



Juha-Petri Tyrkkö

Strange Machines

Strange Machines is a short science fiction novel I wrote in my youth. It tells about the expedition of Earth inhabitants to meet extra-terrestrials with whom they had got acquainted only by earlier exchange of radio messages. The meeting of parties is hindered by surprising problems.

Juha-Petri Tyrkkö

STRANGE MACHINES

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“I still don’t feel myself quite ready for this task,” said Sergei tweaking his seat belt and watching a sun quickly brightening ahead.

“Nobody else feels so any better,” soothed his colleague Wai him from the next seat. “This would be a trip to the unknown for anyone.”

Their voyage of four days among the stars gliding by was about to finish. The sun toward which they were traveling already drowned the stars into invisibility by its bright whiteness. A small speck of light, probably one of the outer planets, wandered slowly by the spacecraft far to the right.

The sun grew and faded into a white sphere as the window gradually darkened. Quite soon there appeared a black dot at its edge. The dot grew rapidly and soon swallowed the whole sun leaving them in a pitch-black darkness.

“Normal procedure,” commanded in Chinese the already aging man piloting the spacecraft. His real name was Qi Liang Jin, but the crew had unanimously decided to call him Grandfather. The nickname did not come completely without reason, as Grandfather was the oldest astronaut of the center still in service, and had been participating in many other missions.

The blackness ahead was split by a blue strip extending sidewise, and from behind it the bright sun appeared again, flaring beneath them into sight a spacious, brightly lit scenery, the lively colourful face of the planet. The last remnants of their dizzying cruising speed faded away. The main drive that had sped them through the space turned off and left them in the middle of the austere world of ordinary kinetic forces. They had arrived in the orbit of their destination planet.

It was still something new and strange for the people of the Earth to visit inhabitants of other planets, and there was no common knowledge about how the other planets should be approached. To avoid causing problems they first tried to contact the planet from the orbit. Grandfather

commanded the computer to examine different radio frequency bands to let them find a suitable transmission frequency to inform about their arrival. The computer did not tell about any findings for a good while.

“How can this be?” said surprised Grandfather watching the display screen that remained black. “Don’t they have any radio traffic?”

“They must have,” said Sergei. “They were talking to us over a radio relay.”

“There is no sign of any activity in the frequencies, except a few bursts of noise in the microwave range. They do not seem to have even satellites equipped with radio transmitters.”

Feng Hua Lei, obliquely behind Grandfather, bent over to look at the screens in front of Grandfather but had to notice the same as the others: the planet was completely silent, at least what comes to radio transmissions.

“Where did the Brothers then get their radio messages, if they did not come from here?” wondered David next to Hua Lei.

“Brothers,” realized Grandfather. “Of course! They may have done a little prank to us. If they transfer the messages to us over the lightyears, they may also change their form of delivery. They know what kind of radios we use, and perhaps they wanted to improve our chances of receiving the messages. If we want to have a contact here, we have to first find out what was the form in which the messages were originally sent.”

The first contact of Mankind to the other inhabitants of space happened as if by chance when physicists noticed the scattered radiation from communication between alien beings. They listened to the messages for a long time, and when they presumed to understand something about them, they sent their groping replies in the approximate direction of the received transmissions. After a few years their efforts were rewarded. The mysterious beings replied to them, and in the flush of

their enthusiasm they named them right away Brothers. Brotherhood may not have been the most accurate concept to describe their relationship, as still, when the expedition group was on its way, the Brothers were not known much better than in the beginning. The Brothers introduced them to space and technology, friendly and willingly every time that they managed to understand the questions even approximately as intended, but the inquiries about themselves were always left without results for one reason or another. Nobody on the Earth had even seen an image of a Brother.

After persistent efforts and inquiries they managed to get into contact with the next space nation, the Koonians. The communication happened with the guidance and technical assistance of the Brothers. Koonians were much more eager to introduce themselves than the Brothers, and their messages were easier to interpret. One could not accuse Koonians of stinting, either, as the receivers managed to barely sort out the information flooding them. As a reward for the unfaltering striving the peculiar Koonian main language, tightly submitted to the duodenary number system, yielded to their efforts and revealed from behind the curtain the hierarchical culture cultivating its form and traditions. Their culture extended toward the people of Earth as if in response to the reaching of the Earth people to space. Koonians quickly became the favourites of the great public, and they were a frequent topic of discussions, even though the number of people in direct contact with them was quite small. The word "Koonian" had been, lacking a better concept, derived from the aliens' own word meaning society or mankind. The word they used for their own planet was not yet known on the Earth, so the media talked about "Koonians" and "the planet of the Koonians", sometimes also erroneously about "planet Koon".

The meeting of the people was a challenge that made even the vast mass of information suddenly feel very small and inadequate, as in spite of all the studying they

realized that they still did not know their talking companions. There was no more information to come, as one day the flow of information had dwindled out, and the contact with the Koonians could not, in spite of the many efforts, be established again. Therefore it was decided that an expedition group would be sent to the planet to find out what had happened, and to establish personal relationships between the Earth people and the Koonians, if possible.

Now the expedition group had found the completely silent planet. Without letting the surprise overwhelm them they rolled up their sleeves and began to search any kind of communication traffic or signs of human activities. The computer used all of its sensing channels and chewed and sorted out the observations while the group members followed its progress with sharp eyes. Finally they succeeded, not by listening to radio waves, but when the computer noticed the weak scattering of a laser beam flipping by.

“I think we made it,” said Grandfather pleased, as the computer caught laser messages criss-crossing the space here and there and deciphering their structure.

“Light signals?” said Sergei with a grin. “They must have quite a lot of satellites to deliver the messages. It is strange that they do not communicate by radio. It should be a much more painless way to keep in contact than the use of mere light.”

“I hope the satellites will give us a light signal before a collision,” said Hua Lei shuddering.

“Perhaps their orbits are in neater order than ours.”

“214 sound channels, 86 image channels, and 3124 unrecognized channels found,” announced the computer. “The speaker on the chosen channel is estimated to be Kaat Heot with weak reliability. A two-way connection is possible through a laser link. Waiting for instructions.”

“Connect,” replied Grandfather, preparing to speak.

They let out a sigh of satisfaction with the computer having succeeded in its demanding task. Koonian

communication traffic could very well have been too peculiar for them to decipher.

On the channel there prevailed so clean and uninterrupted silence that they wondered for a moment whether the connection was there at all.

“Do you hear us?” enunciated Grandfather into the microphone as carefully as he could, in Tuapsaam, the definitely pre-eminent language of Koonians.

“Who are you?” replied a voice after a brief pause in the tone familiar from the recordings of the language lessons. “My device does not recognize you.”

“We come from the planet that you call by the name Mottleface. We are five, orbiting your planet. We are currently approaching the land of Naot. We request guidance for landing.”

“From another planet?” The reply sounded surprised but not perplexed. Koonians were undoubtedly more used to visits from space than the people of Earth. “Switch to the space traffic channels, for example, to... wait a little... to channel 72.”

“Er... on which channel are we now?”

“This is the unassigned national channel number 132, just now used by cargo haulers.”

“Thank you. We will switch.”

“So he was not Kaat Heot,” noticed Sergei as the computer switched to a new channel.

“By mere ear I could not have done any better than our computer,” said Grandfather. “We may not yet be tuned in the way to recognize them by voice.”

By Earth standards, and especially the Chinese standards their speaking had been quite terse in style. Among Koonians it was not a sign of unfriendliness, though, as Tuapsaam and the other Koonian languages knew only one mode of addressing that was used speaking to both the governors and one’s own children. Among Koonians neither respect nor impudence expressed themselves through forms of grammar.

After getting a reply from the new channel

Grandfather repeated his request. This time the speaker was not as prepared for what he would hear.

“Wait a little,” came a confused voice from the channel. And then, after a while: “We do not have your reference. Could you tell us who knows about your arrival?”

“The delegate of extraplanetary matters Puan Toem knows us best. Could you guide us into contact with him?”

“Wait a little, I will try.” This time the silence was several minutes long. And after it: “He is on the channel 48.”

“Thank you.”

“Bureaucracy,” said Grandfather smiling when the channel changed again. He cleared his throat a bit.

“Puan Toem, can you hear us?”

“I can hear you. Who are you?”

“I am Qi Liang Jin, accompanied by four others.”

“Qi Liang Jin?” repeated Puan Toem before Grandfather managed to continue. “Do you come from the planet Mottletface?”

“Yes, we do. We request that...”

“Wait a little.”

With the patience of space diplomats they leaned back, ready to wait for an unknown length of time and go through possibly still many changes of talking companions. The waiting did not become a very long one.

“You have guidance on the next zone, channel 108,” said Puan Toem suddenly. The connection shut off.

“He seemed to be in a hurry,” thought Hua Lei.

The computer searched the mentioned channel for them. This time the first call came from the planet.

“Qi Liang Jin, can you hear us?” came the voice from the radio, not in Tuapsaam, but in Mandarin Chinese, if not completely pure in style, at least fully comprehensibly.

“I can hear you,” replied Grandfather pleased for the

hospitality.

“Can you follow a three-colour guidance?”

“I believe I can,” said Grandfather trying to quickly guess what the word meant.

“Red below, green above right,” said the voice. The computer, always ready for service, began to steer the spacecraft without a delay along the midline of the bunch of laser beams lit around them. Finally they could dive into the atmosphere of the planet.

But their worries were not over. The warning feeling hovering around their spines suddenly found a concrete focus when the computer surprised them by asking a permission to exceed the slope angle of the normal procedure. Grandfather allowed that to let them stay at the midline of the slowly turning guidance beam. The computer was not satisfied for long, but asked next for permission to exceed the rule-based safety limit.

They glanced at each other. For astronauts accustomed to conventional operations following the rules, the suggestion felt quite foolhardy.

“Let’s exceed,” decided Grandfather and continued then to his companions: “We have to go. If we want to land, I presume we have to do it their way.”

As they entered the stratosphere the deceleration forces piled upon them like a heap of lead ingots. Their seats groaned under them, supporting a much too heavy load for their light structure. When the rule-based safety limit had been exceeded, there was left only the technical safety limit, and somewhere behind it lurked a death in white fire. Breathing laboriously they counted the long seconds in their minds while the computer, insensitive to stresses, recited the exceeded temperature limits and other breaches into their buzzing ears. Finally their patience was rewarded and the pressure began to ease.

“Whew!” sighed Hua Lei. “Do they always land as abruptly as we did?”

“Who knows,” replied Grandfather. “I should hint to them about our limited endurance at a suitable time.”

Still a little bit dizzy after the deceleration they watched the scenery outside while the computer guided the spacecraft to still lower altitudes. Further away there spread an area of buildings, perhaps a small town. They were on their way to a greenish but more secluded and empty-looking area. Perhaps also Koonians built their airports away from the habitations? Sharpening their gazes they could resolve a small, needle-like, gleaming mast from which the rainbow-coloured bunch of laser beams guiding their spacecraft like a towline was emerging.

Soon they could resolve the plants of the Koonian forest gliding beneath them. They approached the gradually clearing ground at a low angle but at a daring speed. The computer steered their spacecraft with quick, sharp jolts to keep in the guidance of the beams.

“They seem to walk us right onto their yard,” noticed Grandfather. “Thorough job!”

Their flight ended, not on tarmac, as they had expected, but on a short-mown grass. Far ahead was the mast that had cast the laser beams, closer forward on the left side a strange-looking globular dome built of hexagonal blocks of varying colours. That was about all that there was to see on the site.

“Shall we wait for them or get out ourselves?” asked Sergei.

“Let’s wait,” replied Grandfather. “They are coming to us already.”

Out of one of the openings in the dome stepped out a slender, light gray being whose body structure and walking style reminded them rather of an insect than a human being. The even colour of the being suggested that it was naked and without artefacts on the body. They did not notice on its face any other features than two large, shining eyes.

“Follow me,” told the voice coming from the radio. “I will lead you into the shield for connection with the system.”

The being stood still. It had obviously uttered the words even though they could not see a mouth or any other orifice to produce the sounds. The being did not resemble the images of Koonians they had seen, either.

“We are five,” replied Grandfather. “Shall the others come, too?”

“The directions were intended for all of you to the applicable extent,” replied the voice.

“One must stay,” reminded David them about the safety regulations.

“Does it have to be applied here?” asked Sergei.

“Let’s apply them,” decided Grandfather. “The regulations exist just for the unexpected cases.”

“I hope they do not regard it as a lack of trust.”

“They are probably used to all kinds of visitors already,” guessed Hua Lei.

“Four of us will come,” announced Grandfather to the being outside.

“Understood.” The reply did not show any kind of emotional reaction.

Wai remained in the spacecraft and the others stepped quietly out of the door as if to be careful to not disturb the atmosphere around them. After the being noticed that the last one of them had come out, it began to walk slowly toward the dome. They followed it, puzzled.

From a close distance the dome seemed higher than from afar, even though they saw all the time a smaller portion of its curving surface. The modestly simple openings, shaped as a half of a hexagon, were as wide as the double doors of a large banquet hall. They followed the being into the dimly lit dome, into which streamed daylight through a few transparent wall blocks.

The dome was almost empty inside. On its hard floor, made of glass or ceramics, were standing a few beings, some of them completely still, some clustered to work with an object hidden amidst them. The only sound in the dome was the rustle of the movement of the beings, echoing strangely within the walls.

“This is the local cluster of Heep Tuak,” sounded an announcement in Mandarin Chinese inside the dome. “Choose for yourself a suitable companion and a mode of connection.”

They looked around perplexed, without understanding what the sentence meant and who had said it.

“Could you tell us how we can get to meet Puan Toem?” asked Grandfather.

“Define Puan Toem more completely,” asked the voice.

“Puan Toem is the delegate of extraplanetary matters who managed the connections to the planet Mottleface and who knows us personally.”

“I do not know how to meet him,” replied the voice.

“Do the others here know?”

“Wait a little.” After a brief silence the voice continued: “We do not know.”

“Do you know Puan Toem?”

“We have no information about Puan Toem.”

“Do you know other space researchers?”

“We have no information about space researchers.”

“How about people working for the government?”

“We have no information about them.”

“Who do you know?”

“We are regularly in contact with four different local clusters and one node station orbiting the planet.”

Now they had come to face their receivers, but the discussion did not seem to progress much easier than with the radio. As their guide had already turned its back to them, they took the liberty to walk and look around in the dome. They approached cautiously a group of working beings. Doing so they noticed that the beings looked all different, of different size and colour, with different shapes and movements. They saw in the dome only two or three beings with a similar companion.

“Something is wrong here,” said Hua Lei quietly. “These are not the beings with whom we were in contact.”

“It looks a little strange,” replied Grandfather. “I wonder if there has been some kind of revolution or a takeover of the planet.”

Between the backs of the workers there was left a gap just wide enough for them to peek at the events in the middle of the group. The workers, toiling in silence, did not seem to mind their curiosity. The first one to look in was Sergei who was startled by the sight. On the floor there was a surgical operation going on!

Only when also the others had looked inside the ring of the workers was Sergei forming a mental image of what he had seen. He looked again between the backs of the beings. For an operation there was something quite strange in the work. The being lying on the ground with its innards exposed was missing one and a half limbs, and some other spots of its body looked like a part was missing from them. The other beings were placing in the open places of its body small pieces of tissues, glittering white, like ocean foam. Some were using instruments, some their own prehensile members. One of the beings applied a water-like liquid on the places being treated.

“What is going on here?” wondered Hua Lei aloud. She did not direct her question to anyone in particular, but invisible ears around her heard her question.

“Job 415, plant grower,” replied a voice around them.

“A dreadful accident,” said Sergei sympathetically, now in Russian and with a lower voice, as if to avoid excessive intrusion.

“Is he... injured?” ventured Hua Lei to ask the evident, talking toward the ceiling.

“No,” came the confusing reply.

Hua Lei and Grandfather looked again at the work of the beings.

“They are just inserting more and more tissue,” said Hua Lei to her companions in a subdued voice.

“Perhaps that is their way to reproduce,” suggested Grandfather amused with the thought.

“Wouldn’t an operating theatre be a more friendly

environment to do that?” wondered David.

“They may not need it. And we may have better to move further away if we expose them to a risk of infection unknown to them.”

They moved toward the center of the dome, under the immobile stares of the strange, inertly standing beings.

“What do you say about this?” Hua Lei asked her companions.

“I suggest that we leave this place and try our luck in the city we saw,” said Sergei. “These beings are scarcely of help in finding Puan Toem.”

“They may not know the same people we do,” said Grandfather. “Perhaps they are not locals at all. And for active rulers they are rather indifferent toward us.”

“They were nevertheless given to us for guides. They must then be at least in cooperation with the Koonians.”

“Puan Toem directed us to their guidance,” reminded Hua Lei. “And yet they do not know him.”

“Let’s find someone who can advise us,” decided Grandfather.

They looked around, and noticing that nobody seemed to expect them to stay they left for the opening through which they had entered.

“Do you need further guidance?” asked the guiding voice when they approached the opening.

“Shall we ask something more?” asked Grandfather. The others nodded, as they did not have any better idea.

Grandfather turned toward the center of the dome.

“Are you Koonians?” he asked.

“We operate on this planet,” replied the voice.

“Who gave you the duty to receive us?”

“The task was given over an unassigned channel.”

“Why do you speak Chinese?” tried Grandfather still to penetrate through the wall of incomprehensibility.

“We were given directions to speak in Chinese with you.”

“Of course,” muttered Sergei silently. “They began to speak Chinese when they were told to do so.”

“I mean: how did you learn the Chinese language?”

“After acquiring the vocabulary we acquired the grammatic and idiomatic structures.”

“We do not seem to be able to pose our questions right,” noticed Grandfather to his companions and turned toward the exit.

“Do you need further guidance?” asked the voice again.

“Thank you, this is sufficient,” replied Hua Lei.

“Guidance completed.”

They left the dome.

“Mechanical folks,” said Hua Lei as they took a direction leading them past the beacon mast towards the forest ahead.

There were a few kilometers to walk. On their way they had the chance to introduce themselves to a Koonian forest from a close distance, with the knowledge that the local fauna would not poison or swallow them as their only assurance. Trudging through the forest was as heavy as on the Earth, but its sounds were different. The plants whispered quietly in the wind, remaining in the background, and the animals hiding among them produced more often hisses and croaks than song-like sounds. To their delight the terrain became easier to walk before they got too tired. And quite soon there were buildings appearing among the thinning vegetation, and even a light gray road.

“Let’s speak to the first oncoming Koonian,” suggested Hua Lei.

“Don’t walk in the middle of the road!” warned Grandfather. “We don’t know yet what they are driving here and if we have time to dodge each other.”

“It doesn’t seem to be rush hour now,” mused Sergei glancing at the empty road in both directions. He had barely finished his sentence when a jointed-body vehicle with many wheels and seats for more than ten zoomed past them toward the city. Its vigorous speed did not encourage them to sign it to halt.

“How does one hitch-hike here?” asked Sergei.

“Don’t worry,” soothed Grandfather him. “We will be there in a moment.”

The city was spaciouly built but had a clearly defined perimeter. By Earth’s standards it was small. They arrived quickly at its central parts and finally saw what they had expected: the familiar, dark-skinned Koonians walking along the roadsides and across the plazas from a familiarly shaped building to another. Besides Koonians there were also beings that they did not recognize, but who could very well be of the type thriving at their landing site.

“Which of those is the souvenir shop?” asked Hua Lei looking at the buildings, at some places rather high ones, made of metal and natural stone. Unlike the urban buildings on the Earth, these did not easily reveal their nature and purpose to Earth visitors looking at them from the outside.

“Let’s ask Puan Toem about it as soon as we find him first,” suggested Grandfather.

“Attention!” said Sergei. One of the Koonians, appearing middle-aged and female, was approaching them, obviously intending to walk closely past them.

“Excuse me,” addressed Grandfather her. “We would like to know where...”

“Ask others,” replied the Koonian and walked on. Reviewing in their minds the various tones of Koonians they came to the conclusion that the reply was not rude, but not very considerate, either.

“No problem,” said Sergei. “The next one is coming already.”

The next one was young and male, but the answer they got was exactly the same.

“Unbelievable!” huffed Hua Lei. “They do not want to even talk with us!”

“Could they be afraid of us?” guessed Sergei. “Or is there something repulsive in us?”

“As far away from home as here we should not be

hasty in our estimations,” said Grandfather. “Let’s go on trying and we will see what happens.”

The next passer-by was not similar to others but taller than others by head, and again with an insect-like body. As their earlier acquaintance, this one had also an even colour, a round head, and shiny eyes.

“Could you tell us where Puan Toem is?” addressed Grandfather the being.

“Define Puan Toem more completely,” asked the being just as they had feared.

“Puan Toem is a delegate of extraplanetary matters who managed the communication with the planet Mottleface, and he knows us personally,” explained Grandfather.

“Are you searching the space operation center?” asked the being.

“Yes, we do,” replied Grandfather delighted. At least the name sounded suitable for a place where Puan Toem could be found.

“Space operation center is the third tallest building of the complex limited by the cascade terraces and the forest street, on that hill. Can you detect it?”

The being raised an arm-like limb to point a lowish hill further away to the direction where the street they walked was leading. Grandfather peered for a moment at the building complex.

“We do,” he replied. “Thank you for the advice.”

“Understood,” replied the being and went on walking.

“Soon we know those ones better than the Koonians,” said Sergei smiling as they continued their walk.

They gathered only a little attention on their way to the space operation center. Koonians’ eyes were probably so used to strange beings that people from the Earth did not startle by their appearance anyone of them. They arrived at the spacious yard of the indicated building without anybody saying to them anything.

“A rather Earth-style block of flats,” said Hua Lei looking at the wall rising to the heights. The wall was

made mainly of glass-like transparent substance.

They walked to the entrance, likewise familiar in style, but after David had opened it for them, the nuances of the building began to grow stranger. They had been wondering how to explain their case to a possible guard in the lobby, but they noticed that the problem had solved itself, as there was no lobby or a guard. Behind the door there was a straight, narrow, mysteriously dark blue corridor leading right into the building. In the center of the building there was a shaft rising through it, filled by a helical surface obviously taking the role of the stairs, and at the axis of the helical surface there was a translucent tube. The tube was probably part of an elevator-like machine, but as they could not find a way to use it, they decided to trust their own legs and began to climb the helix.

“Now we should find somebody to direct us,” said Hua Lei.

From the third floor there was a youngish Koonian crossing a short bridge leading to the helix. They stopped at the end of the bridge.

“Is Puan Toem in this building?” asked Grandfather the Koonian. The Koonian was a little surprised to see them, but he recovered immediately.

“Eighth floor,” said the Koonian and went on past them and downwards.

They ascended according to the advice to the eighth floor. At the end of the bridge there was a door, and next to the door there was guidance, meticulously written in Tuapsaam with a dye on the stone wall. The Koonians, who loved symmetry and divisibility had chosen the duodenary system for counting and extended it besides mathematics also to their language. Depending on their positions the same twelve characters could be numbers, vowels, or consonants. They read all the text through for the exercise, muttering to themselves the words they read.

“Should we try first the department named ‘culture

exchange’?” suggested Grandfather.

They entered through the door determinedly. They did not manage to march to their destination right away, because in spite of the clear distinction in the guidance there were no discernible “departments” inside, but a spacious hall continuing through the building, with the workers busily moving from one area to another. One of the workers noticed them and approached them hesitatingly, scrutinizing them up and down almost amusingly minutely.

“How can I help?” he asked.

“We would like to meet Puan Toem unless he is too busy,” said Grandfather. “He knows us and he knows that we intend to meet him.”

“This way, please.” The worker began to lead them further into the hall glancing at them now and then looking bothered.

“I wonder if we came at a bad time?” said Grandfather to his companions in Chinese.

They could not ponder the matter further, as at the moment Puan Toem was in front of them in a very real and tangible form, although halfway turning his back to them as he discussed with a few other Koonians. The worker having guided them left, and at the same time Puan Toem noticed them.

Grandfather greeted him and introduced his whole group. Puan Toem was seemingly surprised and did not immediately find words to reply to them.

“So you come from Mottleface,” he said finally. “Are you, Qi Liang Jin, the same with whom we have exchanged messages?”

“Yes, I am. The connections disappeared later, and we did not know what had happened. That is why we came here personally.”

“Who sent you?”

“I am a representative of all the nations of the Earth, the union of its space operation coordinators, and the government of my own nation. I came here by the

unified assignment of my government and the experts in astronomy and space operations.

Puan Toem weighed his next sentence for a moment.

“Is Qi Liang Jin the name of your bodily present being, or that of the being that you represent? And whose thoughts were recorded in the messages that we received?”

“Qi Liang Jin is my name, the name of the body you see, and the name of the being that the body defines,” replied Grandfather without blinking an eye. “The messages that I sent signed by my own name were created by me, or compiled from the pre-existing, commonly available knowledge.”

The information seemed to surprise the Koonians.

“This matter seems to take studying,” said a Koonian standing next to Puan Toem.

“You are right,” replied Puan Toem. “I have to summon the right people.” He turned again to address Grandfather. “Tell us why you came here.”

“We want to become acquainted with the other nations of space. From the messages we have exchanged I got the assumption that you want the same. For the time being the process of getting acquainted is still incomplete.”

“For what or whom do you want to be acquainted with us?”

“The desire is probably our innate feature. Introducing ourselves to the environment and other beings is a normal way for us to learn to know the world and act purposefully in it.”

Puan Toem did not reply immediately but exchanged a meaningful glance with his companions.

“Return to your spacecraft,” he said then. “We will come to fetch you tomorrow at noon.”

To their confusion Puan Toem turned his back to them and continued his discussion with the other Koonians as if the visitors had never been there. They left the room silent and perplexed.

“I wonder if we are really welcome here,” said Hua

Lei as they descended the helix.

“Well, we were not received as prestigious guests would have been received on the Earth,” admitted Grandfather. “But let’s not yet give up hope. All this may have a good explanation. They may even be tired with the multitude of visitors like us.”

“Shall we return to the ship or do a short excursion round first?” asked Sergei.

“It may be better to return straight to the ship,” replied Grandfather. “I do not know if it is wise for us to try to operate here on our own before we know the society a little better.”

* * *

They waited. Puan Toem had not given an exact time for his arrival, but noon was already beginning. They did not know, either, where or for what they were promised to be fetched, and they had not managed to contact Puan Toem over a light beam link. Sergei, Wai, and David were strolling on the grass outside the spacecraft while Grandfather and Hua Lei were inside.

Their spacecraft had been let be without anyone disturbing it. There was plenty of space for others to land, had anybody wanted to do so, but there had not been others in sight at any time. All the action that there was going on was their moving in the vicinity of their spacecraft and the occasional visits of the strange beings outside of their dome.

That time there was an unusual sight waiting for them. One of the light-gray beings was lying on the lawn between the spacecraft and the dome.

“Is it sunbathing?” wondered Sergei. “I believe that kind of skin is not quick to tan.”

“Let’s go and look,” said David.

They came to the being. It did not seem to react to their presence in any way. Its large, shiny eyes stared steadily at the sky.

“Are you all right?” asked Sergei the being, in Tuapsam just to be sure.

“I have an unidentified problem at the neck,” replied the being. The voice seemed to emanate from its chest; at least they did not see on its body any mouth through which it could have uttered the words.

“So you need help.”

“I am presently waiting for the assistance coming to me.”

“Can we help you, too?” asked Wai. “We could for example carry you into the dome.”

“You can do it if you want.”

They took that for a positive answer and grabbed the being, Sergei at the shoulders, David at the waist, and Wai at the feet. The being was light, distinctly lighter than human beings on average. It also emitted less warmth, and its skin was drier than that of a human being. The being lay on their support immobile, actually without twitching a single muscle. Was it paralyzed?

“Are you unable to move?” asked Sergei the being.

“No,” replied the being.

“You were nevertheless lying outdoors.”

“At the moment immobility is the most profitable state.”

They carried the being into the dome through one of its openings. Another being, shorter and stouter was just about to exit from another opening when it noticed them and turned toward them. It was carrying under its arm a small, light-coloured box.

“How is this place?” asked Wai when they laid the being on the floor of the dome.

“Yes,” replied the being. “Now I must stop speaking.”

The shorter being sat without further explanation at the other being’s head and set the head between its legs. The beings stayed without movement in the position for a minute, perhaps even two, while the human beings watched curiously the events next to the beings. When some invisible sign told the shorter being that they had

waited long enough, it set its feet on the tall being's shoulders and grabbed its head with a firm grip.

"This fellow seems to be the chiropractor of the house," commented Sergei in Russian. "But that grip looks rather rough."

"Perhaps it helps with the vertebrae," replied David.

The shorter being pulled. Muscles bulging with the exertion did not show on its body, but it was obvious that it was applying plenty of force. A few silent seconds passed, and then a sharp, nauseating ripping sound. They looked at the being lying on the floor and spun immediately away struck with horror. The shorter being was holding in its hands the head severed from the body of the other!

David was the first one to gather enough courage to look again at the beings. The headless body of the taller being lay still on the floor while the shorter being manipulated with all ease and comfort the ripped neck surface of the head on its lap with the instruments it had brought along. They saw no blood or other bodily liquids that could have leaked out from the being after losing its head.

"Didn't he... die?" stuttered David. The shorter being stopped for a moment to think.

"No," it replied and continued its work.

"What are you doing?" asked Sergei after noticing what the work was done for.

"I remove the impurities that had infiltrated the tissues during the previous cervical disconnection," replied the being. "They were disturbing the chemical processes of the body and weakening in general the tissues around the neck."

The being laid the head on its owner's stomach to wait and moved to purify the ripping surface of the body. The Earth people watched the work eyes round with astonishment. They saw how the shorter being protruded from its forehead a proboscis-like tube that it used to spread yellowish liquid on the translucently white tissues

of the severed neck, and how it finally set the head back to its place and connected it to the cervix with a single fierce shove.

They waited. And they waited. After a time feeling like an eternity the taller being finally moved tentatively its arms and hoisted itself onto its feet, obviously rid of its problem. Only the grotesque seam around its neck told about the startling operation having been done to it.

“Are you all right?” asked Sergei trying to make his wobbling knees support him.

“Yes,” replied the being briefly and left them.

As they turned to the other being, they saw it, too, being on its way elsewhere.

“Head off, head on, and that is it,” wondered David. “They are disassembling and assembling each other as if they were...”

The twinkle of realization flitted between their eyes and illuminated them with understanding.

“Machines!” laughed Sergei so that the dome echoed. “We have ended up among machines!”

“Brothers told us about this earlier,” reminded David, likewise laughing. “In various places in space there are robots made of biological components – mechanoids, to use the official term. They have not been seen among us, but what would prevent them from appearing here in however large numbers? They all can make copies of themselves and kind of reproduce like living beings.”

“Then the operation we saw earlier was actually a birth,” said Wai.

“It may have been. But they can, of course, be injured and need repairing.”

Sergei turned his eyes to the ceiling of the dome.

“Where have you been made?” he asked in a loud voice, still bubbling with amusement.

“In this cluster,” replied the voice around them.

“Hypothesis confirmed!” said David silently in Russian, smiling.

“Don’t you have any... er... members from other

planets?” asked Sergei.

“This planet has according to a rough estimate a little more than three dozen units originating outside of this solar system. The cluster has no information on their location. All the units in this cluster have been made within the cluster.”

“Are you machines?”

“We are organic assemblies.”

The reply explained rather thoroughly the discussion problems they had had in the beginning. It is hard to attain human contact if the other side is a machine.

“Let’s go to the ship,” suggested Sergei to his companions, still grinning. “This must be told to the others!”

They returned with brisk steps back to the spacecraft and marched right away into the sleeping chamber that was converted to a living space during the days. Grandfather and Hua Lei were presently sitting at the table sipping tea when the others joined them and told their news.

“Machines?” exclaimed Hua Lei, and like the others earlier, burst then into laughter.

“So that they are,” said Grandfather rubbing his jaw.

“It explains why the beings live in a community like that,” said Sergei. “It also explains their peculiar manner of speech:”

“It may also explain something about our Koonian friends,” pondered Grandfather.

“Koonians? But they are not machines, are they?”

“Perhaps not. But tell us why we are here, among the mechanoids, behind the Koonians’ backs. Or why they do not bother much to discuss with us?”

A stupefied silence followed.

“I think that to them we, too, are machines,” replied Grandfather his own question.

“That is absurd!” huffed Hua Lei. “Can’t they see the difference between a human being and a built device?”

“I don’t know how easy it is to notice,” said

Grandfather. “It took them rather long to decide the matter about us, wrong or not. They are continuously dealing with all kinds of mechanoids, possibly very capable ones, too. Could the highly sophisticated machines have dimmed their discernment?”

“So even Puan Toem has not been bored with us,” said Hua Lei. “he just wanted to push a button that makes us move aside for a moment.”

“And now they come presumably with the technicians to examine us a little,” guessed Sergei.

“The matter has other aspects,” reminded David. “Have you thought how it is to be a machine? We come here trustfully, like a human being to meet another one. But what happens when we do not have the human value and respectability? Or human untouchability? They could get an idea to disassemble us like the machines here disassemble each other.”

“Would we be untouchable if we had come here recognized as Earth human beings?”

“We do not know their customs and morals very well, but according to our correspondence until now I believe that they regard life resembling theirs inviolable,” assessed Grandfather.

“We have to convince them that we are not machines, or else they could do to us something that makes us regret our acquaintance,” demanded David with his finger firmly poised against the table. “This work is hard enough without us being regarded as mere cell constructs.”

“Us being regarded as machines does not necessarily mean that we will be mistreated,” said Sergei. “They may still respect us as machines. You did see how interested they were in us, didn’t you? Around mechanisms sophisticated enough there may sometimes be an atmosphere restraining intrusions. Our first self-deducing computers were treated in a way that they could have been mistaken as holy.”

“So a machine can become a human being,”

commented Hua Lei.

“We know how even a human being can treat another human being,” reminded David dismally. “If we are mere machines, our lives and our existence have no worth at all to them.”

“We can turn the subject up,” decided Grandfather on their behalf. “I presume facts speak loudly enough.”

“How should we receive them?” asked Sergei.

“Like human beings,” replied David. “Let’s prepare tea for them, chat for a while, if it feels appropriate, and ask them to take us to their leader. After that we have some kind of protocol to follow, at least as we are concerned.”

“Do they drink tea? It does no good to our purpose if our hosts die in a poisoning.”

“Koonians offer each other food and drinks like we do, but possibly for different reasons,” said Grandfather. “We serve each other tea to keep company, to spend time together, or perhaps as a gesture of friendship. To Koonians serving food is taking care. They want to make sure that the people visiting them have no unsatisfied needs. If they presume their guests feel fine without nourishment, it will not be offered, either. That led me to the thought that we, too, could skip the tea serving, as the researchers scarcely do their job hungry, and are not necessarily even very eager to enjoy the offerings of unknown machines.”

“Then it should be enough that we invite them in here, and... what is that?”

Outside, above them, there sounded a loud, piercingly sharp hiss. Looking out of the window they saw first a shadow gliding over them, and soon after that the cause of the shadow, an aircraft landing next to their spacecraft.

“So much for the tea servings,” said Sergei. “It seems they came to get us already.”

A flattish, oblong aircraft of similar length to their spacecraft set itself on the grass about as far as a lazy throw of a stone. The hissing sound faded out and the air

stream dispersing beneath it and ruffling the grass dwindled away. The engines of the aircraft had barely stopped when the doors opening at its flanks let out a group of Koonians. They turned their eyes from the nose to the tail of their spacecraft as if pondering where to start their scrutiny. When all the fetchers, six in total, had come out of the aircraft, they started to march to the entrance of the spacecraft, led by the foremost one.

The astronauts did not wait for a knock. Grandfather opened the door and stood next to it to receive the guests. David and Sergei further behind retreated quickly aside noticing that the comers did not even slow down at the door but marched right in as if they owned the spacecraft. The Koonians glanced quickly around and went then to the sleeping chamber. They stopped in the middle of the chamber and remained watching, or rather staring, their hosts. Among the Koonians none was familiar to the astronauts. Obviously Puan Toem had not come to fetch them personally.

“May I introduce?” said Grandfather hurrying to the Koonians, speaking in Tuapsaam that he presumed the comers to speak. “Our names, from left to right, are Feng Hua Lei, Wai Khaam, David Ben-Abram, and Sergei Krotkov. I am Qi Liang Jin and I am the formal leader of this expedition, even though in practice we could substitute for each other.”

“Amazing,” said one of the Koonians looking around.

Another one looked straight at Grandfather.

“What is in there?” he asked pointing at the hatch on the floor.

“There are our beds,” replied Grandfather opening the hatch a bit. “We put them in this bin for the day.”

“Beds?” There was a dose of unbelief and surprise in the Koonian’s voice, but finally he had to believe what he saw.

“Let’s look further,” said the third Koonian taking three others with him. The other two moved their own way, with their gaze shifting from one nook to another.

Despite their mental preparedness the hosts watched the Koonians somewhat uneasy. The brisk inspection the Koonians performed reminded them of the police razzias familiar from movies on the Earth. They had to admit, though, that they could not forbid the Koonians to inspect the ship in the way they wanted, as they had arrived on the planet in a rather unofficial and stealthy way, and were therefore suspects in various ways, at least by Earth standards.

“Come to look at this!” exclaimed one of the Koonians in the kitchen. “These are clearly cooking utensils.”

“Here is a storage of clothes,” replied another and flicked underwear from behind the door.

“Let them be,” said one from the front part of the spacecraft. “Come rather to see this cockpit.”

The expedition members already felt like smiling when the Koonians rummaged the ship finding new things all the time. After a while, however, they quit their scrutiny and returned to the sleeping chamber.

“Amazing!” exclaimed one of them looking impressed. “This ship would be good enough even for human beings.”

“That was the intention of its designers,” replied Grandfather with an austere smile at the corners of his mouth.

“I have never seen machines who are this meticulous about their own comfort,” added another Koonian.

“If you have seen enough, let’s go,” said the third, the obvious leader of the group. “We can return later for further research.”

The leader turned to Grandfather.

“Go to the jetcraft,” he ordered tersely.

Without a word, swallowing their forced submission the Earth astronauts left for the exit door.

“Who stays?” asked David.

“None,” replied the Koonian on their behalf.

“Perhaps we all can go,” said Grandfather.

They moved to the Koonian aircraft. On the order of the leader they stayed in the unfurnished chamber right behind the doors and sat on the floor by their own initiative. Through a door they could see into a spacious cockpit chamber that could have accommodated all of them and some more, but in spite of that four Koonians stayed in the entrance chamber with them, staring at them curiously.

The hissing engines started and the aircraft took off. They could not see out, but their sense of movement told them that the aircraft moved in a manner approximately similar to a helicopter. They leaned on the chamber walls and watched the Koonians in return.

In the eyes of the Earth human beings Koonians looked both human and non-human, depending on the viewpoint. They were clearly humanoidic with their heads, limbs, and torsos, and their bodies had the same symmetries as human bodies had. Their skin varied from dull bluish-black to dark gold in colour, and it shone or glittered slightly as if it contained minuscule particles of metal. On average they were slightly taller than the Earth human beings. Their most non-human features were their long, slender fingers and the peculiar shape of their skull and face. Their angular pupils were surrounded by a wide iris of colours in the same range as their skins. There was no white visible in their eyes. The inside of their mouth cavity, briefly visible when they spoke, was surprisingly almost as shiny as a mirror.

It was the Koonians' turn to feel uneasy. They did not seem to like their transportees to scrutinize them.

"Quit staring!" commanded one of them before they managed to turn their eyes away by their own initiative.

"We apologize if we insulted you," replied Wai for her companions. The Koonian seemed puzzled to hear the apology.

"What is the matter?" asked another Koonian his companion. "Do you fear that they see your inner secrets?"

“I do not like to be stared at,” he replied bumping his companion with his palm. “The species of the starrer has nothing to do with it.”

The Koonians seemed to calm down for a moment, but finally the curiosity bubbling inside them found its way out through the mouth of the third one in the chamber.

“Tell us what you are doing here,” he ordered.

“Our purpose is to establish a contact between your and our planet,” replied Grandfather. “We are a delegation.”

“Those? A delegation?” The thought seemed unable to settle into a comfortable position in the asker’s mind.

“It seems to me that you regard us as some kind of biological machines,” continued Grandfather. “We have always regarded ourselves as human beings, comparable with you. We are not merely performers of our task, but also its posers. We ourselves, too, want to establish a human relationship with you.”

The Koonians glanced at each other.

“Why?” one of them asked.

“Human beings have the tendency to form relationships with each other. I have read the same notion in a message that Puan Toem, your countryman, sent us.”

“They think they are human beings,” muttered the Koonians with each other looking somewhat perplexed.

“Why do you think you are human beings?” one of them asked Grandfather. Grandfather noticed that he was not very well prepared to answer the question.

“We are not products of technology,” he said.

“You have wrong information about yourselves.” The words of the Koonian were a statement, not an assessment. “You cannot be human beings, because you have the structure of a machine.”

Grandfather was still thinking how to reply when the aircraft began to suddenly descend. They had obviously reached their destination. After a brief wait they felt a slight bump when the aircraft touched the ground. The

engines switched off and the doors opened.

To their surprise they noticed they had come to the yard of the same building where they had come to meet Puan Toem. They were marched to the second floor on the familiar helical surface without wasting time. They did not manage to check the name of the department in which they were going, but they could guess that the staff felt equally at home on all of the floors. They arrived at a small hall with many seats. Even though the shape and dimensions of the hall were not familiar to them, they quickly realized that it would be used as some kind of auditorium. They were not escorted to the seats but into the empty front part of the hall, in front of the eyes of the audience. The spherical lamps cast around them a bright but not dazzling pure white light.

“We became performing artists,” noticed Sergei.

“Wait here,” sounded the order of the Koonians behind their backs.

There were a few Koonians sitting on the seats, and from the door there were more entering at a rapid pace. When the seats of the room, a few tens by a glance, were almost fully occupied, the door was closed. Silence descended into the room, and one of the Koonians in the front row got up and turned to the audience. His dark brown textile clothing was in the Koonian fashion simple and free of decorations, but something in its shape told even to a visitor from the Earth that the wearer of the clothes was more prestigious and honoured than his audience.

“We will discuss the questions risen from the nature of the beings coming from the planet Mottleface.,” began the one standing up, as a title, and without addressing words. “The beings whom you see here in front of you, and their kin, were earlier in contact with us over a remote connection. At that time we did not recognize their nature, but later scrutiny revealed them to be organic devices, the same kind that appear in our own environment in large numbers.

“These beings are different from their ordinary companions in the sense that they are in their structure and functions very complexly featured and sophisticated, and undoubtedly represent very advanced design of organic devices. Another very surprising feature of them is that they regard themselves as human beings. They have repeatedly tried to establish contact with us in one way or another, as now coming bodily to our planet. Unlike the common devices, these have not named anyone as their maker when asked. Some have even interpreted it to mean that they have begun their attempts of contact on their own initiative. Regardless of whether it is true or not, our duty is to study these devices already because of their special character and advanced design, and find out who has designed them and for what kind of purpose. Those familiar with the matter and those studying it shall represent their contribution to our discussion.”

The Koonian sat down. It seemed that Earth’s turn for representation would not come soon. Grandfather asked with a glance his companions to be patient.

In the middle of the audience there got up a bluish-skinned and likewise bluish-clad Koonian. He came to the front of the audience and began his own speech.

“I am Naap Hilp from the culture department,” represented the speaker himself. “After familiarizing myself with the material I got from Puan Toem I want to ask especially you: Who and in particular what kind of beings do these devices represent? As the Eldest a moment ago told us, these devices claim to be human beings. What have been the motivations of their builders? Were they so proud of their achievement that they decided to promote them to the status of humanity? Were they themselves above humanity, either in reality or in their own mind? Or is their idea of humanity very different from ours – we could not in any way call these human beings, not even if their performance were many times better than it is now.

“We must also consider the possibility that we have been subjected to a gigantic prank. I do not mean that the designers of these devices would have devoted their lives to cheating anyone, as such could not be expected from any sentient being. I rather mean that the technology of these devices either ran out of the control of its designers or otherwise finally exceeded their capabilities to control it, and the devices were misled by some internal mapping error to consider themselves as human beings and convince others of the same, too. In both cases we have to prepare to meet very special beings, possibly much more skillful than we are. I suggest that we use plenty of resources to find out the origin of these devices.”

After having his word Naap Hilp returned to his seat.

“Eldest!” came a request among the audience at the same time. “On behalf of the Department of Natural Sciences we request permission to take these devices to our department to study their structure in detail. The matter will probably become easier to study if we know more about their internal mechanisms.”

“Can you after the disassembly put them back together?” shouted someone from the other side of the room. From the corner of his eye Sergei noticed David’s hands clench into fists.

“Let us not engage in foolhardy attempts before we know what we are doing,” warned the Eldest. “For the time being it is probably better to study them from outside.”

Grandfather looked like he was about to say something but the next speech began already. From the audience stood up a young-looking, brown-skinned Koonian.

“I am Haun Tuein,” he said. “I am not working in this building, but I am in a close connection with a few of its departments and employees. I have a question for you, and I wish you to consider it very carefully, as it may have far-reaching consequences. My question is: How do

you know that the beings standing in front of us are not human? What is the reasoning of your view? You have to be sure about your thoughts, as it is a different matter to call a machine a human being than a human being a machine.”

A soundless grin spread over the room. Koonians did not laugh aloud, but their mouths revealed to others that their sense of humour had been tickled. The shiny mouth cavities of the laughing Koonians flashed in the illumination of the room.

“Is there a risk of confusion?” came an interjection from the rear seats.

The Eldest, standing up, restored the dignity of the atmosphere by his being.

“This question may be suitable for Iat Kuan to reply, as he was in cooperation with Puan Toem when the messages were received,” he said. Iat Kuan stood up. At that moment Hua Lei and consequently her companions, too, noticed Puan Toem sitting next to him. Noticing a familiar face Hua Lei waved her hand for a greeting. The upper side of Puan Toem stirred as if he were about to respond to the greeting, but then he seemed to change his mind and froze, looking at them with a blank, unblinking face.

“Reasoning a claim is a good scientific practice,” said Iat Kuan. “So I will give my reasoning, even though I believe they are much needed.

“Before we can decide who is human and who is not, we have to be clear with what is meant by this expression. The concept of the human being is undoubtedly too extensive to be exhaustively defined, but instead we could create different definitions of who is not a human being.

“Firstly, a human being is sentient, initiative, cooperative, and therefore forming well-defined societies, in these senses clearly higher than an animal or a machine. Look at our own world and compare it with the description these beings have given of their own

environment. What chaos is prevailing among them! Thousands of small organs of society, indifferent to their neighbours, most of the time demolishing what others have built, to build something of their own in its place. A hopeless jumble of duties, rights of possession, units of measurement, and code systems, working only because nobody has noticed that on a larger scale it does not really work!

“We have similar problems, but not among human beings but among organic devices. Does the description of the homeworld of these devices not closely resemble our local device communities, whose members can organize themselves only within their capabilities, and whose whole function is limited to the area for which they have been designed?

“Secondly, a human being has a moral and a human mental life. A human being seeks love, peace, and harmony. The whole parlance of these devices – I am now quoting language researcher Kaam Taum – is based on the rules of struggle and threat. Their expressions reflect their thoughts about life as a battle that lets only the strongest survive. This feature, too, appears in one of our local machine types, namely rebuilders, of whom the most successful regularly disassemble their less successful companions to rebuild from the parts something better. This feature appears also in predators who live eating other beings’ flesh, but not in human beings.

“Kaam Taum found in the messages also hidden information to which the writers never referred directly, but which could be shown to be present in many places. These beings live in the middle of a planet-wide blanket of a threat for which they feel themselves to be responsible. According to some estimates this threat may be a destruction system that they have built and which has threatened the existence of all of the devices if not even the human beings on the planet. Missing direct references, we have not found out the exact nature of this

threat, but its mere existence already tells us about the absurdity of which only a machine can be culpable. And it did not tell us only about the absurdity, but also about the shrewdness of these devices when they offered us a facade different from what they show to each other. I could even ask if they have dangerous and sly intentions toward us?"

Cold sweat rose on Grandfather's forehead despite the heating illumination. On a common agreement the message composers had decided to not advertise their military history to the nations in the space. It seemed, however, that certain things man revealed already by his mere being. Perhaps Koonians saw through them as they lived on another planet and saw the Earth from another angle. Perhaps Koonians themselves did not notice how strange it was to call Earth human beings machines and needed somebody else to tell it to them.

"We know how to lie!" exclaimed someone in the audience. "You do not need to be a machine or an animal to do so."

"At least we can be ashamed of our lies," replied Iat Kuan without puzzlement. "For these devices it is an integral part of their – if I may say so – life.

"But for those who are not convinced with moral evidence, may the evidence of natural sciences be presented. I leave the minute details for the interested to read in the reports and will merely say that a machine built by a human being can be described, but a real human being cannot. The rules that control our bodily functions have always been and will probably remain out of our reach. This pertains especially the reproduction. We have an idea about what happens when a male heredity network connects to a female one, but we have no way to predict what kind of offspring will be born out of the event. On that fact is based the undescrivable multitude of nuances and manifestations of humanity: the human being is too numerous in its dimensions and too finely nuanced for another human being to describe.

“And the machines, then? Of a machine we can write a description, so concise one that another human being, or a group of them, can on its guidance produce a copy of the machine if they wish. The devices standing here in front of us are machines. Do you know how many different heredity elements their heredity chain contains – yes, chain, like a chain of pearls, and not a network?”

An expectant silence followed the rhetorical question.

“Four!” flung Iat Kuan the number among his audience. “Four simple molecules that merely change their order along the chain! Tell me, can you produce human beings out of four components?”

The Koonian raising the question about humanity earlier stood up with a slight tremor of defiance on his face, as it seemed to Grandfather.

“Could you, for the demonstration, write on the board one of such heredities for us to see?” he asked. “I want to see how these beings have been built.”

“We can order it from them recorded on a memory slab if you want,” replied Iat Kuan seemingly annoyed by the undermining of his presentation. “But the consequences of this coding method are evident even without examining the heredity. Those devices consist of cells, we do not. And who else consist of cells if not the machines walking on our streets? They look alike, we do not. And who look alike if not the machines built with the same plan, as we well know? We form a consistent society with consistent rules. These beings instead load into themselves more and more new connection methods to compensate for their inability to adapt and create entireties. The result is the mess we witness every day out there: the machines serve us but with such connections between them that cannot be joined by anyone or anything else but another machine!”

The audience turned to look at Haun Tuein, the brown protester, but he no longer seemed eager to present contrary claims.

“Very well,” said the Eldest. “If there is no longer

disagreement about the nature of these devices, let us discuss the question about their senders.”

One sitting in the front row stood up as if catching his opportunity.

“I am Siom Tain, culture exchanger,” he said. “We began to study the matter as soon as we realized that we are not dealing with human beings. Because we could not reach the senders personally, we had to search them based on the hints extracted from the messages the devices had sent. It was not an easy task, and the obtained results are also neither very accurate nor completely certain. So far our most reliable estimates suggest that the designers of the devices have been destroyed, they destroyed themselves, or they are still alive but do not want to be in other contact with the outside world than sending out the designed devices on their behalf. In the first case...”

“Wait a little!” interrupted one bouncing up from one of the rear rows. “Why should we be satisfied with estimates that are neither accurate nor certain? The devices themselves are standing right in front of us! They have not been brought here just to be looked at, are they? Why shouldn’t we ask themselves directly?”

The audience mumbled acceptingly. Some glanced at the Eldest, some at the claimer.

“Why not?” said the Eldest. “They are what we have come here to examine.”

“Do remember that their reliability has already been questioned once,” resisted Siom Tain. “How would we know if they tell the truth or not? They do not even know their own origin!”

“There has never been such clever a lie that correctly posed questions would not reveal it,” replied the interrupter. “Or will machines beat human beings in shrewdness?”

“Well, if you so claim,” said Siom Tain seemingly reluctantly. “Who would then be the suitable person to pose the right questions?”

“I suggest that the task will be given to Miip Keun. He has been trained to use various machines, both organic and inorganic. Besides, he was in the workgroup which studied these devices.”

Escorted by the eyes of the audience Miip Keun, a youngish male Koonian walked hesitantly, almost timidly to the front of the room, one hand groping the empty pouch hanging on his waist. To Grandfather it looked like he was searching for the nonexistent user’s manual of the new machines. He smiled at the young Koonian friendly, almost fatherly, but the Koonian seemed to become even more confused.

“Go ahead,” the Koonian who had interrupted Siom Tain urged the operator of his choice.

“Who designed you?” asked Miip Keun all the Earth human beings generally after gathering his courage. Grandfather nodded to the audience and took the word.

“Respected Koonians,” he said. “Despite what has been presented we still would like to present ourselves as human beings, the most sentient, varied, and I dare even say highest life-form of the planet Mottleface. We have not been built in the sense you mean, but each of us has been born from his own father and mother, who are beings similar to us. We have come to your planet to establish a relationship between our nations so that they could open to each other a new human dimension and support each other in their strivings. We also represent the governments of our nations, I directly and they a little more indirectly, and therefore we would like to present our case even to your rulers.”

“Why do you call your designers father and mother?” asked Miip Keun before Grandfather could even inhale.

“Probably because they were joined and conceived and gave birth to us in the same manner as you do. I suppose it is typical to human beings.”

“Did your father and mother command or cause you to use these and other concepts closely connected with human beings?”

“Using them has been our custom over generations.”
Miip Keun exerted his thinking to tame his resistant object.

“In how many generations do you exist?” he asked.

“We do not know. We have no recordings of our families further than a few generations.”

“A dozen? Three dozens? Thousands?”

“Undoubtedly at least hundreds.”

“Who designed your first generations?”

“I do not know.”

Miip Keun turned to the audience.

“They seem to jest at our expense,” he said with a lame-sounding voice. “Their information transfer could not have such a number of inconsistencies that they could lose the record of their origin. Every device we know can explain its origin. They have to be able to do so in order to even function and reproduce properly.”

“Ask that other one,” suggested one sitting in the front row. Following the advice Miip Keun moved in front of David.

“In how many generations do you exist?” he asked.

“Undoubtedly at least hundreds,” replied David calmly, carefully mimicking the tone of Grandfather’s sentence.

“Why do you not express to us your actual origin?”

“Why are you interested in it?”

“Because I am a human being. I want to hear a complete description of the being who created you.”

“Are you aware of the scale of your request?”

Miip Keun pursed his lips at his insurmountable task.

“Are you aware that I gave you an order?”

“Yes, I am. But would it not be better to discuss for a while without giving and taking orders? We human beings cannot be in complete contact by just commanding and fulfilling the commands.”

The flashing of soundless laughter brightened all the time around them. Miip Keun did not look behind himself but he realized even without seeing his audience

that he had slid from the user to the used.

“I posed questions,” he said half to his exhorter, half to the rest of the audience. “They just do not seem to process words and sentences in the way we intend. It is impossible to take a hold of them.”

“Use it in its own language,” suggested one among the audience. “Perhaps they parse better their own concepts.”

The young Koonian tried again, this time in Chinese.

“That is not my own language,” commented David.

“It is!” claimed the suggester. “I heard earlier that it spoke in Chinese with that other one.”

“Which one?” asked Miip Keun.

“That... er... female.” The speaker hesitated to honour Hua Lei with a word referring to a living being.

“These devices communicate in several languages,” interrupted one sitting aside. “Even if they speak in Chinese, it is not necessarily their initial language.”

“So be it,” replied the former one. “Let us use whatever language as long as the work proceeds.”

“Chinese must do,” resisted Miip Keun. “Their other languages are too messy that they could be operated in them.”

Talents in languages had been one of the most important selection criteria for the expedition. The members spoke fluently each other’s mother tongues and had also a good command of Tuapsaam and adequate one of other Koonian languages. Undoubtedly also the Koonians examining them were above the average in their language skills but had for convenience concentrated on the Chinese language, which from all the languages of the Earth was by its structure definitely the closest one to Tuapsaam. Besides Tuapsaam and the occasional spots of Chinese in the communication stream the Earth had received from Koonians only one straggly attempt of written Russian, riddled with errors despite the valiant effort. The numerous tenses and cases were not the best thing to advance the discussion with the Koonians.

“If those devices are jesters as Miip Keun surmised, what hope do we have to extract any meaningful information from them?” asked one in the front row.

“Reply in a like manner,” answered another further back. “Devices jest only if they have been taught to do so. In that case their pranks are part of their information transfer protocol. If they call themselves human beings, why not let us address them as human beings. Even absurd methods are useful if they produce desired results.”

“Should we have to behave as mendaciously as them?” exclaimed the former one. “One of the most essential elements of humanity is honesty. If we cannot get information about their origin without lowering ourselves to their level of conceptions, it scarcely benefits us to examine their background at all.”

The representative of the Department of Natural Sciences jumped up from among the muttering people in the room.

“We do not need to be left on their stories!” he exclaimed. “We have instruments to examine them very minutely. They will not get out of order by scrutiny, like we do not, either.”

“Specimens of this level cannot be circulated to be tweaked by whomever,” growled the one from the front row.

The muttering gradually rose into an open ripple of talking. The Eldest stood up and raised his both arms. The room fell silent.

“It is obvious that the situation is not yet ripe for meetings like this,” he declared. “This time I will finish our session here and I advise sufficiently educated researchers of different fields to introduce themselves with the devices in further detail but with sufficient caution. After gathering more information and experience of these devices we will meet again to consider their meaning to us. And in the next session I expect to see much better discipline and order!”

The participants began to leave, many of them looking disappointed. Also inside the expedition members there was a cloud of unsaid sentences still seeking an outlet. They watched as the sitting people stood up one by one and left, mostly looking at the back of the person in front of them. Soon the room was nearly empty. One of the leaving people passed the front side of the seats, close to the Earth people. He stopped and remained watching the astronauts who were still standing still. His eyes met theirs. Suddenly a tingling tension was there in the air. Hua Lei and Grandfather opened their mouths at the same time, but the Koonian was faster.

“Go out,” he commanded.

* * *

“Not even a ride back,” grunted Hua Lei pressing the start button of the rapid oven. The perplexed gloom of the previous evening had mostly dissipated already, but the Koonians’ way of talking and acting over them was still hovering in their minds.

“We may have a harder task ahead than we thought,” said Sergei leaning on the wall of the sleeping chamber. “If we don’t look like human beings to them, our assurances to them can be mere gum beating.”

“Do you have an idea, then, what would pass for a human being for them?”

“We heard some definitions in the meeting. We have to be spontaneous and organized, we must have high morals, and in no way can we be composed of cells.”

“If we can’t meet their criteria, we probably have to find someone who accepts us,” mused Grandfather. “We may have to find our way even to their rulers by ourselves if the mediators are not willing to help us for that end.”

“Shall we go to find acquaintances?”

“Why not? Perhaps Koonians’ attitude toward us vary.

And while we learn more about them, we can also familiarize ourselves with their culture. As far as I know, they maintain some kinds of libraries or writing collections which even machines are allowed to use.”

“But first we will eat!” said Hua Lei carrying steaming dishes onto the table.

The setting was rather austere and ascetic, as they for some reason still were during the space missions, but the smell of the food made their mouths water.

“Good appetite!” wished Grandfather at his plate. They all began to eat eagerly.

All except David, who stared at his plate looking gloomy.

“What is the matter?” Hua Lei asked him.

“You decided to cheer me up?” he asked picking up with his chopsticks a piece of meat from the Chinese-style sauce.

“Don’t worry,” soothed Hua Lei. “On this ship all pork is synthetic, made of pure ingredients. The flight kitchen is careful even in these matters.”

“Synthetically pure?” David went on staring at the piece of meat.

“Guaranteedly,” assured Hua Lei. “Could someone pour me a little bit of soda?”

“The can is still in the bin,” noticed Wai. David raised his hand just when Wai was about to get up, and stood up instead of her.

“It looks quite real,” said Grandfather tasting his meal. “Almost like in the good old times.”

David stalked back and rolled next to Hua Lei’s plate a white, wobbling plastic bag.

“What is this?” wondered Hua Lei picking up the bag.

“Blood,” guessed equally surprised Sergei peering at the usage instructions printed in small letters on the side of the bag.

“Synthetic blood,” reminded David sitting down at his place. “Made of highly nutritious and likewise pure ingredients. Should quench the thirst and contain even

vitamins. Even the blood group matches your own.”

“This can’t be drunk!” protested Hua Lei.

“Why not? Does your worldview forbid it?”

“No, but my stomach does!”

“A good notion,” commented David and took the bag off the table. A moment later he returned with a can of cool mandarin drink.

“We may owe an apology to David,” noted Grandfather. “I am sorry if I insulted you.”

“I will make you Malaysian vegetable stew,” suggested Wai. “Without a tiniest bit of pork in it.”

“Mutual respect is enough,” replied David with a bit of a smile. “To not interrupt our dining, I will get a veal portion myself. Go on meanwhile, I will join you in a moment.”

“A little lesson of culture and morals would not indeed hurt us,” laughed Sergei. “How could we manage among Koonians if we don’t know even each other better than this.”

They went on dining. While the food was being eaten Hua Lei dreamt aloud about an occasion to taste Koonian foods. Ready-made portions they probably could not reach because of their lack of funds and their status in the alien society, but they could perhaps utilize what the Koonian nature had to offer them, and possibly even give something to eat to Koonians later.

“Thank you,” said Grandfather after eating, and ventured to burp a little. “Perhaps we could plan our next moves while we eat dessert.”

The meat dish was followed by dried bananas. The diners leaned on the sleeping chamber walls with the dessert bowls in their hands.

“It is a pity that we don’t have the local map,” said Hua Lei. “Now we don’t really know where to go.”

“Perhaps our friends in the dome can help us,” suggested Sergei.

“A good idea,” replied Grandfather. “One way to learn the local culture is to learn how to use public machines.”

“They are surely machines, aren’t they?” asked Hua Lei.

“I think they are,” said Sergei. “And whether they were or not, we still don’t need to treat them the same way Koonians treat us.”

They pondered how to put their questions so that the machines could provide them with the desired information. Long ago there had been a time on the Earth that the machines knew so few commands that they could be used like artisan’s tools. As the technology advanced, however, the people of the Earth had come to a problem that seemed to ail them even on other planets: the machines were complex enough that their effective utilization began to be overwhelming to human beings, but the machines were still not smart enough to guess at what their users were aiming. The more sophisticated machines the human beings built, the wider proved the gap between man and machine to be.

Had the Koonians learnt to use their machines better than the Earth people did? The messages that had come to the Earth had not mentioned a single word about problems in using machines. The Koonians’ desire for order and systematicity undoubtedly guided them to design devices that at least did not argue with their masters. No wonder if the wilful visitors from the Earth caused them trouble.

Loud knocking on the side of the spacecraft interrupted their pondering. They went to the window to see out. There were three Koonians at the door.

“Open up!” commanded one of them staring at the door.

“Do they want us with them again?” wondered Hua Lei.

“When will we have a chance to familiarize ourselves with the environment if we are continuously carried from place to place for the gawking public?” said Sergei.

“This is one kind of familiarizing, too, I suppose,” said Grandfather. “And we can always refuse if their

demands become unreasonable.”

“I want to have a lock on the door of my clothing bin,” said Hua Lei. “If not for any other reason, then at least to diminish the work of putting the clothes back in.”

“I understand how you feel,” replied Grandfather and went to open the door.

As previous time, the Koonians marched again briskly in, without scruples or salutations.

“Come out!” commanded the first one the people in the ship.

“All of us?” asked Hua Lei.

“They always want to leave at least one in the vessel,” told the second Koonian to the first one.

“All right,” replied the first one. “Let one stay if it is necessary.”

After a brief exchange of glances David was chosen to stay inside.

“Don’t go far away,” he told to his leaving companions.

The trip was not a long one. Outside of the spacecraft there was a very stoutly built, gray-skinned being, an obvious mechanoid, waiting for them. Koonians stopped them in front of it. The broad distance between the hip joints of the mechanoid made it look bowlegged, and its thick limbs revealed it to be designed for heavy labour. It stood put, waiting. Further away, behind the tail of the spacecraft they saw the Koonians’ flying vessel by which they had arrived without the expedition group noticing them.

“How strong are you?” asked the third Koonian. The expedition members recognized him to be the same who in the meeting had asked them for the Department of Natural Sciences to be examined. It was obvious that all three were colleagues from the same department.

“I can lift about 3000 measure weights from the ground to above my head,” replied Hua Lei.

The group leader scrutinized her assessingly, from top to toe.

“Go down on all fours,” he ordered then.

Hua Lei glanced surprised and hesitantly first at the ground and then at the robust mechanoid. The grass was clean and dry, but the thought of crawling in front of the Koonians still did not appeal to her, especially as she could not guess what they had in their minds.

“Descend on the ground, on your hands and knees,” repeated the command issuer as if to make sure that his order was clearly understood.

Sergei stepped between the order giver and Hua Lei.

“I will do it instead of her,” he said with a sombre shadow in his eyes.

“All right,” replied the Koonian, not very pleased for the meddling with his arrangement.

“Load!” commanded the second Koonian the mechanoid. The sturdy being picked from behind it a pair of sacks, connected with a broad textile belt. It put the sacks on Sergei’s back as if loading a camel. Sergei’s arms budged a little under the sudden weight, but he corrected his balance quickly. The mechanoid put on him another pair of sacks.

The weights were seemingly heavy, but the mechanoid picked them from the ground with one hand as if they were nothing but air. If there were more such mechanoids on the planet, Koonians scarcely needed to sweat in physical work.

“Load evenly,” warned Grandfather the mechanoid picking up the sacks. “Otherwise his back may be injured.”

“We know,” replied the leader.

“It is worth caution,” reminded the third one. “The Elders make us regret our birth if we harm these devices.”

“Very well, then,” yielded the leader. “Slowly and carefully,” he ordered the mechanoid.

The third pair of sacks began to take all the power Sergei could muster. His face was sweating and his muscles were trembling.

“Is it a malfunction?” wondered the second Koonian looking at Sergei’s toiling.

“Not at all,” replied the third one. “That is a completely normal interaction between nerve and muscle cells, quite typical to a mechanism built like this one.”

The mechanoid laid even a fourth pair of sacks on Sergei’s back. A short while Sergei could still support the increased load on his back, then he collapsed on the ground under the heavy burden.

“Remove the weights!” ordered the first one. The mechanoid began to pick the sacks off Sergei’s body.

“Am I now qualified for a championship match?” asked Sergei hauling himself up and wiping his sweat.

“Now that we have a reference for the ratio of the power and the weight, it would be great to get a sample of their bodies,” dreamt the third one aloud, ignoring Sergei’s words.

“No way!” claimed the second one. “We make experiments with the entire devices or not at all. There is hardly any room for interpretation in the decree of the Elders. We have to know the cellular functions of those devices much better before we can do even as much as prick their skins.”

“How do we learn their properties without samples?”

“Use your brains! We did not examine even neutron stars by sawing them in two.”

“If you want to have medical information about us, we can make a copy for you from our database,” suggested Hua Lei.

“Did you hear that?” urged the third one the leader.

“I did,” replied the leader. “But I am not going to take the risk of trusting their records. We gather our material ourselves.”

“How about trying to examine their secretion of power-producing substances and their relationship with their intelligence?” suggested the second member of the group. “We could. For example, have them walk a circle carrying loads on their backs and solving at the same

time mathematical problems.”

“Are you sure that we get any results that way?”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Grandfather. “Most of this information exists already, calculated ready for you. We would spare a lot of time if you receive the information and, for example, verify its validity with random tests.”

“It is me who decides that!” growled the leader. Grandfather retreated quickly a few steps from the Koonian’s outburst.

“It is no use getting mad at machines,” calmed the second member down his leader. “They will be much easier to use as soon as we find the right method. Remember that they came to us from outer space.”

“Will you find the method?”

“Not yet. But we could get better clues for that, too, if we do more experiments.”

“Shall we make them walk?” asked the third one.

“I think we should apply at least some chemistry. I don’t believe that we get far enough with mere gymnastics.”

“Will dead cells qualify for a sample?” asked Hua Lei.

“Dead? Well... it depends on how they died.”

Hua Lei ripped a bunch of hair complete with roots from her head and tied it into a loose loop.

“Here you are,” she said handing the loop to the Koonian. “I hope it helps you to begin your work. At least in our institute this is usable material.”

“Shall we try with this?” asked the Koonian his companions.

“Why not,” said the third one scrutinizing the hair. “They are cells, if not the hair itself, then at least the root cells.”

“And what happens to our program?” asked the leader. “Are you going to quit our work for today right in the beginning?”

“This way it is really starting,” said the second one. “We got a sample without even touching their innards.”

“All right,” replied the leader tensely. “Let’s go then.”

The Koonians left. Peace returned around the spacecraft of the expedition group.

“Cleverly contrived!” said Grandfather to Hua Lei smiling. “With those, things would have taken the whole day or even two, and I don’t know if we would have survived without injury through all their tricks.”

“In my home district this could have had even a bit of romanticism in it,” said Hua Lei rubbing her stinging scalp.

“Shall we go now to study culture, before those advocates of science come for a new round,” suggested Sergei.

“Let’s do so,” said Hua Lei. “I go to tell David.”

* * *

“Here it is,” said smiling Grandfather and drew from the shelf a large and prestigious-looking tome. The book was almost painfully heavy to carry, not only because of its large size but also because all of the most valued works were written on metal. The book consisted of thin metal foils, processed matte pale gray. The foils were obviously tied to the sturdy and amply decorated metal cover by melting. The text of the book had been written by hand, probably etched with some kind of acid. The writing was dark and elegant in its plain simplicity.

They turned the pages slowly and with due solemnity at a table they had chosen from the center of the circle of bookcases which followed the circular shape of the building. The book on the table was titled “Thoughts of Wisdom, Part One”, and at least at first glance it seemed to consist of the directions of the respected leaders and thinkers for the happiness and prosperity of the nation. The part number also hinted that the series was continued. The first part could give an idea of the cornerstones of Koonian thinking and the latest one a cross-section of the current state of the planet. The books had been stored on the top floors of the society archive as

if to express that they were even more important than the works of jurisprudence and history stored on the floors below.

“Fortunately the language has not changed much,” noticed Hua Lei relieved. “We could hardly have managed to learn any Koonian pictograms for the immediate needs.”

“Koonian writing does have its history,” reminded Grandfather. “When the duodenary system and therewith a formal grammar were taken to use, the language crystallized in some respects, fortunately into something as wieldy as this.”

Hua Lei glanced around. They were alone on the floor except for occasional mechanoids walking by, and Koonians who stopped for a moment to stare wonderingly at the cellular beings trying to read their works of wisdom.

“The edges of the crystals seem to chafe them a little already,” she ventured to assess. “You know the local word for ‘mechanoid’, *kuan-pion*, but in the meeting there were some loosely eliding it into *kwambyon*. When the grammar was still new and shiny, they might have got their mouths washed with soap.”

“Very few of us perseveres to live the way he teaches others. The Tuapsaam grammar and other culture here are beautifully symmetrical creations, but their makers may not have remembered that their appliers may not necessarily be as regular in their behaviour.”

“Listen to this,” said Sergei, with his finger on the page, respectfully a few millimeters off from the surface of the metal foil. “*What then aggravates him who hears? Is the reason in the speaker? Is it even in the spoken words?* This would have been something to quote in the meeting!”

“It would be great if problems get solved by us quoting them their own philosophy,” grunted Grandfather. “I am afraid that here and many other places we get only a stone thrown at us, or – even more

injurious -- hear a quote of our own philosophy in return.”

“What other interesting things did you find?” asked Hua Lei.

“I got a feeling that I have read quite similar text before,” said Sergei. “Perhaps wisdom is wisdom everywhere in the Universe. Many of these sentences have undoubtedly been said on the Earth, and in the same way forgotten as they are here.”

“Does the book have anything about the taboos of these people? We may have better to know the things that cause allergy to them.”

“I am afraid that we found one already,” said Sergei.

“Which one?”

“Us. I think our case is not only about our plausibility but rather about their not wanting us to be human beings. If we prove the matter to them, they will find the contrary evidence, however remote it may be. For some reason they can’t tolerate the thought that something like us could be a human being.”

“It seemed so,” admitted Grandfather.

“Could we get the stone out of their shoe? It would be a relief on both sides.”

“We have to go through these books for our own sake, too,” reminded Hua Lei. “As machines, we are outlaws all the time, and it is only a matter of time when they get bored with us and disassemble us for spare parts. We have to know the Koonian ethics for human beings and machines. In trouble we need to know which rope to pull to buy more time. We can also bail out and leave the planet, but as this is about the future of two planets, I am not very eager to do so. If we return empty-handed, another expedition group will not be sent to the same planet right away. And if the misunderstandings grow older, they will solidify further.”

“We have to get an audience from the rulers as soon as possible.”

“To whom are we going? Who rules the relationship

of Koonians to other nations? I guess that at the top level there are three rulers.”

“Here is something about it,” told Wai reading a book of Koonian political science. “Rulers can be from one to four, or in exceptional cases six. Each ruler must have an equal number of subrulers or ministers so that each of the twelve divisions of the society has one minister and one ruler. The rulers choose successors for each other, or let the people choose if the people so demand, but they are strictly responsible for their decisions only to each other, so they are much more sovereign than the leaders of the nations on the Earth.”

“Who controls the rulers?” asked Sergei.

“I don’t know. Perhaps the ethical guidelines for ruling. Or the people may be politically aware and informed. I guess that the rulers cannot be dethroned by voting. Perhaps they are many just that they could shepherd each other.”

“We have to find out the current form of the rule and choose the ruler who is concerned about our case,” said Grandfather.

“How do we find him?”

“If Koonians will not help us, we may have to rely on their machines. The machines have plenty of information and they form a planetwide network that may be able to guide us to the rulers.”

“How are rulers approached here? Will their servants even let us in?”

“We don’t know until we try.”

“Will we jeopardise ourselves out of ignorance?”

“According to Koonian view machines can’t be guilty of a crime as they are not responsible beings. The machines can be destroyed if they are a risk to safety. But I guess that even the rulers can’t live without machines roaming around them. We might fit in with them.”

“An insult may have nasty consequences even if it is not a crime,” said Hua Lei. “One thing in which we are likely to insult them is that we invade the territory of

humanity when we exceed the limits appropriate for machines.”

“We are being watched,” warned Grandfather.

Between the bookcases there had appeared several Koonians who stood still, watching them. Besides puzzlement there were other emotions appearing on their faces. The expedition members waited and meanwhile browsed here and there the books they had picked from the shelves.

Finally some of the Koonians walked to them slowly but looking resolute.

“What are you doing here?” asked the first one in the group.

“We are studying your culture,” replied Grandfather.

“This information is of no use for you,” said the Koonian. “The regulations and the annals are two floors down. These books discuss wisdom and knowledge about life.”

“Can’t your masters come here in person to read them?” asked another one.

“Those don’t look like recorders,” said a third one.

“We are here to learn ourselves,” replied Grandfather.

“Then leave,” ordered the first one. “These books are for human beings, not for machines.”

“It can happen this easily,” noticed Hua Lei in Chinese when they got up from the table.

* * *

The expedition members wandered slowly along the broad street. In the street they could move without gathering attention, among mechanoids. They watched the activities of the differently sized and shaped organic machines between each other and the Koonians. The machines were walking on the walkways with or without a load to carry, climbing on the walls and supporting structures cleaning, repairing, and polishing. Some entered the buildings or met their sought Koonians

already in the street to complete their errands with them.

“Servants working free of charge,” commented Hua Lei. “Koonians have arranged their life quite effectively.”

“I guess that their design and tuning up for the work still takes sweat and effort,” commented Sergei. “We may only see the resulting spotless exterior.”

“They looked at the buildings rising to heights at the street sides. The urban feeling was not conveyed to them in an as immediate way as on the Earth because there were fewer familiar cues. They had not seen a single showcase or advertisement. The traffic around them where almost whispering, reminding them of the era of horse carriages on the old video recordings. The buildings were touching each other only in exceptional cases. Most of the time there was enough empty space around them, paved or of natural ground, that one could ride around them even with a vehicle.

They found a shop selling foodstuffs. Outside there was no large sign for its name, or illuminated advertisement to serve as a landmark for the searching eyes. The only written guidance was engraved into the metal above the double doors: “Muut Saum’s retrieval hall of comestibles”. The best hint for the use of the hall could be obtained by looking through the transparent doors into the hall where the Koonians picked foodstuffs from the shelves.

“Is anyone paying for their groceries?” asked Hua Lei her companions. “I can’t see anyone handling money or even a place where the items could be paid.”

“Perhaps the face is good enough here for a credit card,” guessed Sergei. “Or perhaps the payment has some other form than cash.”

“There may be someone inside keeping the tally,” said Grandfather. “I would not dare to claim that Koonians trust each other so much as to let everyone guard himself. The shopkeeper may know personally them or their employers and enjoy then a roughly equal amount of benefits and services at their expense. Asking for direct

compensation at a counter may not be popular here. The words ‘price’ and ‘compensation’ belong to the vocabulary of Tuapsaam, so I believe those people aren’t hogging goods merely at will.”

“So we are inevitably destitute, as we are not members of the society,” said Hua Lei. “So much for buying souvenirs!”

“Trading may not be as simple here as it is on the Earth.”

“Would they give us anything if we just went in and asked?” wondered Sergei.

“Hardly,” said Grandfather. “Besides, soliciting we know to be inappropriate here, not to mention if we were thought to be thieves. I presume that it is no use pleading for mercy if you are a stealing machine.”

They peered into the hall which, despite its open doors, remained closed to them. The shelves and service desks were too far away from the doors that they could have seen very well what there was for sale. The groceries of the customers coming out of the doors were hidden inside textile bags, with mechanoidic customers possibly even inside their bodies.

“Why do you wear clothes?”

The sudden inquiry behind them took them all by surprise. They turned around and saw in front of them a young Koonian child with a cloth bag in his hand.

“We?” stuttered Sergei, standing closest to him. “Er, why wouldn’t we?”

“It is not freezing cold now,” commented the child.

They glanced around. And indeed: none of the mechanoids that they managed to catch in their eyes were wearing any kind of clothing. Obviously machines used to dress themselves only when the cold threatened their functionality.

“You see, we need clothes already in this kind of weather,” explained Grandfather. “We get cold easily.”

“Why?”

“We are human beings, like you. Human beings feel

cold morre easily than machines. We come from the space, and where we live, everyone is wearing clothes.”

“There are no human beings coming from space,” remarked the child. “Only machines.”

“Are you completely sure?”

“Yes. Mommy told me.”

“So, what could we add to that?” said Grandfather laughing.

“We are nevertheless coming from space,” said Wai and knelt next to the child, a young boy. “Our names are Wai, Hua Lei, Grandfather, and Sergei. What is your name?”

“Heon Tiim,” replied the boy vivaciously. He opened his bag and took a yellowish-brown ball out of it, popping it into his mouth. He seemed to remember something and offered the bag to Wai.

“You take some, too,” he urged.

“Thank you,” said Wai smiling. “We have never tasted these. What are they?”

“Salt berry balls,” replied the boy puzzled by the ignorance of his talking companions.

Wai broke the crispy ball into several pieces and gave the pieces to her companions.

“No, everyone take one of your own,” admonished the boy.

“We are quite many,” said Wai.

“I still have plenty here,” replied the boy bouncing the bag on his palm.

Wai encouraged herself to pick three more balls from the bag. Everyone thanked on their own behalf. Hua Lei was the first to taste a tiny bit of her share.

“A peculiar taste,” she said in Chinese. “This could be salty, leafy wheat bread.”

“This salt is surely something else than the table salt we use,” remarked Sergei chewing his portion. “Be careful that you don’t get stomach pain or even a poisoning.”

“Indeed,” noticed also Hua Lei. “It has bitter and hot

stinginess. Does anyone of you recognize this substance?"

"I don't know," said Grandfather sniffing his portion. "My first guess is some bromide. We might learn the truth only back on Earth. There may be a mixture of several different salts in them."

"Look at this!" exclaimed the boy and stretched the mouth of the bag into a miniature hammock. They kept waiting for what the boy would show to them. He set one of the balls he had taken out of the bag between the edges of the hammock he had conjured and raised the bag to his mouth. He did not insert the ball into his mouth as they had expected but bent down a little and stood still, concentrated, the ball in front of his lips rounded into a circle. After a while he straightened himself slightly breathless after his finished effort.

"Look," he told them and showed the ball lying on the fabric of the bag.

There was steam rising from the ball. The moisture contained in the ball was sizzling on its surface. It was obvious that the ball had suddenly heated burning hot. The boy was seemingly proud of his achievement and satisfied with the impression he had made.

"How did you do it?" asked Sergei sincerely astonished.

The boy did not get a chance to answer, as at the moment a number of alarmed-looking adult Koonians rushed into their midst.

"What is going on here?" exclaimed the first one glancing around.

"Was it you?" asked the next one the little boy.

"I showed them how to make this hot by shouting," explained the boy showing them the ball he had heated.

"You don't make such noise in a public place!" scolded the first one. "I already thought that those were harming you."

"That was surely heard to the next city," added another one. "I hope you didn't cause any accidents by

scaring people.”

“Sorry,” muttered the boy sheepishly.

“We shall let it be,” said the first one. “But next time find a better place for your shouting exercises.”

“I will,” promised the boy.

The Koonians left.

“Did you shout?” asked Sergei still more surprised. “I did not hear anything.”

“Only human beings can hear it,” replied the boy, his livelihood still dampened by his abashment. “Except for some machines. The kind that has big ears.”

“And how about animals?”

“Near our home there lives a flappy-wing that comes when it is called by the shout. Its name is Hian. But Aup the Giant will not come if it is not called by a breath-shout.”

“Aup? I thought that Aup the Giant exists only in tales.”

“Hush!” Hua Lei scolded Sergei. “Don’t spoil the imaginary world of a child.

”It is still bigger than you,” explained the boy. “Sometimes it walks by our house. Mommy told it once to move a tree aside from the garden, and Aup could pick it up all by itself. In the evening Mommy tells what Aup is doing when it is not in our garden.”

“She does?” laughed Grandfather. “Perhaps we have seen Aup, too.”

“Aup can’t talk. It only listens and picks up trees and big rocks. Then machines come to our house, too, and sometimes some of them can talk. Mommy does not talk with machines. Mommy only commands them, and Daddy does, too. I think it is exciting to talk with machines. Sometimes their answers are so funny.”

“We like to talk with you,” said Sergei. “You are the nicest companion we know in this city.”

“Where is your Mommy now?” asked Wai.

“In there. Mommy comes out soon.”

“Is she getting foodstuffs?”

“Yes.”

“What food will she cook today?”

“I don’t know. Something that tastes good, I guess. And vegetables.”

A call from the door of the retrieval hall woke the boy up. He ran to his mother who was carrying a fairly large burlap sack. He began to pull his mother from her hand towards the expedition members.

“Come and see, Mommy!” he demanded eagerly. “Those are almost like real human beings.”

“Let’s try those contraptions some other time,” replied the mother. “Now we have to be home in time.”

The expedition members waved goodbye to the son who left them holding his mother’s arm.

“How did he do it?” wondered Sergei looking at the crumbs of salt berry ball on his palm.

“Did something come out of his mouth?” asked Hua Lei.

“What then?”

“The people said that he shouted, but we did not hear a sound.”

“Ultrasound? Could he produce so enormous ultrasound pressure that it would heat the food? Why was he not heated himself?”

“Say,” said Grandfather. “Does this phenomenon have any connection with the insides of their mouths shining? How about if their purpose is to reflect out something that could, for example, heat the food?”

Sergei felt like smiling.

“Microwaves?” he guessed.

“Why not?” said Hua Lei. “It fits. Do you remember the drawing about the Koonian anatomy they sent us? Behind their lungs there are two flat oblong organs that they call power glands. We supposed first that they were some kind of liver equivalent. But perhaps it does not release sugars but electric current. From the glands there are four thick lines leading to their throat.”

“And their shiny larynx is a high-frequency

resonator,” spurred Sergei the brainstorm. “The shiny oral cavity reflects the radiation out of the mouth as a narrow beam to the direction the person is watching.”

“The mouth does not only reflect, but it also adds to the radiation the same kinds of frequency accentuations as it does to the sound produced by the vocal cords. They can utter microwave phonemes the same way as they utter sounds. And I guess that in those very frequency bands the radiation travels through the air exceptionally easily.”

“Their bodies have built-in both a radio transmitter and a microwave oven. Effective!”

“Perhaps the main function of the organ is still to aid the digestion.”

“How do they hear the radio waves? Are their ear canals shiny, too?”

“I don’t know. It would be consistent. Perhaps they have a dual-function inner ear so that microwaves and sound waves excite the same nerve cells.”

“And how about their glittering skin?”

“It may protect them like sunblock if they shout in groups. Their diet probably has a generous helping of minerals so that they can form and maintain body members containing metals.”

“Is it metal? We know only that it is shiny.”

“At least the organs have to conduct electricity, or otherwise the people will fry their own brains when they shout.”

Sergei looked at the crumbs on his palm suspecting.

“Will we become shiny, too, if we eat these?”

“Let’s at least spare some to the Earth. Shall we go on? David is probably expecting us already. And I can hardly wait for the occasion to tell him about this.”

They started to walk.

“A microwave oven and a radio,” laughed Sergei. “And they are calling us machines!”

* * *

“Open up!” came the shout from the outside of the spacecraft. Banging went on.

Sergei rubbed his sleepy eyes.

“Who is making all that racket?” he asked yawning.

“Have three guesses,” grunted already much more wakeful David from his bed.

Grandfather hauled himself up from the bed and stepped to the other side of the window pane full of Koonians.

“Would you allow us to prepare for the day a little first,” he shouted through the wall.

“Hurry up,” came the permissive reply.

“Do you really intend to open the door for them?” asked Hua Lei. “At least I don’t want to meet those creeps again.”

“We can open for them,” said Sergei. “But how about if we lived our life on our own terms for a change? Our ship is on their land, but the inside of it is ours.”

“A slight enhancement of human dignity may be in order,” mused Grandfather. “Let’s now prepare for the day at our leisure and see after that if we can attain a better exchange than before.”

“Are they in the habit to visit people at cock’s crow?” wondered Hua Lei.

“This may be here a usual time to begin the daily work,” said Sergei. “Today that work is us.”

“It is not that early any longer,” said Grandfather. “Isn’t it rather us who have slept long.”

They washed themselves and ate without haste while the Koonians shouted and banged the door at times. During the latter half of the breakfast there was also indefinite rustling and clanking at the door. The movements of the Koonians trying to enter, as seen through the window, suggested that they were already using their tools to examine the locking system of the door.

David was still collecting the last plates from the table

when Sergei opened the door to the impatient Koonians.

“What kept them,” barked their old acquaintance from the previous time by himself while marching in. After him the same researchers as last time followed, accompanied by one new Koonian, from the same department as his tool bag revealed.

“Good morning,” said Sergei sunnily. The leader glanced at him.

“They really keep it up,” he snorted. A slight grin flashed on the faces of the other researchers.

The new researcher, coming in last, put his bag on the table and began to take out mysterious-looking, mostly small metal instruments.

“What are you doing with this?” asked the second researcher holding on his palm the white, resilient ball he had found outside.

“We are playing *taam-kain*,” replied Sergei. “During our excursion we saw your people playing it. It looked so interesting that we wanted to try it, too. The mechanoids in the dome over there taught us the rules and made this ball.”

The researcher glanced at the leader with the ball in his palm, but the leader decided to not pay attention to the quirk of the expedition group.

“Today you will explain your origin,” ordered the leader. “Our work has waited for its start longer than enough. We need accurate information about those who designed you.”

“Can we then have the information about your designers?” asked Sergei.

“We have not been designed!” hissed the leader. “We have been born!”

“We have been born the same way as you,” replied Sergei.

The second researcher put his hand on the leader’s shoulder to pacify his turmoil.

“Which one shall we send?” asked the leader the others in a calmer voice.

“That one looks suitable.” The researcher flicked his hand toward David who was resting on his bed after the breakfast. The leader stepped forward to face David.

“Do you know where the Department of Natural Sciences in the Space Operation Center is?”

“Yes, I do,” replied David. “It is in the basement of the main building of the center.”

“All right. Go there.”

“Why?”

“You will be examined. Go there.”

“And what if I do not want to be examined?”

“We want,” dropped the leader the words from his mouth one by one, quickly growing irritated. “We tell you to go.”

“I don’t feel like going,” replied David very calmly, as if to contrast himself against the leader.

“Why not?” wondered the second researcher. “Are you malfunctioning?”

“For example because today is the day of rest.”

“Now they are already taking days off!” wondered the third one. The fourth one obviously was dealing with Earth people for the first time, as he could only look at the events astonished.

“You have an error in your timekeeping,” remarked the second one. “The day of rest is the day after tomorrow.”

“Your day of rest may be then. My nation has one today.”

“I know that the walk is not a significant effort for you,” growled the leader. “Get moving!”

“You come here riding a vehicle but presume that I will walk. Wouldn’t it be more humane to come with a vehicle large enough that I could join you?”

“Shall we get a larger one?” asked the second researcher.

“Well, if that is the only way to get it there,” said the third one. “What will our leader say?”

“Notice that I didn’t promise to go with you,”

reminded David.

The leader turned his back to David and fixed his eyes on Hua Lei. She turned her own eyes away.

“These machines have a serious attitude error,” said the leader slowly pacing the small vacant patch of the floor. “What should we do to them? They have to be adjusted. Otherwise we can’t get anything done with them.”

“Pain,” invented the second researcher. “Pain is a rather effective means to fix attitudes and evaluating functions, as it causes in most devices some kind of alarm reaction. A device reacting to pain outlines its tasks differently from one not feeling pain. It has often been used to rectify the motivation disorders of test phase devices.”

The expedition members glanced at each other. Their visit to the planet was getting a whole new dimension.

“A good idea,” noticed the leader. “The mere suggestion makes them react.”

“We won’t go for this game!” muttered Sergei deciding for all the others. He turned to the leader.

“Pain indeed is an alarm signal,” he said to the leader. “You know what it is about as you feel pain yourself. And if you intend to cause us pain, we may in our alarm react in a way that you will not like.”

The leader hesitated under the crossfire of the sharp, unblinking stare of the expedition members. He was slightly taller than any of them, but not necessarily stronger.

“The machines endangering the society will be scrapped,” he tried to rescue himself from the already rather uncomfortable setting. David did not reply to the threat with a word, but the way in which he patted his palm with a large spanner picked from the maintenance set told more than words. By the cue of their leader the Koonians collected their equipment and left the spacecraft with their faces carefully blank.

“It looks fanciful,” said David with a grin looking at the cat-sized ladybug waiting on the floor of the dome. Unlike its paragon on the Earth, its back was void of spots and of dark colour. From its front protruded a pair of clawed limbs that Earth crabs would undoubtedly have favoured.

“It classifies at least on five levels of hierarchy all plants except trees or anything more primitive than the filament organisms,” told the gray, long-legged mechanoid next to him.

“It could do this trip even alone,” remarked David.

“It is possible,” admitted the mechanoid.

“Why is it not done, then?”

“Its inference system is not powerful enough that it would know where it is allowable to collect plants or with how much effort the collecting should be reasonably attempted.”

“All right,” laughed David. “I will watch it. Thank you again for your help.”

David walked towards the exit. The small machine kept up with his pace with its legs rustling on the floor. Despite its small size the machine did not lag even at brisk walking speed. At least in agility the machine excelled, if not in the contests of smartness. It was not an actual mechanoid, as it had been built for temporary use, and was not capable of producing offspring similar to itself.

They came out. The machine did not get slower even on the grass. David instead stopped suddenly when he noticed the already familiar Koonian researcher in front of him.

“Do you still claim that you are a human being even though you stay among machines?” he asked.

“I do,” replied David and hurried to continue his trip. He had still fresh in his memory an incident that had happened a while ago. The researcher with his colleague

had caught him outside of the spacecraft and examined the action of his muscles and nerves. To prevent interference from natural neural activity the measurement had been performed by considerably strong electric shocks. When David remained lying on the grass dazed the Koonians had wondered to each other about the weak quality of his defense mechanisms. Good mechanoids obviously were not supposed to be shocked by electricity.

This time the Koonian did not seem to carry any electric-looking devices, but David did not stay to wait for what else the Koonian might have prepared for him. He marched briskly toward the edge of forest glancing back from the corner of his eye. The Koonian indeed began to follow him, not right at his heels but keeping some distance. At the edge of the forest David turned around.

“You can return to your research center,” he exclaimed to the Koonian. “I am on my way to the forest and am not available for any kind of research.”

David wanted to say to the Koonian a few other things, too, but for the sake of the other expedition members kept them to himself. On the planet there were limits that even the most valuable machines could not cross if they still wanted to be allowed to perform their functions. And the expedition members did not know where those limits were.

“Go on with your action,” urged the Koonian.

David went into the forest annoyed with the Koonian he had for his blight. He moved quickly, hoping that the researcher had not had enough physical exercise between his research sessions to follow him too far. The researcher, however, was driven by the zeal of his calling. Whatever routes David chose, the researcher followed him circuitously, staying at some distance from him to make observations, but still relentlessly invading his consciousness. After a while the researcher moved to David’s relief behind him and also seemed to stay there.

Until he suddenly felt a sharp jolt at his back.

David spun around and saw a line extending to his back. The other end of the line was in a small box that the researcher was pressing against a tree trunk for support. Feeling his back David caught a small, hard object. He tugged it for a while and finally got it detached. On his palm there was a small metal barb to which the line was tied, and a small metal ball for a weight. The ball was obviously the thing that had hit his back.

“I am just measuring the rhythms of movement in your body,” said the researcher. “You can go on with your errand.”

David severed the line with a single tug and flung the barb with its weight toward the researcher.

“Stay away from me!” he shouted.

“Do you consider your whole being more important than the rest of the world?” asked the researcher, not indignant but rather like trying a new approach. He walked toward David.

“I know who I am and what I am worth!” shouted David. “You instead refuse the truth!”

The researcher stopped in front of David.

“You are hard to examine,” he said. “What would you say if we decide to incinerate you.”

“What would I say?” David’s raised index finger trembled slightly. “I tell you already now that no being talking to me in that vein will not escape his accountability even if he ran to the edges of the Universe.”

“Was that a threat?”

“It was information,” replied David with a sigh. “Go away already! I can’t calm myself endlessly.”

David went on his way and the researcher was left standing after him. The small plant-collecting machine followed David after waiting through the argument patiently and without taking sides.

They came to the area that David had sought: a volcanic morass. A little bit ahead there was a rather low

but wide prominence of volcanic rock with a good variety of plants growing around it, some on dry and some on swamp-wet ground. Hua Lei had wanted to try Koonian cooking, perhaps in the hope that also a Koonian heart could be reached through the stomach. A morass terrain specific to the planet would be a real treasury of foodstuffs to them.

“We will collect hair nuts into three bins, and salt berries, crawler flowers, succulents, and redpods each to one bin. We will collect from the juiciest third of the supply. The harvesting area is limited by the three nearest trees.”

The machine flashed its claws to signal an understood command and started working immediately. David walked into the area examining and tasting the plants according to what he had learnt from the machines. The plant-collecting machine was the reply from the machines dwelling in the dome to the expedition members, after they had told their approximately shaped request for help in studying the plants. The machine had been suddenly given to their use, and when they would no longer have use for it, it would wait for other use for a certain time, and after that it would be disassembled and the parts would be used for some other purpose. Besides the assembly of the machine, the other machines had also transferred to the astronauts extensive records of data about the construction of the machine. Even though the expedition members were penurious by the local standard, they had now and then at their disposal luxuries that would not be available on the Earth even with plenty of money.

The plant collector was as agile with its claws as it was with its legs. It collected plants at a speed that David guessed to be beyond even the swiftest people on the Earth. The bins inside its body would not hold a very large amount of plants, but at least in the beginning they would not need much. Later they could possibly come to the site themselves to collect more if there were a need.

Soon the collector sprinted to his feet and knocked its round back with its claws to tell that the task had been completed. The whole third of the plants were probably not picked, but the bins assigned for the task were already full.

“Let’s go back then,” said David and started to walk to the way he had come.

The researcher was there again. He was standing at the edge of the forest still as a mouse, watching David’s activities.

“You are still there?” barked David.

“Are you returning?”

“Yes,” replied David. “But not the same route as you!”

“Come this way,” told the researcher to David who was on his way to a rocky slope. “The ground is more even here.”

David glanced at the direction indicated by the researcher. And indeed, on the lower ground there was an even opening, looking easily traversable, leading to a dry, open forest. Koonians could be useful at times, too!

David and the plant collector turned towards the opening. The researcher stood at its edge waiting for them. David was still not attracted to the thought of walking through the forest accompanied by the Koonian, but if the researcher had got his research done, he might be tolerated.

David looked at the researcher weighing the alternatives in his mind. The researcher responded to his gaze cheerfully, with an expression almost like a smile.

“Let’s go then,” said David to him. “I...”

A twinkle in the researcher’s eyes made David stop suddenly. A strange expression passed over his face, one that David could not recognize and of which he was not sure if he liked, either.

“Go ahead,” said the researcher. David looked at the opening in front of him.

Further ahead there was black, volcanic rock visible

among the tree roots. Next to the roots David saw what he was searching, a piece of rock that the roots had cracked off. David stalked to the rock and carried it to where he had stood. With a wide swing of his body he flung the rock onto the green opening in front of him.

There was a splash. Water burst up from between the grasses. The meadow swallowed the stone without leaving any sign of it falling.

“Is that where you wanted me?” growled David furious.

“I was just examining your capacity of observation,” replied the researcher calmly.

“I could have drowned there!” shouted David. “Underneath those plants one can’t necessarily even get back up!”

“If you were of such weak make as to walk right into the water, who would miss you and your like for research? That kind of machines we can make ourselves.”

David kept standing, wordless, staring at the researcher. The plant collector was again waiting noncommittally for the human beings to get their issues solved.

“Machines examine what they see, following the procedures they know,” explained the researcher. “Good machines with good procedures, weaker machines with weaker ones. Really primitive machines feel the ground before they step on it. Human beings, on the other hand, avoid the danger already in advance, as they can apply their knowledge so much more effectively than machines. I could walk safely even on this opening, as I can tell apart the root-supported tufts and weakly supported flark areas.”

“And if the roots are surrounded by a flark area?” asked David watching the researcher leap near the edge of the area from one tuft to another.

“The roots grow by sprouting and form therefore an integral network,” illuminated the researcher him.

At the moment the researcher fell among the grasses

up to his chest.

“Did you think that the roots had been tailored for your caprices?” asked David and stalked to the researcher grabbing the weeds for support.

“Help me up!” commanded the researcher wondering David’s slowness.

“How about if I am interested in researching experimentally how Koonian researchers react to approaching death?” growled David.

“Madness!” panted the researcher. “Is that how you have been built to treat human beings?”

With the plants failing the researcher sunk little by little deeper into the water concealed under the plants. For some reason he seemed unable to pull himself up even though he still had a hold of the plants. His annoyance was stifled by a sudden wave of panic.

“You are a human being?” shouted David. “Where does it show?”

“Mercy!” moaned the researcher. “I am drowning!”

“Mercy? You are asking mercy from a machine? You are ready to incinerate one who is a human being, and beg for mercy in front of a machine! How disgusting!”

David stood up. An emerging rush of emotions made his hands tremble.

“You were never living a human life!” he shouted from his strangled throat. “And now you are not even dying a human death!”

A bunch of grass grabbed by the stuttering researcher’s fist got ripped off from its roots. The researcher sunk deeper into the water. David could not see more of him than the desperate arms reaching upwards and the eyes wide with horror from below the water surface in the slowly closing hole among the plants. He stomped one of his feet firmly on the tuft on his side and standing astride shoved his arms under the water. With a single furious pull he dragged the Koonian up from the water holding the chest of his clothing. He flung the researcher on the dry land. The researcher was

left swaying on his knees paralyzed and mute with the shock, his legs still captured by a rib cage of an animal that had died in the water long ago.

“I suddenly changed my mind,” said David staring sternly at the researcher he had pulled up. “If you think carefully, you may guess why.”

* * *

“How did it go?” asked Sergei when Hua Lei and Wai came in.

“Not too well,” replied Hua Lei. “It is impossible to have them trust us.”

“They had appetite for the food,” told Wai.

“But no appeal to its cookers,” added Hua Lei. “Whatever we say, however we help, however delicious food we cook, we are always mere machines.”

“Perhaps they are used to mechanoids giving them their best,” said Grandfather. “I don’t know if it is a good idea to try to compete with them.”

“Wai wrote a Koonian song of her own on the Board of Arts,” told Hua Lei. “I am not an expert on the local art, but I still know that the song was good, surely better than many around it! But we could not get even as far as around the street corner when it was already being wiped off!”

“The recognition they give is up to them,” said Grandfather. “It is not within our powers to try to wrench it to us.”

“Then what shall we try?”

“Have you found out any hints about where the rulers live and who of them would be the most favourable to us?”

“Even the machines didn’t know, but the best guesses seem to lead to the city of Koan Aot,” said Sergei. “The trip is not outrageously long if we can find even an adequate vehicle.”

“Where could we get one? We have no credit and

machines will hardly be picked up for free rides.”

“I wonder if our mechanoid friends could help us.”

“I guess not. I have never seen them deliver anyone anything with a heavy frame. They might construct a driver for us if we get the vehicle.”

“Let’s have an inner circle supper,” suggested David bringing dishes onto the table.

“I second the proposition,” hurried Hua Lei to answer. “Exercise gives one appetite.”

Talking gave way to slurping noodles. The people who had stayed in the spacecraft ate with matching appetite.

“Chinese know how to cook!” lauded Sergei finishing his portion.

“Then it may be better that I don’t reveal to you that these noodles originate from Thailand,” said David with a smile.

“All right,” corrected Sergei. “Asians know how to cook!”

“Perhaps we all are somewhat Asian,” mused Grandfather.

“I believe my family lines come from the western side of Ural,” said Sergei. “I was brought to the east by my work.”

“Talking about Asian skills, how about if Wai performs for us with her latest work?”

“I don’t know if I remember it any longer,” said Wai backing off. “I made it on a moment’s whim.”

“Make a new one. We know already that you have the talent.”

Wai tried to squirm her way out of the trap, but finally the cheers in four voices left no room for refusing. She recited several short lyrical creations, themed mostly about their group amidst the Koonians. The last one she sang after asking the computer to accompany her. She got a resounding applause after her performance.

“No wonder that you got censored,” said Grandfather. “Poetry is often more potent than prose, and this theme is

probably not the favourite of our hosts.”

“I think that they just can’t tolerate machine-made art,” guessed Hua Lei. “I don’t know if they even took the time to read the song they erased.”

“Now it is your turn,” urged David Sergei.

“All right,” replied Sergei. “But you have to join me.”

They folded the table aside. On Sergei’s command they were suddenly surrounded by a balalaika orchestra, conjured by the computer, and he and David began to dance tropak while others retreated to the back end of the chamber for safety.

The music ended. Dancers stopped to wipe off their sweat.

“Quite a performance!” said Grandfather. “I didn’t know that David knows Russian dances.”

“That must be an infection I got from Sergei during our training period,” replied David.

“What shall we perform?” Hua Lei asked Grandfather.

“I think we should already spare our energy for tomorrow,” suggested Grandfather. “The challenge waiting for us may be quite a complicated one.”

They accepted after squeezing a promise of a Chinese song concert from Grandfather. The removed table was replaced with beds and the expedition group began its evening routines.

“The day here has too few hours,” said Sergei going to his bed. “We were just starting.”

“Then we just have to live faster,” replied David. “Good night.”

The last one to the bed was Grandfather who asked the computer to switch off the lights. The spacecraft darkened and silence came to the sleeping chamber.

The night passed on. Foreign constellations travelled across the sky towards the west, and nocturnal animals sneaked in the forest close to the grass field. Now and then in the distance flicked a laser beam carrying messages. The mechanoids in the dome, working soundlessly even during the day, were in the night still as

a mouse.

David woke up. It was still dark outside, and he knew without looking at a clock that it was still night. But what had waken him up?

Around him there was no other sound but the tranquil breathing of the other expedition members. Even the sounds of the animals outside were so quiet that they could very rarely be heard through the hull of the spacecraft. For a reason he could not understand his heart was racing and secretions in his bloodstream evoked restlessness. Only with a conscious effort he managed to calm down enough that sleep began to creep again into his mind. Were the experiences of the past days still haunting him? Or was it some incident long ago on the Earth, not necessarily even something happening to him personally? David fell asleep again amidst his thoughts.

A brisk slap on his legs exploded into his consciousness like a thunderbolt. Instantly he bounced to the sitting position, only to get a new lash, this time on his chest. When his consciousness after a second cleared of the depths of sleep, he noticed the dark sleeping chamber to be full of people. He himself was immobilized, chained to his bed with stiff, sinewy bands.

“Lights!” sounded Grandfather’s shout from the darkness in Chinese. The computer, recognizing the emergency from Grandfather’s tone switched the lights of the sleeping chamber to full brightness.

There were as many Koonians in the chamber as could stand between the beds. All the expedition members were bound each to their own bed with pale, almost wrist-thick bands. From the cockpit peeked into the chamber still more Koonians. David did not recognize any of them, but he could guess even without introductions that they were fetched again, and this time the reason could scarcely be mere research.

Koonians understood the fastening mechanism of the beds, and with accustomed ease they opened the latches fastening the beds to the floor and began to carry the

expedition members preparing for the worst, together with their beds, to the cockpit. Two Koonians grabbed David's bed and the third pulled from the open, liquid-filled container on his back more thick bands to ensure the firmness of David's chaining. The soft bands stuck to his blanket and the frame of his bed, and hardened in a few seconds stiff and sinewy. Koonians raised David's bed up and began to carry him to the cockpit after the others.

The Koonians had entered the spacecraft through the large window into which they had cut a smooth-edged hole large enough to pass through. In front of the spacecraft there was waiting the Koonians' own aircraft, into which the expedition members were carried. There were many Koonians participating in the task, possibly a whole dozen, and their action reminded more of a troop with military training than a group of researchers. Each of them worked quickly and without talking, as if acting on a premeditated plan.

They were carried to the entry chamber of the Koonian aircraft. The doors slammed shut and the aircraft took off immediately.

"What is this about this time?" asked Grandfather. None of the Koonians replied. The expedition members put their heads back on their pillows guessing that questions would not be answered. They travelled for a short while with the stone-faced guards watching them without blinking an eye. Deducing from the brevity of the flight they had arrived at the same city they had already visited several times. After the aircraft landed the doors opened and the guards carried them out with their beds without wasting time.

They were taken to a two-storied oblong building, lit outside with white globular lamps. The entrance led straight into a corridor with several doors on both walls. In the corridor there were standing a few Koonians, foremost of them Puan Toem and the researcher who had eagerly examined David.

“Which one was it?” Puan Toem asked the researcher when the carrying guards stopped in front of them for a moment.

“That one,” replied the researcher pointing at David without hesitation.

“This one?” Puan Toem eyed immobilized David from top to toe. “All right. Take them to shelter three.”

“Shelter three?” said the researcher surprised. “What would they do there? Wouldn’t it be simpler to just put them into a storage room to wait?”

“Don’t forget that these machines imitate human beings,” reminded Puan Toem. “I am afraid that they malfunction if they are not let to eat, defecate, and exercise regularly. They may still be needed.”

The carriers were still waiting for the final order.

“Just take them to the shelter,” instructed Puan Toem.

The expedition members were again carried ahead.

“This may be my fault,” said David to his companions craning his neck to see them.

“This would have eventually been our fate anyway,” replied Grandfather ahead of him.

Their carriers turned into a staircase and took them one floor down, to a basement level. When they came to the lower floor, a strong organic smell wafted around them. Behind the barred doors there were lying or walking to and fro animals of various sizes.

“We are advancing!” cheered Sergei. “We have been promoted to animal status!”

They came to their destination. The carriers put them down on the floor of a rather spacious room. The room, an animal cage like the others, was empty and plain. In the ceiling there was a single embedded light fixture. Near the ceiling there were a few small ventilation holes. There were no windows.

The carriers poured from a small bottle reddish liquid on their bands. After a brief pause they yanked the bands apart at the point the liquid had been applied. The bands, hardened into their arched shape, fell on the floor. The

carriers grouped around them, two for each of them, and grabbed their arms to prevent their escape. They marched their captives around the room.

“This is a water tap,” said one of them and stepped on the plate on the floor. Water burst out briefly from the metal nozzle on the wall. “You drink it and wash yourselves with it. Into the drain hole below you will defecate.”

The tour continued.

“This is your nutrition,” continued their guide and pointed at the roots dumped on the floor. “Here you will sleep,” he said at the dry plants heaped on the back of the room. They stopped.

“We will come to check you daily,” said the Koonian while his companions emptied the pockets of the captives. “If you malfunction, you will inform us during the checking. Do you understand?”

“Ammoo!” replied Sergei.

“We understand,” said Grandfather. “And right in the beginning, please bring us more varied food, preferably our own food from our spacecraft. Without the necessary nutrients we will get sick quite soon. And if the temperature sets, we also need a better and warmer place to sleep.”

“All right,” said the Koonian. The group went out of the room taking away the beds with them. The last one of them closed the barred door and locked the lock obviously fastened to the door just for the captives. The Koonians left.

“So, we became jailbirds, on bread and water then,” said Grandfather.

“What are they doing with all those animals?” wondered Hua Lei peering into the corridor. “We are in an urban zone, aren’t we?”

“Probably research. Such a small amount of animals can hardly be meant for cattle keeping or other such utilizing.”

“Research? Why not? Animal experiments are what

they have been doing to us, too.”

“Rather think how we will get out of here,” said David looking around.

“There are not many ways,” commented Grandfather. “That door is the only opening large enough for us. We leave through it or not at all. There is nothing we can do to the bars, and probably not to the lock, either.”

“Rehearse all the movies and books on prison escape that you know,” said Sergei. “Perhaps Koonians don’t know all the tricks invented on the Earth.”

“They won’t,” admitted Grandfather. “But regrettably they are aware of it and secure the situations accordingly. It takes a lot of smartness to cheat them.”

“They have arranged our conditions so that they need to open the door as seldom as possible, perhaps only in emergencies,” said David. “If we want to get out, we must arrange an emergency.”

“What kind of emergency?” asked Sergei. “Arranging emergencies is known to be risky to safety.”

“The emergency doesn’t need to be the kind that alarms us,” remarked David. “It is enough if they get startled and open the door. They are still interested in protecting us as they told us to inform them about our malfunctioning. So, I will malfunction a little bit.”

“Are you planning a surprise attack?”

“I don’t think it will succeed. Their guideline obviously is to arrange two guards for each of us to be handled. If we get out one by one, each will have two guards, and one against two may be better off than five against ten. They are not armed as they don’t dare to harm us. They can rely on their muscle power only, and then we may have a chance to escape.”

“Our ladies are not as hard-fisted combatants as you may be,” reminded Grandfather. “I am not so sure even about myself.”

“Two first ones may manage to release the others.”

“Sounds too dangerous.”

“Then I will go alone. I go to get an audience of the

rulers so that you can be released by a royal decree. If I don't succeed, I will fly our ship here and blast a hole into the wall with the engines."

"How will you get out? Do we have to break your leg?"

"It is not necessary. An acute mental disturbance is enough. Handling psychological problems requires lots of expertise and effort and probably gives me many chances to escape."

"Be careful to not look too damaged. They may put you into a junk bin if they don't believe they can fix you."

"We still have time to hone the details."

"Shall we sleep, too?" suggested Hua Lei. "There are still night hours left and we will need all our strength."

"Let's try," replied Grandfather.

They fluffed the low heap of plants and prepared for themselves as comfortable a bed as they could. As the shock of captivity subsided they fell asleep one after another, except David, who lying on his back and in deep thought stared at the lamp whose switch they had not found anywhere.

The next dawn could be noticed only by watching the shimmer of light in the small ventilation holes. Their wristwatches had been removed, and even the sounds of the animals did not give a good enough idea of the time of day. Nobody came to the corridors in the morning. Perhaps also the maintenance of the animals had been arranged as self-sustaining as possible.

"Good morning, everyone," wished Hua Lei, getting up from the plant heap as the last one.

"Good morning to you, too," replied Sergei and brought to Hua Lei a white root, washed clean. "Breakfast to bed, here you are."

"Wow, thank you! This is like a holiday trip!"

"The water is clean and tastes reasonably good," told Grandfather. "But these roots have coarse fibers and are rather tough to chew. They taste mostly like wood. I

wonder if they are used here for human food at all.”

“I would not be surprised if our menu were the same as in the neighbouring rooms,” said Sergei.

“It can be worse. Animals are considered as living beings. Besides, not nearly all of the mechanoids here are in the habit of getting their energy by eating, and only very few of them chew solid food. I can hardly wait to get our own food here.”

“Are you ready to malfunction?” Hua Lei asked David.

“I think so,” replied David. “Let’s say, for example, that this imprisonment was too much for me to take.”

“I will tell them when they come,” said Sergei and sat next to the door.

“Your wait may become a long one,” warned Grandfather.

“This is as good a place to sit as any other one.”

When nobody was talking there were only the sounds of moving animals. The sounds of the city and the Koonians upstairs were too faint to be heard in the animal shelter.

“Shall we play something?” suggested Sergei.

“Like what?” asked Grandfather.

“And with what?” asked Hua Lei.

“How about chess? There we have a good heap of chess pieces. If their likeness is not good enough, we can always nibble them into something more artistic. The board we can make out for example from those plants.”

“Why not?” said Grandfather. “I’ll make the board if someone else takes care of the pieces.”

“Could we pass better for human beings if the Koonians find us playing?”

“I am not an expert on the matter, but I am afraid that even the machines play now and then,” said Grandfather. “They streamline their thinking processes that way.”

Dedicated to their task they twined the plant stalks into chessboard squares and gnawed with their teeth out of the roots as meticulous miniatures as they could.

“This takes some practice,” commented Hua Lei looking at her works.

“I feel like a rabbit,” said Sergei and spat out a piece of a root stem.

“This game has only white pieces.”

“Tie a weed to the neck of the others to tell them apart.”

“This will be exciting,” said David. “Aren’t Russia and China both chess countries with long traditions?”

“Yes, but now Sergei has home advantage,” replied Grandfather. “This is the western version.”

They played, Sergei against Grandfather. Grandfather won despite the westernness of the board. When Koonians did not appear, they played another round. And a third one.

“Would you like to try, too?” Sergei asked David. “Quite soon you have to play this in a very real form.”

David sat on the floor at the board. He and Sergei arranged the roots to their original positions and started the game. David, already tuned to his task, played rapidly and with aggressive moves. It did not take long before the game was already in the halfway.

Sergei woke up from his thoughts.

“I think they are coming,” he said listening to the sounds in the corridor.

“Good luck!” wished Grandfather slapping David on the shoulder. He took David’s place at the chessboard. David set himself lying on the floor, face down and limbs slightly apart.

On the other side of the bars appeared Puan Toem himself, accompanied by an indefinite number of other Koonians.

“They seem to be in good shape,” he said.

“That old-looking one said that they will malfunction if they don’t get their own food,” told another one, familiar to the expedition group from the past night. “Shall we get them their own food?”

“Don’t bother,” said Puan Toem scrutinizing the

astronauts. “They will stay functional long enough with our nourishment, too. Sooner or later we have to get rid of them anyway.”

“Is our relationship cooling down all the time,” asked Grandfather at the chessboard.

“Between man and machine there is surely no need of...” Puan Toem stopped abruptly at mid-sentence when he noticed David. “What has happened to that one?”

“To a human mind, like ours, for example, it is a rather heavy ordeal to be treated first as non-human and then also a prisoner,” told Grandfather and got up from the floor. He walked to Puan Toem to face him. “He is in a deep depression... no, I would even say that he is suffering a severe shock. He can’t take much more rough treating and insecurity about his fate. He must get out of here before the pressure and the anxiety crush his personality. Take him to rest and treat him like a human being, or you will be left with nothing worth examining.”

Puan Toem watched David. Annoyance and puzzlement took turns on his face. For a fleeting moment Grandfather believed he had seen even a faint trace of compassion on the Koonian’s face.

“All right,” he said to his companions sighing. “Take it in the street for fresh air and then back in, upstairs. Play some music to it or whatever you come up with.”

“How about letting him walk for a while by himself?” suggested Grandfather.

Puan Toem’s assistants looked at him inquiringly.

“That will not do,” Puan Toem said. “It is much too dangerous for that. Meon Taam almost got killed already. It must have two strong guards all the time, preferably in continuous bodily contact.”

“If you have no respect for our humanity, perhaps you could at least respect our likeness to humanity,” said Grandfather.

“If they get destroyed, let them,” decided Puan Toem. “We can’t delay the inevitable forever. We will research them as long as we can. And we at least know where

there are more of them.”

Koonians opened the door and entered the room, two of them next to each expedition member. When David, barely standing on his legs, had been walked to the corridor, the guard of the others was removed stepwise, beginning from the rear of the room. Walking by the chessboard the Koonians glanced at it smiling, clearly understanding its use.

David began to slouch ahead in the corridor, walked by two Koonians holding his arms. David hung his head, without saying a word, looking like he was barely aware of what was happening around him. Soon their sounds disappeared beyond the ascent to upstairs.

“Hold your thumbs up for him,” said Grandfather. “A lot depends on this.”

* * *

Puan Toem’s face was gloomy, even threatening.

“If you know where it went, tell it now,” he commanded the expedition group through the bars. “The information is urgent and indispensable. The runaway must be caught before anything worse happens. There is no room for pranks or caprices here.”

Despite their commanders face foreboding trouble the expedition members could hardly suppress their joy.

“He made it!” exulted Hua Lei in Chinese. “He made it!”

“Let’s not take it yet for granted,” warned Grandfather.

“Did you understand what I said?” pressed Puan Toem them. “We need all of your information about its possible escape route. We will use all our means to get the information. We are prepared to even injure you to some degree if you do not divulge your information otherwise.”

“If you injure us, we will end up like David,” warned Grandfather. “We lose our ability to think effectively. Even a slight damage can cause surprisingly extensive

consequences.”

“That can be a lie,” said Puan Toem. “The depression of the escaped device got cured rather suddenly – so suddenly that I doubt if it was real at all. We know you are prone to lying. Attempts to do so will be wasted because we have logical machines who over time can filter the truth out from even a large number of lies. It is sufficient that you talk, talk a lot, and it does not matter much what. Finally we will get the truth out of you.”

“You don’t need to injure us. You get our cooperation anyway, as it is also in our interests to find him. He may have ended up in wrong hands. We don’t know where he is but we can help you to trace him. In that you don’t even need to trust us, as you will lose nothing, and finding David on the other hand is a sufficient guarantee of the sincerity of our words.”

“All right. You will go with us immediately.”

“Our conditions are that we all go and that we all, including David, are guaranteed human treatment.”

“Conditions!” muttered one of Puan Toem’s companions. “Did you hear that? They set conditions for us!”

“The things one hears along the life!” said another one grinning.

“All right,” said Puan Toem. “Out and off you go, all of you!”

The expedition members were satisfied to leave their prison with a Koonian at both arms. The scales were finally weighted for their benefit. Would it be possible to let the situation remain as favourable?

They waited in the yard when Puan Toem landed a smallish aircraft designed for human transport. They got in, seated three abreast, the Earth inhabitants on the extension seats turned on the aisle. How great it was to sit in a place reserved for human beings, if only on an extension seat! The expedition members stretched their legs and pressed their backs into the backs of the seats.

Puan Toem piloted the aircraft by himself. They took

off, according to Grandfather's guidance heading for Koan Aot where the rulers lived. They flew low and fast. The roar of the air stream and the engines mixed around them. David had been out of contact already longer than a day, and Koonians were seemingly desperate to find him quickly. Might Puan Toem have been threatened with a punishment for letting a killer machine loose? The expedition members were worried, too, for David who was an outlaw also on his way to the rulers.

Koan Aot was a distinctly larger city than the abode of the expedition members, and in places also more densely built, unless the single buildings were just as large as Earth city blocks. Between the buildings there were also geometric gardens, monuments, and artificial cascades, as was becoming for a city of the government. The government building in front of which they landed was large but not showy. It looked even plainer than many of the surrounding buildings. Only the large sign at the main gate in its majesty made the passers-by shiver with respect. The most impressed of their group was Puan Toem.

"Is it here?" he said almost whispering. "That can't be possible in any way!"

Following the etiquette the Koonians stepped into a building obviously serving as a guardhouse. One of the people inside came almost to the door to meet them, dressed in a uniform made of brown, glittering cloth. Puan Toem stepped forward, apart from the others.

"What is your business?" asked the officer.

Puan Toem noticed suddenly that he had no ready-thought title for their visit. Besides, too revealing words could be even dangerous. He began with an introduction.

"A representative of ours came here a while ago," he explained. "We came to seek him, as we need him immediately."

"You came in quite a number."

"This is an urgent case."

"I will announce him to the informers. Whom may I

announce?”

“His name is David,” replied Grandfather on behalf of hesitating Puan Toem.

The officer picked from his pocket a disc fitting on his palm. At the rim of the disc there was a row of gleaming buttons. He raised the disc in front of his mouth.

“The Space Operation Center representative Taap Uit is requested to report in person at the reception or to the informers,” he said into his palm. “The matter is urgent.”

The officer asked them to sit down on the long pillow obviously reserved for the very purpose. Other officers sat at the rear of the room drinking and browsing their papers. Minutes passed but nothing happened. Finally Puan Toem stood up and walked to the officer who had received them.

“Could we be allowed to go to search him from the building?” he asked.

“By the rule, we ask our guests to wait,” said the officer. “But as the matter is urgent, we can make an exception. However, each separate group must have one of us with them. As we are only eight here, we ask that you not to divide into more than six groups. Two of us must remain here.”

Five officials got up from the rear of the room and came to them. Koonians grouped themselves around the expedition members, two for each. Including the guards coming along for David they divided into five groups.

They walked across a patio paved with pale-coloured stone slabs. There were three entrances to choose from. The group of Grandfather, Puan Toem, and two other Koonians took the central one. They climbed the stairs and entered through the double doors. They came into the lobby tiled with pale matte tiles. There were some clearly mechanical-looking machines walking among the people.

“Mechanoids must stay in the lobby,” said an officer. “The safety regulations forbid the use of organic and any large machines inside the building.”

That would therefore have been as far as David could

have proceeded unless he had managed to slip in past the watching eyes. And in that case he might have been caught by the security personnel. Grandfather complied and remained standing where he was.

“Could you wait for a moment,” he said to Puan Toem and bent down to talk with a lapdog-sized box moving on the floor on wheels.

“Wait a moment, I will call an informer,” said the box. And at that moment there walked to him a slenderly built machine, tall up to his chest and looking like a long-legged spider.

“I am an informer of the building,” said the machine in a surprisingly deep and masculine voice compared to its body structure. “How can I serve you?”

Lowering his voice a little bit Grandfather asked whether the machine knew anything about David. The machine clearly did not know David by his name, but supplied with other attributes the information began to dribble out.

“The malfunctioning mechanoid, intruding the building was carried yesterday to the Teim Nilt recycling station,” told the machine. Grandfather interrogated it quickly for as detailed information as possible about the location of the recycling station.

“We found him,” he told to the Koonians waiting further away. “He is no longer in this building.”

The officer announced the completion of the task to his colleagues. They left the building.

“Let’s go quickly!” Grandfather urged Puan Toem. “We are in a hurry!”

They thanked and bade farewell to the officer already outside of the building and gestured to the other expedition members crossing the yard to follow him. They returned to the aircraft half-running.

The aircraft rose above the roofs and they flew over a few blocks in an oblique direction. At their destination there was no parking place reserved for aircraft, but they landed their aircraft on the park lawn disregarding the

rules, and ran to the slope leading into the basement of the building. A large door opened for them automatically.

They turned left and entered through another door. Behind the door they found a spacious, oblong hall. In the hall there were a few workbenches with attached machines, and behind them rows of shelf racks filling most of the hall. On the shelves there were a large variety of machines of different sizes and shapes, both mechanical and organic. Most of them were immobile, soundless, and looking lifeless, but some others let out indefinite sounds. At the workbenches there were two Koonians busy with work. To the workbenches there were attached halfway disassembled machines.

“I hope David is still alive,” said Hua Lei. They began to follow the outermost row of shelves. The working Koonians glanced at them over their shoulders but did not intervene with their entry.

They passed by a large number of machines tightly shoved on their shelves. Most of them had been attached to their place with firm belts obviously to prevent random roaming. Two round-headed mechanoids stared at them from the shelf with gleaming eyes, hissing constantly like an untuned radio receiver. Further ahead a third one repeated to itself an indefinite chain of syllables. One moved its clawed limb to and fro as if trying to do something with it, but the broad belt kept it from doing so.

“This is spooky,” said Hua Lei. “Those machines are too organic, almost like human beings. And yet they are here broken and waiting for recycling like metal junk.”

“Perhaps we have to get accustomed to all kinds of things when we travel in space,” said Grandfather. “But I, too, feel rather unpleasant about this.”

“At the end of the hall they turned to the next row of shelves. There was no sign of David.

“I hope he has not walked right into his death,” said Sergei.

They continued back towards the closer end of the

shelf row.

“Where are the sophisticated mechanoids?” one of the Koonians asked the workers after getting them into sight.

“Look over there.” The worker waved his hand toward the opposite long wall of the hall, keeping at his work.

“What are you searching?” asked the other one.

“A wrong machine has accidentally been brought here.”

“It is better if you get it out. There is plenty of work in any case.”

They continued to the opposite wall. There was a rack made of cylinders, into which human-shaped mechanoids had been inserted bottom first to wait for processing. Some of them began to move when they walked past. Hua Lei turned her head away, but in vain, as on the opposite side there were still more mechanoids.

They found David. He had been pushed into a cylinder like the mechanoids around him, into the lower of the two rows, close to the end of the hall. Across the mouth of the cylinder, passing between his head and feet there was a thick restraint belt, on which he was leaning his head twisted aside. He did not seem to be aware of their arrival.

“It is not fun to be a machine in human hands,” grunted Grandfather and detached the belt from its latch. David’s head lolled on his legs. He opened his eyes a little bit.

“You came,” came a vague, breathless hiss from his mouth.

“A machine told us where you are,” said Grandfather. They drew David cautiously out of the cylinder and set him on the floor. Little by little his body stretched straight while his hindered blood circulation returned to normal. They raised the supine David in their arms and began to carry him toward the exit.

“Did you find it?” asked one of the workers as they came out from between the shelves.

“Here,” replied Puan Toem and pointed at David.

“Oh, that one? Well, we could hardly have done anything with it.”

“You could disassemble it for spare parts,” said the other. “We were told its head is not working right.”

They satisfied themselves with a goodbye to the workers and took David out. After reaching the aircraft they put David on the seat next to the wall and took the remaining seats.

“It was a close shave,” sighed Grandfather in Chinese.

“It looks like David’s attempt failed,” said Sergei.

“Then we probably have no further things to do here,” said Grandfather. “At least nobody can say that we didn’t try.”

They quit talking. The return trip went by without words. When the familiar buildings and residential areas appeared below the aircraft, the expedition members peered out to see where they were going. Their destination did not seem to be far away from the space operation center.

However, Puan Toem did not land in the yard. They remained hovering and looking down. In the yard there were several Koonians, most of them beside the wall as if trying to enter the building.

“What is going on here?” wondered one of the passengers.

“It seems they found out,” noticed Puan Toem and turned the nose of the aircraft back. “It is no longer wise to try to bring these in there. It looks like this is becoming a national incident.”

They hopped to the yard of the space operation center. Glancing around Puan Toem found the situation safe.

“Hurry inside!” he said. The Koonians got out of the aircraft and began to rush the expedition members into the building. Two last ones dragged David from his arm-pits.

They went to the basement of the building. Puan Toem rushed them along the corridors which obviously extended outside of the area the building occupied above

ground. They went through living quarters and laboratories, and came finally to a storage room dug into the rock.

“You stay here for the time being,” Puan Toem said to the expedition members, and continued to the Koonians: “Empty the storage. Leave only the things necessary to these. You can let them to the safety doors, but not further. Call me if problems turn up.”

He turned back to the expedition members.

“You will now use for your maintenance the same equipment as our staff,” he ordered. “You will eat from their food supply and clean yourself in their cleaning facilities. You will sleep in this storage room. Functions other than what is necessary for your maintenance are forbidden from you. We will force you if necessary. The staff will supply your environment to a usable level.”

“Thank you,” said Grandfather. “And what will be our future hereafter?”

“It is being negotiated,” replied Puan Toem. He left, seemingly hurried to get in time somewhere else.

The expedition members sat on the floor of the austere storage room. They watched the Koonians who according to the directions given to them carried items in and out through the only door of the storage room.

“We can use their equipment,” said Hua Lei almost delighted.

“It is a reason to be content,” said Grandfather. “It will probably be the best recognition we will get here for our humanity.”

“What shall we do with him?” asked Hua Lei looking at David who was lying on the floor.

“Those things looking like mattresses are probably for us,” said Grandfather looking at the flat sacks brought to the floor. “Let’s put him on them and take care of him as much as we can.”

David parted his eyelids a little bit.

“What is this place?” he asked in a tired voice looking at the ceiling and the walls.

“One of the storage rooms of the space operation center,” replied Grandfather. “We are hiding here for the time being.”

“Thank you for coming to get me,” said David silently.

“No reason to thank,” replied Grandfather patting David’s shoulder. “Who would leave his comrade in trouble?”

“We failed,” he said. “The ruler probably didn’t even want to think about what I said.”

“It doesn’t matter now. We leave for the Earth as soon as we can.”

They shaped the padding-filled sack into a suitable sleeping place for David and set him on it. Hua Lei went out of the storage room to see what there was available for them outside of it. After a quarter-hour she came back with some small boxes and bags.

“I brought something to eat,” she said. “These taste the best and at least haven’t so far poisoned me dead.”

“Let’s try,” said Grandfather. “We have nothing else to eat here, anyway.”

They began to nibble the Koonians’ foodstuffs and gave some to David who was slowly recovering his strength.

“They are edible,” said Sergei picking the red, sticky, bean-like vegetables from the can he had opened. “Carbohydrates and proteins like on the Earth.”

“These must be dried vegetables,” said Hua Lei sprinkling dark flakes on her palm from a cylindrical jar.

“If you found a bathroom somewhere, please let me know where it is,” asked Sergei. “I would like to wash myself a little.”

“I found one,” replied Hua Lei. “One door forward from the dining space. Using the water taps takes some exercise, but you will find the way.”

Sergei went off following Hua Lei’s advice.

“You should see their toilet!” laughed Hua Lei after Sergei had left.

As the day passed on David's condition improved closer to normal all the time. They could not see the outside world at that time, either, but the faint sounds coming from the other parts of the building gave them hints about the passage of the workday. The Koonians carrying the goods had left after the completion of their task, and the expedition members had been left alone in the underground laboratory wing. The safety door Puan Toem had mentioned was not locked, but they still did not dare to go on adventures into the corridor behind it after hearing the threats about it.

They heard David's account about how he had surprised his guards during an outdoor walk and after a brief melee managed to escape from them. He had lost his pursuers by dashing through the nearest building and had hid thereafter in nooks and crannies all the time going towards the road that led out of the city. After searching for a time and hiding at times he had managed to find a bridge, on which he stayed waiting for cargo hauling vehicles passing underneath. Finally he got his strike of luck and he jumped on the roof of a multi-bogie vehicle running towards Koan Aot.

After getting to Koan Aot David had managed to find machines who knew where the government building was. From his hiding place he noticed that machines were allowed rather freely to enter and exit the building. To his surprise he had been stopped right in the lobby. Any possible errand that he could have had was to be given to intermediates. So he had returned outside the gate, climbed over the wall and slipped in through an open window. Inside the building the machines had helped him again, and he had learnt that the ruler he sought was currently in a meeting. When the participants had left the meeting room, David had stepped forth, discreetly tugged the ruler's sleeve and stated his case while the ruler had stood still staring at him. The effort was fruitless because as soon as David had finished his speech the ruler had already ordered his staff to get him out of the building.

The officers had caught David, and after investigating the case for a moment sent him to recycling as a unit sustaining dangerous damage. He had ended up in a recycling station where he had immediately been shoved into a cylinder, in a posture in which he could not even breathe normally. His protests had been ignored except at times when they evoked hilarity in the workers. Many of the mechanoids brought to the recycling station were talking deliriously, but this was the first one who claimed himself to be a human being!

Most of the machines in the recycling station were damaged useless. Some were repaired on a coarse scale, often combining functional halves or changing limbs. The rest were disassembled for spare parts or in hopeless cases incinerated or scrapped. Many of the machines assigned for destruction still assumed themselves to be functional and therefore resisted their destruction. It took two workers to attach the resisting machines to the workbench. Among the machines there were also some roughly repaired units which were functional enough for the workers' own needs. They helped the workers to handle the storage. The most popular helpers were the smart mechanoids who could perform complex tasks with minimal directions. Sometimes their intelligence was a hindrance when the mechanoid was not, because of its internal prioritizing of values, willing to help its masters in every asked task. In such times the workers could adjust the functions and value systems of their helper with methods that to David met all the hallmarks of gross assault.

"I believe that in the junking business people are not very nuanced," said David. "Next to me, a few cylinders away there was brought a mechanoid for whom the storage posture seemed to be as unreasonable as it was for me. The mechanoid died before the workers came again to the same shelf."

"Fortunately it was a machine," said Hua Lei. "Perhaps they don't suffer the same way as human beings

do.”

“I think there are things that shouldn’t be done even to a machine,” said David. “The target may be a machine and the doer a human being, but both are participants in the same event.”

“Perhaps Koonians are driven by similar urges and impulses as the Earth human beings,” pondered Grandfather. “Therefore they could suffer from complexes similar to us. And carry similar burdens.”

They prepared for the night’s sleep. They had no idea about the accurate time of the day, but their bodies told them about the approaching night. The sacks were not particularly comfortable mattresses, but undeniably an improvement compared with their previous imprisonment. In their current location they could even switch the light off by themselves.

How long would Koonians still want to keep them for research or waiting for research? And what would happen when they would no longer be interested in it? Could the expedition group return to the Earth, or would they all end up in the same shelf rack from which they had managed to rescue David? That night David was not the only one who did not catch sleep.

* * *

“Wake up!” whispered Sergei shoving his companions. A little bit of light had been trickling into the dark storage room below the door from the corridor, but for a moment the light had been brighter when someone peeked in through the crack of the door.

They all got up soundlessly. They guessed from their earlier experience that the person sneaking in the corridor hardly meant anything good for them. Sergei went to the door to listen. The corridor was soundless. He waited still for a moment and peeked then into the corridor.

“Let’s get out of here!” he whispered after getting his head back inside.

They stepped soundlessly from the door to the corridor and left as quickly but as soundlessly and discreetly as possible towards the safety doors that separated the laboratory wing from the rest of the building. They passed a corner of the corridor after another exerting their memories. They had come to the storage room through various other rooms, but leaving Puan Toem had locked unnecessary shortcuts. They had to return along the corridors, and a few times they had to trace their steps after taking the wrong branch.

They did not make it in time. Just when they came to the stretch of the corridor they presumed to be the last one, in front of them appeared a familiar Koonian. He had been leading the research group from the department of natural sciences. Now his expression had, if possible, even more agitated, almost furious resoluteness than they had seen at the spacecraft. The leader leapt a few steps toward them and with a wide swing flung the large net he had carried under his arm above them.

But also the expedition members were resolute. David and Wai got just in time away from below the net and quickly raised its edges to help their companions out of it. The Koonian dashed at them raising a long white tube. By yanking the net David got Sergei aside a moment before a dazzling white flash cut through the air.

“We’re being burned alive!” shouted Hua Lei. They fled shaking the net away from them while running. At the corner of the corridor the white flame flashed again.

They ended in a dead end. Shouting David hammered the locked door that had stopped them. The leader reached them.

Noticing his victory the leader raised the tube calmly. The flames, capable of scorching with their mere heat radiation flared into the corner of the corridor when Sergei and David jumped for safety into the opposite corner where the others were already crouching to escape the heat.

They raised their eyes. The leader had stopped for a

while to stare at the corner of the corridor, stupefied motionless. The temperature of the flames had been high enough to perforate the wall. The filling of the thin interior wall, perhaps even its very metal, had ignited to burn in small, greedy, white flames.

The brief moment was long enough for the expedition group. They fled past the leader. David yanked the burning device from the leader's hands before he could stop him. However, the chase could not start, as at the same moment a huge pressure wave slammed all of them to the floor. The corridor burst full of thick, blackish-gray smoke. Burning droplets of liquid and solid debris flew through the air. The shouts of the Koonian and the expedition members were mixed together.

David and Grandfather staggered forward in the corridor pulling the three others along. A new explosion-like eruption burst forth more sparks and smoke, Exhausted by the heat and the gases mixing with the air they exerted to reach the safety door faintly visible ahead. Reaching it they hurriedly groped for its lock.

"It has been locked!" shouted Hua Lei between her fits of cough. "We are going to die here!"

"Move aside!" shouted David. He raised the white tube towards the door and fumbled the knobs of the burning device squinting his watery eyes.

"Help!" came a furious, desperate shout in Tuapsaam from the corridor.

"He is shouting for help!" shouted Wai crouching down.

David got the burning device activated. They receded from the flames that ate the metal of the safety doors as if they were a mere cobweb. David flung himself against the door. The door swung open and the expedition members dashed stumbling one over another into the fresh air waiting behind it.

"Help me!" sounded a long shout among the smoke, turning at its end into a blood-curdling scream of pain.

David swung the door shut to prevent the smoke from

coming out of it. However, he noticed that Wai had stepped in to stop the door.

“Don’t go there!” he shouted. “You won’t survive there!”

The warning did not help. Wai disappeared into the smoke.

“You idiot!” shouted David with all of his voice through the crack of the door. “Come back here at once!”

A few seconds he was able to stay still. Then he dashed into the smoke after Wai.

A new explosion, a stronger one than before. The three expedition members were shifting nervously.

“I will be the next one,” said Sergei.

“Stop already!” shouted Hua Lei with her voice failing. “I don’t want anybody else to go in there.”

“I can’t leave them alone there!” said Sergei.

He did not need to go, as at the same moment David staggered out through the safety door coughing, gasping, and with his clothing smouldering.

“They are finished!” he breathed out. “I couldn’t make it in time.”

They slumped to the floor. David bent down grabbing his hair with both hands.

“Let’s get out of here,” muttered Grandfather as if to himself. “The fire can spread here, too.”

There were running steps in the corridor. Soon there appeared a group of Koonians wearing obvious fire extinguishing gear. With masks on their faces they ran past right into the smoke billowing behind the safety door. Loud, pacifying hiss told that the extinguishing work had begun. Soon the roar of the fire faded out leaving only the sound of the ventilation machinery running at full speed.

“They had to be the staff of the house,” said Sergei. “Fire brigade will not arrive that quickly on any planet.”

After a moment two more Koonians arrived, without protective equipment. One of them was Puan Toem who had obviously put on the first available clothes he had got

in his hands.

“What is happening here?” he asked the expedition members after coming to them.

“We were being executed,” replied Sergei from the floor. “Did it possibly happen on your order?”

“No,” replied Puan Toem looking at his companion. “But I can guess who is the culprit.”

“Teim Siin, right?” the other Koonian asked Sergei.

“I don’t know. He never introduced himself. He was one of those from the Department of Natural Sciences who was examining us.”

“That man never has the patience to wait for official decisions!” growled Puan Toem. “Where is he now?”

Sergei pointed at the safety doors with his finger.

“What? Was he left inside? What happened to him?”

“He probably died.”

“How can he be there if you are here?”

Puan Toem was left for a moment to look at the expedition members.

“Shouldn’t you be five?” he asked.

“We were,” replied Sergei. “But Wai was also there.”

“In the fire? Why?”

“Because she returned to rescue our executioner.”

Sergei’s voice was rather weak, but it still made Puan Toem startle.

“Amazing,” said Puan Toem’s companion. “Until now they have carefully protected themselves from anything that endangers them.”

Puan Toem did not reply.

Gradually the smoke behind the safety doors began to dissipate. The fire brigade members returned one by one out from the doors.

“Wait still for a while before you go,” warned one of them Puan Toem passing by. “There is still smoke in the air and some objects may still be hot.”

“What happened in there?”

“It seems that first the oil products exploded and after them the hydrogen. The engine laboratory has been

practically wrecked into pieces.”

“What caused such an explosion? Were the substances not safely stored?”

“Can you tell?” asked the firefighter his companion who was just opening the safety door. “What caused the explosion?”

“I don’t know,” said the other firefighter. “I wonder if this one has anything to do with it.”

He handed to the first one the burning device David had left behind the door.

“A glazing tube?” said Puan Toem surprised. “What could it be doing here?”

“Teim Siin is a thorough character,” guessed his companion.

They made room for two more fire brigade members who were carrying a charred corpse, possibly that of Teim Siin.

“One of those is still inside,” said the foremost one nodding toward the expedition members. “We saw no other corpses.”

Grandfather staggered up.

“Do you allow us to fetch the body of our comrade?” he asked Puan Toem. He replied to Grandfather’s inquiring look with an inert stare.

“Go get it,” he said.

Sergei and Grandfather went. After a while they returned. Sergei was carrying on his arms Wai’s body he had covered with some of their own clothes they had taken off.

They waited until the fire brigade had left and grouped in front of Puan Toem and his companion.

“We have now done on this planet everything that was possible for us,” said Grandfather fixing his eyes on Puan Toem. “Perhaps you, too, have studied us as much as you see to benefit yourself. Therefore I request now that you let us return to our own planet, as our presence here is no longer useful to either side. As also the public opinion among you seems to have turned against us, it is in order

that we are let leave and the problems we caused can be forgotten.”

“Is there already a decision about them?” asked Puan Toem’s companion.

“We were discussing it,” replied Puan Toem. “But we can hardly examine them any longer. They have become a national problem, and therefore they should probably be destroyed according to the regulations.”

“It is easier if we just let them go,” said the other Koonian.

The expedition members waited patiently while Puan Toem pondered about the matter.

“All right,” he said finally. “Go. I will show you to the back door. There you can leave unnoticed.”

They started to walk the corridor led by Puan Toem. Turning from branch after branch they came to the helical surface that led to the ground floor.

Next to the helical surface two Koonians passed by them. One of them the expedition members knew; he was the third member of the research group from the Department of Natural Sciences.

“Did you have a fire here?” he asked. “I heard Eip Taim tell that there was an explosion.”

“There was,” replied Puan Toem curtly and went on walking.

The researcher stopped to stare at the body Sergei was carrying.

“Is it dead?” he asked keeping up with Sergei.

“Yes,” replied Sergei staring ahead.

The researcher kept walking along with them looking at the body and at the expedition members in turns.

“Where are they going?” he asked.

“Back to their planet,” replied Puan Toem’s companion. “But keep it to yourself.”

The researcher grabbed David’s sleeve stopping him. The others stopped, too.

“You have no use for a charred body,” he said. “Give it to us and we will examine it.”

David raised his eyes. He looked at the extended arms of the researcher and his eyes with an eager gleam in them. The agonizing burning feeling erupted inside him and filled his whole world with its fiery glow, hotter than the fire they had escaped. The energy boiling in him rushed into his flexed arm like a charge of thunder.

He felt a soft touch around his arm. Hua Lei held his arm stopping him in a way that a stone wall could not.

“Wai wouldn’t have wanted you to,” she said silently, wiping her tears.

David stooped. The storm in him faded as if having spent its energy.

“Does this never end?” he screamed towards the central shaft reaching upwards. The researcher retreated a few steps seemingly puzzled with the reaction of the expedition group.

“Let’s go,” exhorted Puan Toem and steered them to the corridor leading to the read of the building.

They stepped into the night lit by the dim glow of the city. A cool wind blew in mild breezes around them.

“Continue straight ahead to the perimeter of the city,” advised Puan Toem.

The expedition members started to walk. They crossed backyards and quiet alleys. At times they stopped to rest. Sergei and David took turns to carry Wai’s body. Also Grandfather carried the body for some distance. Towards the edge of the city the houses became fewer and thereby diminished also the light. But when they reached the edge of the city, they saw on the eastern sky the first hint of dawn.

“We have been walking a long time,” said Hua Lei. “The morning is already coming.”

“We still have distance to go,” commented Sergei.

“What shall we do if they have confiscated our spacecraft when we arrive?”

“I have the feeling that they will not do so,” replied Sergei looking ahead.

They came to the same road along which they had

arrived in the city the first time. The road was deserted and quiet. They walked along the roadside until the glow of the dawn had increased enough that they could turn into the forest.

The light increased. Hua Lei looked at the trees and undergrowth around them. Small drops of dew were glittering in the light coming from the brightening sky.

“Beautiful!” she said. “They have a beautiful planet. I wish we had experienced something like this while visiting them!”

Also the others let their eyes rest on the trees while walking among them.

“I wonder if any of us will ever return here;” said Hua Lei.

“Who knows,” said Grandfather. “Wai paid so high price for our effort that I think we shouldn’t forget it, either. Perhaps we will at least contact them.”

“Who knows if they after a few decades will already think differently and accept us,” mused Sergei.

”Tell my greetings to them then if I am no longer around,” said Grandfather.

“Surely!” promised Sergei smiling a little. Finally they caught the sight of the familiar mast. They directed their steps toward it. The morning approached the surrounding grass field in competition with them, and when they saw their spacecraft on the grass, the first rays of the rising sun were already playing on its hull.

They stepped into the spacecraft. David wrapped Wai’s body together with thin, flexible cooling tubes into a reflecting foil and connected the tubes to a small cooling device. The machine had been nominally designed to cure minor injuries, but its designers had included some extra power capacity in it as if anticipating what other uses it might have. David stroked lightly Wai’s head covered with the foil and went out, joining his companions.

“The window must be repaired before the takeoff,” said Grandfather looking at the cleanly cut window piece

lying on the grass.

“I will ask our friends for help,” said Sergei and went for the dome.

Soon two mechanoids and one angularly shaped machine arrived with Sergei. After Sergei had explained to them the task they began to work right away.

“I go to clean the ship,” said Hua Lei. “There is debris in the cockpit if it hasn’t actually rained in.”

The others followed Hua Lei and began the preparations for the return trip. It did not take long before the spacecraft was ready for the voyage. Also the machines had got their work ready. Missing the specific equipment necessary for window repair the seam of the fitted window piece was rather crude, but obviously reliable and airtight. Sergei thanked the machines and told them farewell. Even though they did not respond to the compliment. There was still something friendly in their appearance as they walked back toward the dome.

A cup of green tea refreshed their bodies weary with the ordeal like a small comfortable oasis in the desert of sorrow. They drank a swig at a time while the computer tested and checked various parts of the spacecraft. Eventually it got its checking completed and announced the ship to be checked and ready.

“All right,” said Grandfather and took his cup from the table. “Could someone still check the ship visually from outside?”

Hua Lei volunteered for the task and got up. She went out and walked around the spacecraft checking its hull and landing gear. Everything seemed to be in order.

Returning to the door she saw Puan Toem next to the spacecraft.

“Did you come to bid farewell?” asked Hua Lei surprised.

“I came to watch your departure,” replied Puan Toem. “There is a guidance for you on the same channel that you used for landing.”

Hua Lei watched him for a moment with different

thoughts crossing her mind.

“I like to think that you arranged the guidance out of kindness for us, Thanks to you!”

Puan Toem took a deep breath.

“You are really strange machines!” he sighed.

“From some other viewpoint we may be much less strange,” said Hua lei from the door with a cautious smile passing the corner of her mouth. “Farewell!”

The airtight door of the spacecraft shut and its bolts clanked shut.

Puan Toem retreated a few steps when the engines of the spacecraft started. The spacecraft rose from the grass field accelerated by a brisk propulsion and guided by the three-coloured bunch of laser beams began its voyage toward the Earth waiting for them in the distance.