at the next meeting with his head scientist, Professor *Van den Brook*.

"Good evening, professor! Any news about our business?"

"The same to you, Mr. President. No, but there are some technological developments about to be released by my colleagues in Switzerland, and I was hoping that you would authorize me to take a leave of absence for a couple of weeks to attend a congress to be held in *Geneva*."

"Humm! You are in luck. I must go to a meeting in the North Pacific somewhere next week. I understand that one of the *Eleven* has another business that he must attend to at the time of our next scheduled session and he asked to hold a special meeting instead, in order to avoid any inquiry about his whereabouts. Of course, it is imperative that the identity of the members be preserved. We also vary the venue to avoid detection of the facilities.

It's funny, though, now that I come to think of it. You will be in beautiful Switzerland enjoying this exchange with your colleagues and I, on the other hand, will be in one of those drab *New Islands* where I was thinking to send you recently during our argument about that stupid affair of the *Bailiff*."

"Yes, I suppose, although this congress will not exactly be fun. I anticipate much controversy and strife and I will have to report on the results, and quite likely integrate them into our systems and assets. The snowy summits of Switzerland have also significantly receded due to global warming but, admittedly, their climate is indeed milder than ours. The trip will be longish since I cannot use a sub-orbital shuttle as if I were on official duty. If all is well, I should also depart on one of next week's regular flights to Europe. I take it your transportation will be handled through the secret service, isn't it?"

"It is indeed. I look forward to your report and any future technological improvements."

[Professor *Van den Brook* and *Tsien* both leave to go about their respective business]

The following week, President *Tsien* boards a military jet starting at night from a secret hangar and arrives at his destination after a quick two-hour flight. It is already early morning on his arrival. The welcoming committee is composed of a single officer whom, after saluting, invites him to board a black chauffeured limousine that will take him to his quarters. According to the mission order, the meeting is to take place at 1900 hours the same day. Somewhat despondently, *Tsien* assumes that the Eleven are in a hurry and that the meeting should be rather short. The place is deserted.

A non-commissioned officer bows and takes him to his room, then departs. Uneasy due to this lack of decorum, *Tsien* decides to take advantage of the free time to refresh himself and sleep a few hours but first, he extracts a tiny transceiver from his baggage and tries to contact one of his agents. The digital device signals that the building is shielded, and that communication can therefore not be established. I had forgotten about that, he thinks. I better try from outside later. After a quick shower and a snack from the room self-serve he decides to take a nap in order to shake off the fatigue and adjust to local time, instructing the computerized alarm to wake him up a good 2 hours before the meeting.

He has hardly fallen into an uneasy slumber as a chime at the door suddenly wakes him up with a start. A glance at the clock tells him it is only 14:00 hours. "What is it", he asks? A muffled voice on the other side of the door answers: "This is the guard on duty, sir. I was told to advise you that the meeting time has been rescheduled to 1500 hours. You should prepare immediately, and I will take you to the bunker in about 45 minutes." "Okay, grumbles *Tsien*, I'll be ready." The guard walks away.

Annoyed and a bit concerned, *Tsien* quickly dresses and tries to collect his wits. This is highly unusual, he thinks, I'm being rushed like a third-class soldier. This is no way to treat a president, irrelevant of the usual haughtiness of the Eleven. Noticing a coffee machine in a corner of the room, he prepares himself a mug of *Cobizco* and swallows it rapidly before

the guard returns. Something serious must have happened, he surmises, but what? It must have something to do with this series of recent occurrences that I dismissed as a hoax ...

At that moment, the guard returns and knocks on the door. "It is time, sir. Please let us proceed to the bunker." An electric cart is parked in the corridor. The guard waves *Tsien* into the passenger seat, then drives into a labyrinth of brightly lit passages and stops in front of a low concrete building with narrow slit windows. The guard signals his arrival and a door opens to let them in. Two officers in uniform greet them and invite *Tsien* to follow them to the conference room. "Someone will come for you shortly. Please be seated", says the leader. The room is only furnished with a table, two chairs and a bright light. Slightly apprehensive, *Tsien* realizes that it looks more like an interrogation room, but the two officers have already closed the door behind him and left. As *Tsien* turns around to face the table, a voice behind the light orders him to be seated.

"What the hell is the meaning of this, I was supposed to meet the Eleven!"

"I am the chief of Special security. It was I who organized this subterfuge. You are under scrutiny for attempting to destroy evidence and hiding critical information from the Eleven, not to mention gross technical incompetence (you should know better than simply deleting computer records; there are backups, low and high memory copies, transient files etc. that gave you up). As of now, you are confined to quarters."

Even with all his self control *Tsien* was hard put to repress fear. He realized that he was in trouble, but his anger flared again: "I did nothing that was unwarranted, he erupted. This was evidently a hoax and I simply wanted to avoid unrest among the populace. My head scientist himself who was present at the time said that it was only a hologram."

"He will also be interrogated, but for now, we will use him as a bait and give him some leeway. We consider this affair as a plot to destabilize the Administration and it was your duty to report it..."
