

Foreword & Acknowledgements

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

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

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Enjoy!

Jean Desbiens

Strings or Nothing

We had left *Tsien* in a hot soup that he had concocted for himself. In the meantime, Professor *Van den Brook*, unaware of this situation, was trying to solve his own difficulties with flight connections. Indeed, although there was still some international tourism, air carriers had suffered greatly from the various waves of pandemics that had hit the planet. However, as there was still an elite, it held to its privileges, but the air links were no longer what they had been and it was not uncommon to have to use several medium-haul flights to get to one's destination, hence many inconveniences and delays. The professor, who had been slow to make his reservations for fear of a refusal by *Tsien*, had already logged a two-day delay before he could board the final Swissair flight to Geneva.

Dong! Swissair passengers bound for Geneva are requested to present themselves at Gate 15 for immediate boarding.

"At last, it's not too soon, said the professor. I hope *Von Gartner* has received my last email and that she will be waiting for me at the airport. I'm exhausted."

After a few hours of flight, the aircraft lands. The professor picks up his luggage and goes through Customs, then heads for the exit. At this moment, a message from the public address system invites him to go to the Swissair counter where he sees his colleague who greets him with a relieved air.

"Ah! There you are at last, Professor *Van den Brook*, she said. With all these delays, you missed the opening of the congress and some of the press releases, but these were only formalities and I can fill you in. Let's first go to my place for a bite to eat and you'll also have some time to freshen up before we have any serious talks..."

"Good idea Sarah, he says, but I'd rather start with a bit of toiletry and a fresh outfit. The trip was somewhat difficult..."

"Okay, Anton, she replied. In this case, why not enjoy a short stay in the spa and one or two pool lengths? If I remember correctly, it was your habit, during our studies, and it will put you back in shape in no time while my

robot chef prepares a snack for both of us; it's better not to overeat, if you're tired. She smiles with a slight smirk and continues: "My car is on the 3rd level parking, let's go!"

[A little surprised, the professor follows her to the parking lot while asking himself: "Here she goes, switching directly from the formal to the familiar... That is not like her at all. Could she be in that kind of mood?"]

Once they get to the car, a black VW, they get on at the back and Sarah presses a sensor while saying in a neutral tone "*Ich bin es! Fahr uns zu Hause!*" The on-board computer replies "*Einverstanden!*" and without further ado maneuvers towards the exit, then speeds up into the fast lane.

"We have approximately 40 minutes of travel time, she says, so relax a little (she presses another key). I can almost hear you think, so please stop looking at me like that! The life of a public servant doesn't befit you. You should have stayed in SR&ED. I assume your divorce didn't help. As for me, I'm married to my job, I like it too much to bother with a family life and this work certainly is very demanding... I turned off the microphone, so we'll be able to set the record straight. For starters, I played this role only for the onlookers. Indeed, we are probably being watched."

The professor widens his eyes and remains speechless, so Sarah goes on: "We've heard about your problems with *Tsien*, she says, but there's more. One of our technicians working on the bases where the Administration holds its secret meetings has learned that our dear president is now confined and under review for allegedly hiding information from the Eleven in connection with the recent incidents. It doesn't really matter whether it's true or false, our leaders are very suspicious... As a result, you must expect serious trouble since you are involved in this case. I have a plan B for you, if you're ever interested, but we'll talk about it later. For now, try to collect your wits, we'll be there soon."

Indeed, the car (with all windows obscured) enters a secondary road and heads to a secluded villa perched on a wooded hill, then rushes into the underground garage.

"Wow! This property must have cost a nice amount of money, says the professor. "Yeah, some things I can afford, but others, unfortunately, are out of my reach," she says in a slightly bitter voice. Let's go in!"

"Do you feel like a drink, first, she says? Then go to the bar, back there, and make yourself useful: serve me a peach schnapps on the rocks. I think there's still gin in the rack, but you'll have to settle for what's there. I don't particularly like your favorite brand, a Dutch thing, if I remember..." The professor prepares and hands her the drink, pours himself a good swig of gin, then sits in front of her in one of the chairs of the basement living room.

"If I understand you correctly," he said, "you think I might be suspected of having been in cahoots with Tsien? It's ridiculous, moreover, it was he who repeatedly ordered me to act as I did (sometimes with explicit threats) and he insisted about erasing himself the emergency recordings he had activated during the incident. The only weird element that I noticed was that the technology used to produce and control the hologram that was broadcast to us seemed unknown and sophisticated, while suggesting that the sender had the means to see and hear our reaction without apparent physical devices, but what were you alluding to for a Plan B?"

"It's related to the latest developments that we're about to announce at the conference," she said. After a careful study of the equipment used in our fleet, which clearly seems to be taking advantage of limited transitions in at least one other dimension (possibly an interface between dimensions), we have concluded that this technology is not fully developed. We need more powerful double-walled screens to keep the laws of our universe active inside the ships, while facilitating access to other higher dimensions that could allow us to free ourselves from the influence of the Earth's gravity field and of the lines of force of the solar field, due to the fact that transitions can only occur at some distance from any significant mass.

String theory is not yet the chosen model, but some clues pointing to the existence of other dimensions and parallel universes have already been detected in the second decade of the 21st century. It is estimated that there might be a dozen within our reach.

If there were more it would be even better, since Planck's equations predict that the energy levels needed to access them would be significantly lower. We need better superconductors to do this, the preferred candidate being stable metallic hydrogen that is not found native on Earth, but that could be available in space, possibly near gas giants, or even be manufactured under very high pressures. We have an underwater facility near the Mariana Trench where we hope to do that, but will the product be stable and usable at normal temperature? It remains to be seen.

I could offer you a research position, which would probably help you evade the possible difficulties of your association with *Tsien*, but this implies a certain isolation. Think about it while you're here, even if you hand over the decision when you get back to Headquarters, that is if the Eleven leave you alone."

"Wow! This is certainly a matter for serious reflection. I am a little shaken by your revelations, but let's stay calm. If I were to flee without further delay, it would certainly be interpreted as an admission of guilt. I prefer to keep your offer as a trump card up in my sleeve, to use only if there is a pressing need, but let's go back to the conference: were there any developments about the detection of gravitons and/or anti-gravitons? That could be a defense approach, because I used that argument in my reports on the incidents leading up to this case. What we would really need to make this case go away would be a truly revolutionary discovery like antigravity or at least its theoretical demonstration. Unfortunately, research is heavily dependent on governments or tycoons who want to use it for their own profit, and these guys want results."

"No, nothing new about it yet. It won't happen soon, I'm afraid. Would you like another drink or would you rather go right away to the pool and spa? I'm going to instruct the robot chef to serve us sandwiches and appetizers there."

"I would go for the pool! It should get me through this adrenaline rush. I have the necessary outfit in my luggage. I'll put on my swimming suit and we shall meet by the water. All right?" "Okay, See you there..."

By the time the professor arrives at the pool, Sarah is already doing a length. He waits for her to reach the other side and slips into the water, then starts an easy crawl. They meet halfway through and she beckons him to join her near the sun loungers. Upon his return, he finds that she is waiting for him, wrapped in a beach towel, and that the robot chef has placed snacks and juices on a coffee table, near each chair. He smiles at her and grabs a towel, then lays down with a sigh of ease in the chair next to her. "I'm already feeling much better," he says."

"Help yourself at will," she says. She bends down to take some triangular pieces of sandwich and raw vegetables with a container of dip and the towel falls, exposing her bare chest, but he finds with a shock that she is wearing prosthetics... He manages barely to hide his emotions and gives her an interrogative glance.

"I'm glad you were able to master yourself," she said. I don't need anyone's pity! My colleagues (men and women) would be too happy to see me feel sorry for myself and burst into tears, but that would only deprive me of my faculties and I am determined not to offer them this spectacle. All I need is my intuition and the satisfaction that discoveries bring. I already have more accomplishments than many of them and I intend to continue to do so. This stroke of fate is for me only an incentive to broaden my scope of action."

The professor takes a deep breath and says, "Since that's the way you want to proceed, we won't talk about it." He, in turn, takes a few bites and a sip of juice and goes on: "To get back to the subject of our research, I believe we might have to dig in the area of the white holes predicted by Einstein's equations. As black holes are sources of intense gravity, one could infer that the opposite applies to white fountains and that corresponding antigravity will be observed... "

Sarah smiles at him and says, "It's amazing how we can still think the same way, even though our paths have been separated for years. We will succeed against all odds!"

[She approaches him and gives him a long hug]

Earlier, on the Island, Tsien had been taken back to his quarters. *In petto*, he was fulminating. "If these idiots think I'm going to let myself be led quietly to the slaughterhouse, they're mistaken," he thought. Shortly after the sentry has left, he slides the transmitter into his pocket and leaves the apartment. Remembering that the building is protected, he heads for one of the exits from the compound into the bush. No one in sight and not even an alarm system or camera, he mused. One wonders how they were able to rise to power!

Once outside, he sneaks a look left and right, then hurries down a path through the lush vegetation. After walking a kilometer or so without meeting or hearing a living soul, he reaches a clearing and pulls out his transceiver, then launches the call signal... This time, the device activates in a few seconds and a voice replies: "Yes, Mr. President, what can I do for you?"

"I need emergency transportation tonight at my current coordinates," he says. "

"One moment, please," his correspondent replies. [...] Rapid transportation can be on site in 2 hours 45 minutes. You will only have 5 minutes for boarding, otherwise we could be intercepted."

"All right. I'll be there, he replies. Out!" With a little sardonic laughter, he turns around and returns to the apartment without any problems.

However, far away, in the heart of the base, a sentry on duty dials the number of the Head of the Special Security Services and simply says: "Everything went according to plan, Sir! He is already contaminated with the disease and his fate is sealed! You only have to let him go and no one will suspect anything, since he went outside on his own without thinking about the consequences... "

"Fine, says the other. It's always better to have one's hands clean."
Click!
