

At Sakura's

[A few days later, an email reaches the professor...]

FROM: Office of the President_ HQ

TO: Prof. Anton Van den Brook, Mariana Marine Colony, CERN Annex

SUBJECT: YOUR RELOCATION

Dear Sir,

As a result of your acceptance of the offer to resume your commission with Headquarters, we have contacted your current employer, and taken arrangements for your return. To ease your transition, we have selected temporary living quarters that could be permanently assigned to you if deemed suitable by you. Unfortunately, there was no more room available in your former place of residence, but we found a standard furnished apartment for you in an adjacent area, across the canal surrounding the administrative complex. There are services nearby and a pedestrian bridge leading to an underground conveyor access point to the inner complex.

Further instructions will be provided later for travel arrangements and the transportation of your personal belongings.

Yours,

Bao Zhang 张宝

Upon his arrival at the lab, the professor stops a moment at the front desk to address Sakura and slips her a cryptic "It's coming soon" to which she replies with a nod and adds, with a downcast look: "Yes, there was a Communiqué. We should take arrangements for our gettogether. I'll email you later."

On his way to his office, the professor notes out of the corner of his eye furtive glances given to him by several members of his team and thinks that action should be taken as soon as possible and a general meeting convoked. The email promised by Sakura reaches him shortly afterwards. In it, she points out to a certain amount of staff agitation and a greater traffic of internal e-mails, which seem to indicate an increase in the unrest related to the announcement, a situation that should not be allowed to get out of hand. In her view, that's probably why the Senior Management saw fit to issue the Communiqué without further ado.

Considering this estimate to be fairly accurate, the professor responds by asking her to convene the meeting the same day after the lunch break, and then he instructs the Chief of Staff to come immediately to his office.

[LATER, AT THE MEETING]

"Is everyone there? Yes? Well, then no need to procrastinate. You have already received the Communiqué. That was to be expected, since my assignment here was for a specific purpose, namely, to bring the research to a successful end. It's done and I understand that there will be bonuses and/or promotion opportunities available to all; some conditions related to specific positions may apply. The credit for this conclusion goes to the team and not to me since I only played a minor and temporary leadership role. My only right to posterity is the discovery of this extremophile near the Trench. For my part, I've been invited to resume, at least temporarily, my former job in the Planetary Administration and I await instructions about this shortly. The name of my successor is not known to me, but I assume that the Senior Management will let it be known as soon as the actual date of my transfer is decided, which will not be long in coming, since I have already been informed that some action has been taken in this regard, in conjunction with the CERN.

To conclude, I wish you a good continuation in your work and a stimulating career in the field of scientific research. You may take a brief coffee break now before returning to your posts as appropriate. Have a good day! "

[After a round of moderate applause, the crowd disperses]

In the evening, back home, the professor prepares himself a Bloody Caesar and takes the time to watch his pre-recorded newscast while nibbling on crudités; suddenly the system notifies him of an incoming video call he accepts on the spot. Sakura immediately appears on screen.

They exchange the usual courtesies, and she comments: "Your speech was pretty well sent, I would say, but I think that some icing was missing on the cake, judging by the moderation of the applause. Still, it seems to have defused tensions. I also believe that the announcement of the Senior Management will not be long in coming, which is why I propose that we schedule our tête-à-tête for this Thursday after work. I can offer you the traditional sake or tea and sushi before going to the living room for a conversation and a moment of relaxation before the currents of fate separate us ... "

"Agreed, the professor replies, so I'll walk you home then. No need to worry about the menu, I'm beginning to get a little nervous with all these developments and I would prefer to avoid any ceremony as much as possible. I will sleep better by the day I leave."

Thursday, after the end of the shift, the professor and Sakura take the same route as on the previous occasion of their brief meeting at the Kraken, but carry-on to her apartment, which they reach after a few minutes of walk. At the door, Sakura begs the professor to please take off his shoes at the entrance. He smiles at her and says: "Oh yes, of course... I know the custom. Once inside, she bows briefly and invites him to follow her in a narrow corridor that makes an elbow and reveals a small Torii.

"Welcome to my home away from home," she said. "Of course, this is not a real Torii, I couldn't have brought one here, but it helps me cheat boredom when I'm homesick... Come in and sit cross-legged by the coffee table over there. I'll be back in a moment." Thereupon, she slips away in small steps and lets him look around the simple decor adorned with a few plants and various prints hanging on the walls, while we guess, at the back of the room, the presence of a retractable workstation behind a screen partially hiding the installation.

A few minutes later, she returns dressed in a kimono, and places a tray on the table with two glasses and a bottle of warm sake flanked by an assortment of sushi and side dishes, then sits in front of him, inviting him to help himself. "If you do not feel like sake," she says, "I have jasmine tea and various herbal teas." "No, not at all," he says, "I much prefer sake served the traditional way and I can manage eating with with hashi!"

"Fine," she replies, "so let's enjoy and we can discuss after this introduction."

Once the snack is over, she puts the tray back on the serving cart and says: "Let's go to the other room. I have installed some more comfortable armchairs for my visitors who prefer this type of furniture, and you will probably be more at ease to talk. "

"Good idea," replied the professor, "your sake has already done a good part of the work and the sushi were excellent."

"This is an open-concept dwelling that we can re-arrange to our liking," Sakura continued. The colony provides removable partitions that are easy to install if necessary. I belong to a residents' association that maintains gardens in a special room offered free of charge by the administration, provided everyone can use it. I take care of some of the plants as a volunteer. Those that are here are loans. If we must go away for a while or leave, the association takes care of them or recovers them, so that they are always in good condition. This avoids potential problems of contamination by mold, etc. and controls are frequent... Going back to our business, I would like to ask you how you found your stay with us? "

"It went pretty well, overall. As I explained to you before, I had to leave my previous position in the Planetary Administration, something that often happens when there are changes at the presidency. I was a little uncomfortable in the colony because of my phobia of immersion, but I got used to it and the team worked quite well, except for the resentment due to my appointment. Fortunately, we were successful quite fast, all in all, with respect to metallic hydrogen. Thereafter, I had a stroke of luck with regard to that discovery near the Trench. There will surely be many useful technological spin-offs that will be credited to the team, but let's talk about yourself: how on Earth did you end up in the Colony?"

"It's a rather long story," she said, "my grandparents had a property in Kawauchi, near Fukushima, in the prefecture of the same name. Because of the nuclear disaster I am sure you've heard about, they were evacuated for a time and did not want to return when the local government allowed people to come back home. They accepted the compensation offered and resettled further inland, but this resulted in financial losses. "

"At the time, many felt that the money offered was insufficient, but their fear of radiations led them to accept the offer without much discussion. When I was born and grew up, later, my parents couldn't help me finance my education, so I chose to become a geisha, which

involves quite a long training but allowed me to fund the higher scientific studies I really wanted to undertake. The job of geisha is demanding, but the reality is not what some Westerners imagine," she said.

"Have no fear of judgment on my part in this regard," replied the professor, "my family once had close commercial ties with Japan, and we are familiar with its culture. I understand that some of my ancestors even dwelled in this country for years. "

"In the end," said Sakura relieved, "I heard about this colony and the possibility of an open position through my cousin Sato who works in Guam. I told you briefly about him if you remember... He is unambitious and preferred to exile himself there and work in a bar rather than pursuing higher education, but he is a good resourceful boy, and his help has been invaluable... »

"For my part," said the professor, "I went into the field of scientific research and experimental development (SR&ED) and got acquainted with Sarah during my studies. We briefly worked together in this field in separate offices, but lost sight of each other during the period of my marriage (too hasty, I must admit), which led to a painful divorce. In short, I left SR&ED and positively fled into the science administration sector, a job I held until the death of former President Tsien. I was supposed to attend a congress in Geneva with Sarah when the fatal accident of record happened to him, so she offered me this position in the Colony, knowing that I would have to leave Headquarters... "

"I see," she said, "but it's getting late. We talked for a long time, and you may want to meditate for a moment about everything that happened before going to bed. I wish you well and please let me know how you fare when you will have returned to Headquarters. See you tomorrow at the lab..." They get up and walk to the door. Then, she hugs him for a moment, after which they part.

On his way home, the professor reflects on his future with a little sadness, but philosophically tells himself that life is punctuated with precious little moments such as these where you find someone special, and others where you must leave each other. What will happen to me in this whirlwind, he wonders?
