

Dreamscape

The professor, after giving the pilot a venomous look, thanks him anyway and heads for the lab premises located in one of the lower floors of the habitat, while trying to wear a more serene mien. [...]

[The receptionist sees him get out of the elevator and whispers into her microphone: "Watch out, he's coming!"]

"Hello *Sakura*! I hope your weekend has been enjoyable." "More or less so, she replies, and you?"

"There were good and bad parts, but overall, it was rather positive, except for the unpleasant surprise on arrival (the imminent bad weather, I mean). Pretty much everyone knows that I'm not overly excited about the prospect of spending two or three days in immersion..."

"I see, she says. Do you have any instructions for the oncoming day-to-day business?"

"Yes, says the professor. I think a little informal meeting would be in order, tomorrow morning, to get myself back into the general picture with respect to the work in progress and the overall situation within the team. Email all staff to notify them. Program that, say, for 11 o'clock tomorrow morning, which will give them time to prepare. It won't be long, so they can stretch the lunch break."

"It's okay, I'll take care of that. By the way, there's email in your personal inbox. It arrived a little before communications were cut off in preparation for the dive. You're in luck, though, it shouldn't last more than 36 hours, according to the forecast."

"Good, says the professor, I'm going to have a look at it right now."

"One more moment, Sir, says *Sakura*, an inquisitive look on her face. Excuse my curiosity, but what exactly happened in Guam? You were seen leaving with this guy from Security who has been around here and there and everywhere since the appointment of the new President..."

The professor jumps up and exclaims, "How did you come to know about that? He came across me unexpectedly as I was taking advantage of my vacation to visit the place and take a few moments of relaxation. What's more, there was no one around!"

"I have a cousin who works in *Puntan Dos Amantes*, she says. The place is small, and one quickly learns who's who, when there are newcomers. In addition, we can read smoke signals, as they say... Don't worry, I'll keep it to myself."

"It was only an informal interview, says the professor; this might prove useful one of these days, but it's better to be discreet when you have dealings with the powers that be. Everyone knows that political staff and their loved ones can expect to have to find a new job whenever there is shuffling at the top. Not long ago I held a position of scientific director at Headquarters, and I suffered the same fate as the entourage of the late President *Tsien*. It is also this very same character (Singh, that is) who rather unsubtly showed me to the exit door..."

"Understood! Motus and mouth sewn, Sir, good evening."

In petto, the professor breathes a sigh of relief, then heads for his office to view the awaiting email before returning to his home in the habitat. The lab seems deserted, but the purring of various devices and the rattling of test tubes can be heard, confirming that experiments are in progress, despite the weekend break. He unlocks the door and is about to turn on the switch when suddenly the ceiling light flares up brightly and applause rings out accompanied by brass band music and the loud pop of *champagne* being uncorked...

Turning back sharply on himself, the professor notices a small group of lab technicians who laugh loudly and invite him to come and celebrate with them around a table pushed into a corner, while his assistant offers him a drink.

"Sorry, he said, we had to use your office; it was the only place where we could surprise you..."

"Well, it's certainly successful, I must say, but what are we celebrating?"

"The success of the experiment, of course, he replies. We obtained crystals yesterday, while you were still in *Guam*, out of reach of the local area network. Of course, not everything is settled. We know very well that we need to analyze the product to determine its purity and properties, not to mention that we have to demonstrate that the process can be reproduced under identical conditions of temperature, pressure, etc., but this is an important first step... Cheers!"

"Cheers! the professor replies, taking a small sip. There, I will enjoy one of these sandwiches and some munchies to ward off a possible headache. I'm just back from a helicopter shuttle. I thought I'd just check my emails from here, but since that's the way it is, let's celebrate a little bit."

[The professor spots Sakura, who is sneaking in towards the table and says in a low voice, "Well done, but in the future, I will be wary of your innocent air and your maneuvers to divert my attention." She gives him a teasing wink and goes on her way without saying anything.]

Later, after returning home, the professor consults his private mailbox and sees only an automatic acknowledgement of his email to Sarah. I assume she did not have time to respond before the communications were interrupted, he muses. I'm going to write her a follow-up tomorrow. There's no need to hurry since the email won't go out until the habitat has re-emerged...

After a quick shower, he slips into the bed, but suddenly feels dizzy. Damn it, he thinks to himself. Yet I drank almost nothing... The dizziness intensifies and the professor feels as if the room were spinning around him, while a black hole is about to swallow him. He struggles in vain to regain his self-control and suddenly sees himself leaving the habitat in a disembodied form, sinking into the depths of the ocean as he glimpses for a moment the ghostly image of Sarah quickly replaced by that of the Bailiff who tells him in a low voice « *Herinneren!* »

At the bottom of the abyss, he sees the dome of the remote-controlled installation, then a steep cliff from which emanates a bioluminescent glow. Injured fish come up against the gelatinous organism which merges with the affected areas and then detaches itself from the main mass. The symbiote "customers" then leave and the bioluminescence fades...

The vision goes back in the opposite direction and the professor's consciousness reintegrates his body. He has just enough time to think "What does all this mean?" as a dreamless sleep takes hold of him...
