

# Conversations

[A few days later, Sarah phones the professor...]

**Ring!** – Hello Sarah. So, what's new? Did you receive the shipment?

Yes indeed, the samples arrived yesterday. Everything is in order and the special containers are okay. We immediately stored them in a safe place and reconnected them, but that's not all, by a long shot. This guy from Security you told me about came here with the carrier. You must remember him; he says his name is Singh (probably a national of India). He insisted that he be given a guided tour. In his defence, I must say that he knows his stuff. He is aware of the latest technological developments in the field and asked sharp questions, always well targeted. He claims to have been a scientist in one of his earlier incarnations (Hi!). I replied poker faced that I might have a job for him if I'm still around when he will have his next avatar!

You must be kidding? He was the one who ushered me out after Tsien's fatal accident, that is when he tried to break arrest!

Don't worry, I only meant it as a joke, furthermore he didn't seem offended. Other than that, not much to report. Give me some time to do a few analyses and tests, and then we'll talk to each other again. However, there is one piece of bad news I must tell you right away....

Don't keep me waiting! What is it?

Well, you're going to have to move and find yourself a new job...

**?!!** What the hell are you talking about?

Don't you remember that unrest among your staff? I alluded to promotions and other assignment opportunities in case of success, therefore I must deliver on my promise... Your assistant will replace you (in about six months) and new postings will be offered elsewhere to many others. After all, he is competent and when he's had a taste of management for a while, he'll have wider ambitions or be disillusioned and want to move to other pursuits...

As for the others, it's better to give them some hope of advancement, in order to prevent any further grumbling and retain them if possible. We do not want to deprive ourselves of specialists who are hard to find and train, especially in this remote place in the middle of nowhere.

Moreover, there is also the small matter of your extremophile. It will have to be characterised and classified. In the meantime, we will immortalize you by giving it part of your name, it's customary! Since you are a fan of sci-fi, we shall call it "*Odo Brookensis*". Amusing, isn't it?

*Duive!* I don't know how I'm going to survive this...

Anyhow, I have work to do! Talk to you next time. *Tschüss!*

[The following month...]

Hi, it's me again! I'm rather in a hurry, so I'll summarize the latest news. Your crystals seem stable, but they are sensitive to some magnetic fields. There's no shortage of these here, as you know. Fortunately, our devices are very well insulated, otherwise we might have had accidents or losses.

I did some experiments based on old publications by a German researcher I had read about it in the past. They might be useful. Under certain conditions, the metal phase can be turned into plasma which could be used for spacecraft propulsion, which would require less weight and volume to carry per useful payload than that of conventional fuels. The transition to a gas phase is also possible for use with some surface vehicles that cannot be easily or effectively electrified. This would also involve a safer and more ecological energy source...

The most interesting part is that the crystals can also be grown by subjecting them to specific alternating magnetic fields at low frequency in the presence of the pressurized gas phase. Don't try it, there is a danger of explosion if the wrong frequency is applied ...

Not bad so far, said the professor! We'll see next time for the rest. I won't hold you any longer, I must also return to the lab this afternoon to manage current affairs and see to the installation of a permanent observation post of the organism on the side of the Trench. Talk to you later!

Back in the lab, the professor notifies the technicians and finishes his work while meditating on the implications of this recent communication.

As he prepares to depart, he notices *Sakura* who is also about to go home. He hesitates for a moment and approaches her with a slightly constrained smile.

Hello *Sakura*, are you about to leave?

Yes, professor. The day was a bit boring, despite the work to be done. A lot of paperwork. [She suddenly makes a face] Don't tell me I have to stay late this evening, she asks in dismay.

No, not at all, he replies, but I'm concerned about something and would enjoy a piece of conversation over a drink. Could you devote a bit of your time to me informally? How about a brief stop at the *Kraken* before returning to the dullness of our respective quarters?

Oh! Coming from someone other than you, I might have interpreted this proposal differently, so it's serious, isn't it?

Yes. I will not hold you back more than thirty minutes or so and your drink of choice is on me.

Well, then it's okay! Fortunately, the *Kraken* is not too far from my place. Let's go!

They exit, climb onto a moving walkway leading to the service area and arrive at the door of the restaurant after a few minutes only. The professor opens the door and follows her into the premises. He waves to *Antoine* who seems idle in front of the bar. The latter gives him a wide smile and approaches.

Good evening, *Monsieur*! Good evening, *Sakura*! You did well to come at this time, it's not busy, but there will be a large crowd later in the evening, we're having a show... Two seats at the bar?

No! This is for a private conversation related to office affairs. Give us a table in a remote corner. It will be rather brief. Thank you!

Follow me, I have just what you need near the view window...

At the table, *Sakura* settles for a citrus cooler while the professor orders a Rhum & Coke. He hesitates a little, looking for a way to tackle the matter...

*Sakura* throws in right away I won't play games with you, professor, I believe I already know what this is all about...

Really? I do not see how any information could have transpired. I was only informed today! You've been reading smoke signals again, is it?

Not this time, she answers, it turns out that all lab communications pass through my hands, so to speak. Moreover, I know our mutual boss very well and I have connected some dots, given what you told me about your professional past. There was some discontent among the staff when you were assigned here out of the blue. I'm sure you noticed it... *Sarah* reacted quickly enough with promises of promotions and other opportunities, therefore, now that she has obtained results, she must deliver...

Thank you for the drink, professor, but I must really go now, I am expected shortly. Come to my place for tea, one of these days. We still have time; you will not leave tomorrow morning and I am confident that you will find your destiny. You have a good dose of luck and intuition. Good evening!

Left alone, the professor seems lost in his thoughts for a moment, then he gives a sign to his waiter and orders another drink. Upon *Antoine's* return at the table, he talks briefly with him in a muffled voice, settles the bill and sets an appointment for a more private meeting...

Understood, *Monsieur*, I hope that you will find a solution to this conundrum. We will be able to discuss this more at ease at our next encounter since I will be on leave at that time. Good night!

After a while, the professor gets up and leaves the room without turning around, while at the back of the *Kraken*, a figure lurking in the shadow observes him....

Back at his apartments, the professor breathes a sigh and prepares to stream the daily news bulletin to have an idea of current events when suddenly, a signal sounds and the computer warns him of the presence of a visitor at the door.

Who can that be, he says to himself gruffly, the electronic peephole does not show anyone...? He carefully opens the door and glances right and left, then starts in surprise when *Singh* appears, pocketing stealthily a tiny gadget.

You again? What is it that earns me the honor of your visit, this time?

Nothing sinister, professor. The President simply ordered me to deliver this confidential letter to you in person. [He hands him an envelope without any letterhead and waits]

The professor frowns and thanks him but does not show any sign of being about to open the letter. Instead, he says: "I've had a rather difficult day and I prefer to review the content later, if there's no urgency. Good night!" Without further ado, he retreats inside and closes the door...

Faced with this show of rebuttal, *Singh* turns around on his heels and slowly slips away, shaking his head...

Left alone in his quarters, the professor examines the envelope from all sides, then, unable to wait anymore, opens it and reads.

FROM: OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT\_ HQ  
TO: Prof. Anton Van den Brook, Mariana Marine Colony, CERN Annex  
SUBJECT: EXTRAORDINARY PROCEDURE

Professor Van den Brook,

President *Inayik* sends you his greetings and asked me to inform you of the following situation:

As a result of your departure from Headquarters, the position of Chief Scientist held previously by you was temporarily awarded to your colleague with the most seniority in the Service. Unfortunately, the incumbent is also the most advanced in age and he has just indicated that he wants to retire as soon as possible for health reasons, which will leave the post vacant. This procedure has never been used before but given the prohibitive costs of a competition open to all, the Management considers that it would be preferable to benefit from your experience, should you be interested in resuming service within the Administration. Your recent success in your current assignment is considered valuable for planetary needs and, as a result, we offer you a higher salary and fringe benefits.

Given your status as still under after-mandate oath, we grant you until next month to assess this proposal according to your personal situation and to notify us of your decision accordingly.

Regards,

Bao Zhang 张宝  
Private Secretary to President *Inayik*

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