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WANDERERS AND TRAVELLERS

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The water in the pool was not very cold, but all the same I was frozen. I had been sitting on the bottom, right under the steep bank, and for a whole hour had been cautiously turning my head from side to side and peering into the dim greenish twilight. I had to sit without moving, for septopods are sensitive and suspicious animals, they are frightened off by the slightest sound or any abrupt movement and will disappear, to return only at night, when it is better not to have anything to do with them.

An eel was busying himself under my feet, and a dozen times a pompous-looking striped perch swam past me and back again, stopping each time and staring at me with his vacuous round eyes. As soon as he was gone, a shoal of silvery small fry would appear and begin to graze just above my head. My knees and shoulders were quite numb. I was afraid that Masha might not wait any longer and would get into the water to rescue me. I succeeded in conjuring up so vivid a picture of how she was sitting all alone at the water's edge and waiting for me, how terrified she was, and how she longed to dive in and find me, that I had already made up my mind to come up, when at last a septopod swam out of the weed twenty paces or so to the right of me.

It was a fairly large specimen, and appeared noiselessly and suddenly, like a ghost, his round body foremost. His whitish mantle

was pulsating gently, in a limp and inert kind of way, as it sucked in and ejected the water, and he rocked slightly from side to side as he moved. His tentacles were tucked under him and their thin ends trailed after him resembling tattered of old rag; and the slit of his eye, nearly covered by the eyelid, shone dimly in the faint light. He was swimming slowly, as they do in the daytime, in a strange and uncanny trance, not knowing, where he was going or why. He was probably impelled by the most obscure and primitive drives, like those, perhaps, that control the movements of amoebae.

Very gently I raised the marker and aimed it at the inflated back. The silvery mass of small fry suddenly darted away and vanished and it seemed to me that the eyelid above the great glassy eye flickered. I pulled the trigger and immediately sprang up and away from the caustic sepia. When I looked again, the septopod was no longer to be seen: only a dense blue-black cloud was spreading through the water and clouding the bottom. I came to the surface and swam to shore.

It was a fine hot day. A blue haze hung above the water, the sky was white and empty, except beyond the forest where a great motionless mass of bluish cloud towered.

On the grass in front of our tent sat a stranger in bright swimming trunks with a bandage round his forehead. He was tanned and not so much muscular, as extraordinarily sinewy, as though covered with a whole network of ropes under the skin. You could see at once that he was incredibly strong. Before him stood my Masha in her blue swimsuit—long-legged, sunburnt, and with a shock of sun-bleached hair down her back. So, she wasn't sitting by the water, anxiously waiting for her daddy. She was excitedly telling this sinewy fellow something, waving her arms the whole time. I was even hurt that she hadn't even noticed my appearance. But the man did, and quickly turned his head, looked at me intently, and smiled, waving his open hand. Masha spun round and shrieked happily "There you are!"

I climbed out on to the grass, took off my mask and wiped my face. The man was smiling as he examined me.

"How many did you mark?" asked Masha in a business-like manner.

"One". My jaws were cramped with the cold.

"Oh you!" said Masha.

She helped me to take off my aqualung, and I stretched out on

the grass.

"Yesterday he marked two," explained Masha. "The day before yesterday four. If it goes on like that, we'd better move on to another lake." She took a towel and began to rub my back. "You look like a quick-frozen gander," she proclaimed. "This is Leonid Andreyevich Gorbovsky. He's an astro-archaeologist. And this, Leonid Andreyevich, is my daddy, Stanislav Ivanovich."

The sinewy Leonid Andreyevich nodded and smiled.

"Are you frozen?" he asked. "It's so lovely here—the sun, green grass..."

"He'll be all right soon," said Masha, rubbing me with might and main. "He's usually quite jolly, but he's chilled to the bone".

It was clear she had been saying all sorts of things about me and now was doing her best to vindicate my reputation. Let her. I hadn't time—my teeth were chattering.

"Masha here and I were very worried about you," said Gorbovsky. "We even wanted to dive in and find you, but I don't know how. I expect you can't even imagine a man who's never had to dive in the course of his work." He turned over on his back, then on his side, and leaned on his arm. "Tomorrow I'm flying off," he confided to me. "And I simply don't know when I'll ever have the chance again to lie on the grass by a lake and have the possibility of diving with an aqualung." "Feel it, then," I said.

He looked carefully over the aqualung and touched it.

"I certainly will," he said, and turned over on his back. He folded his arms under his head and looked at me, slowly blinking his sparse lashes. There was something irresistibly attractive about him, but what exactly I don't know. Perhaps it was his eyes, trusting and a little sad. Or perhaps it was because his ears stuck out from under the bandage in such a comical fashion. Having gazed his fill at me, he turned his eyes on a blue dragonfly that was swaying on a blade of grass.

"Dragon-fly," he said. "Dear little dragon-fly! Blue—lakeside—beauty! There she sits, neatly and prettily, looking around to see what she can gobble up." He stretched out his hand, but the dragonfly left the blade of grass and winged its way in an arc toward the reeds. He followed it with his eyes and lay down again. "How complicated it is, my friends," he said, and Masha immediately sat down and stared at him with round eyes. "There she is, perfect, graceful, and content with everything. Ate up a fly, reproduced

herself, and is now ready to die. Simple, elegant, rational. No spiritual perplexities, no love-pangs, no self-consciousness, no ideas about life."

"A machine," said Masha suddenly. "A boring cyber!"

This from my Masha! I nearly burst out laughing, but restrained myself, though believe I snorted, and she looked at me with disapproval.

"Boring," agreed Gorbovsky. "That's it. But now imagine, comrades, a dragon-fly of a poisonous greenish-yellow colour, with horizontal red stripes, and a wing-span of seven metres, and its jaws all covered with a nasty black slime. Well, have you pictured it to yourselves?" He raised his eyebrows and looked at us. "I see you haven't. But I have run away from them like a madman, even though I've been armed. Now, the question is, what is there in common between these two boring cybers?"

"That green one," I said, "is from another planet, I suppose?"

"No doubt about that."

"From Pandora?"

"Exactly, from Pandora," he answered.

"What have they got in common?"

"Yes, what?"

"But that's obvious." I said. "An identical level of assimilation of information. Reaction at the level of instinct."

"Words," he sighed. "Don't be angry, but these are only words, and no use to me. I've got to find traces of reason in the Universe, but I don't know what it is. It's no good talking to me about different levels of assimilation of information. I know quite well that the dragon-fly and I have different levels, but all that is intuition. Now tell me: here I've found an ant nest—does it represent traces of reason or not? On Leonida they discovered buildings without windows and without doors—does that represent traces of reason? What have I to look for? Ruins? Inscriptions? Rusty nails? A septihedral screw? How am I to know what traces they leave? What if their aim in life is to destroy the atmosphere wherever they find one? Or to build rings round the planets? Or to hybridize life? Or to create life? Perhaps that dragon-fly was self-reproducing cybernetic apparatus set going in times beyond memory? To say nothing of the possessors of reason themselves. After all, one can pass a slimy creature croaking in a puddle twenty times and only turn away from it in loathing. But the creature looks

at you with beautiful goggling yellow eyes and thinks to himself: 'Interesting, obviously a new species. An expedition should return here and catch a specimen.

He covered his eyes with his hand and started humming a tune. Masha had her eyes fixed on him and waited. I was waiting, too, mentally sympathizing with him: it is hard to work when your job hasn't been properly defined. Very difficult. You grope about in the dark and you get no pleasure, or satisfaction. I had heard of these astro-archaeologists. It was impossible to take them seriously—and no one did.

"But there is reason in cosmos," said Gorbovsky suddenly. "There's no doubt about that. I know that now. But it isn't what we think it is. Nor the kind we expect it to be. And we're not looking for it there. Or not the way we ought. In fact, we don't know what we are seeking."

"That's just it," I thought. "Not that, not there, not that way. That's not serious, comrades. Just childishness—looking for the traces of ideas that once floated about in the air."

"The Voice of the Void, for instance," he continued. "Have you heard of it? I don't suppose so. Half a century ago people wrote about it, but now nobody mentions it any more. Because no progress was made, you see, and since no progress has been made, perhaps there is no Voice? We've got plenty of these cock-sparrows, you know,— they know nothing themselves about science, because either they're lazy or haven't been educated properly, but they have heard that Man is all-powerful. He's all-powerful, but he can't make head or tail of the Voice of the Void. Dear, dear, dear—what a disgrace! We can't, we won't! What cheap anthropocentrism!"

"What's the Voice of the Void?" asked Masha softly.

"It's a very curious effect. It can be perceived in certain directions in Space. If you switch your spaceship receiver over to automatic reception, sooner or later it will tune in to a strange transmission. You hear a calm, impassive voice repeating the same phrase over and over again in a strange expressionless tongue like the language of fish. It has been picked up for many years and it always repeats the same thing. I've heard it and many others have heard it, but not many talk about it. It's not very pleasant to think about. You're an unthinkable way from Earth. The Ether is empty: there are no atmospherics, nothing but slight rustling sounds. And

suddenly this voice is heard. You're on watch, alone. Everyone's asleep, everything's quiet and eerie—and then you hear this voice. It's very unpleasant, I assure you. There are recordings of it, and many people have cudgelled their brains and still are to decipher it. But in my opinion it's futile. There are other riddles. Astronauts could tell a lot, but they don't like to." He fell silent and then added with a kind of melancholy insistence: "You've got to realize— it's not simple. We don't even know what to expect, you see. We can meet them at any moment. Face to face. And you know—they can turn out to be immeasurably higher beings. People talk about collisions and conflicts, or about different conceptions of what is human and good, but I don't mind that. I'm afraid of an unparallel humiliation of humanity, of a gigantic psychological shock. We are so proud, you know. We've created such a marvellous world, we know such a lot, we have penetrated into the Great Universe, where we are exploring, discovering, studying, investigating—what? For them this Universe is their own home. For millions of years they've been living there, as we've been living on our Earth, and they can only wonder at us—what are these beings doing here amongst the stars?"

He broke off suddenly and jumped to his feet, listening to something. I started involuntarily.

"That's thunder," said Masha softly, gaping at him, open-mouthed. "Thunder. There'll be a storm soon."

He was still listening and scanning the sky.

"No, it's not thunder," he said at last, and sat down again. "It's a liner. See it, over there?"

A bright streak flashed across the blue pile of clouds and vanished. And again there was a faint rumbling in the sky.

"And now sit and wait," he said, incomprehensibly. He looked at me and smiled, but in his eyes there was a look of sadness and suspense. Then it passed and his eyes again took on their former trusting expression.

"And what do you do, Stanislav Ivanovich?" he asked.

I decided he wanted to change the subject, so I started telling him about the septopods. That they belonged to a sub-class of a dibranchiate, class of cephalopods and represent a special, hitherto unknown, family of the order of octopuses. Their main features were a reduction of the third left tentacle, opposite the third hectocotylyzed right one, three rows of suckers on the arms, a

complete absence of coelome, an extraordinarily powerful development of the venous hearts, the maximum concentration for cephalopods of the central nervous system, and various other, less important, peculiarities. They had been discovered not long before, when a number of them appeared off the east and south-east coasts of Asia, and a year later they were being found in the lower reaches of the great rivers—the Mekong, Yangtse, Hwang Ho, and Amur, and also in lakes that were a fair distance from the sea-coast—in this one, for instance. And this is remarkable, because ordinary cephalopods are highly stenogalinaceous, and even avoid the arctic waters with their reduced salinity. Also, they hardly ever come out on dry land. But the fact remained: septopods feel quite happy in fresh water and they do come out on to the shore. They get into boats and on to , bridges, and not long ago two were found in the forest about thirty kilometres from here. - Masha was not listening—she had heard it all from me before. She went into the tent and brought out the 'minivox' and switched it to automatic reception. She was obviously impatient to pick up the Voice of the Void.

But Gorbovsky was paying great attention to what I was saying.

"Were those two alive?" he asked. "No, they were found dead. The forest here is a game reserve. The septopods had been trampled and half-eaten by wild boar. But they were still alive thirty kilometres away from water! The mantle cavity of both of them was stuffed with damp weed. That, apparently, is the way they lay in a certain store of water for their journey across dry land. The weed was of the species that grows in lakes. There is no doubt that these septopods had come from these very lakes and were on their way deeper into the country to the south. I must mention that every single specimen so far captured has been an adult male. Not a single female, nor young septopod. Probably the females and the young cannot live in fresh water or come out on dry land. It's all very interesting," I continued. "As a rule, you know, sea animals only alter their mode of life so completely during the breeding season. Then instinct forces them to go to quite unaccustomed places. But here there is no question of breeding. Some other instinct is at work here, more primitive, perhaps, and more powerful. The main thing, now, for us is to trace their migration routes. So I spend ten hours a day at the bottom of this lake. Today I marked one. If I'm lucky, I'll mark another one or two before

evening. At night they become extraordinarily active and seize everything that comes near them. They've even been known to attack men. But that is only at night."

Masha had turned the radio on as loud as possible and was revelling in the mighty sound issuing from it.

"Quieter, Masha," I said, and she turned it down.

"So you mark them," said Gorbovsky. "That's interesting. How do you do it?"

"With generators." I extracted the cartridge from the marker and showed him an ampoule. "With pellets like these. In each one there's a generator which can be heard under water at a distance of twenty or thirty kilometres."

He took the ampoule carefully and examined it closely, and his face became sad and old-looking.

"Very clever," he murmured. "Simple and clever."

He continued to twist it about in his fingers as though trying to get the feel of it, then put it on the grass before me, and rose to his feet. His movements had become slow and irresolute. He went to where his clothes were lying, rummaged among them, found his trousers, and stood still, holding them in front of him.

I was watching him with a vague feeling of unease. Masha was holding the marker ready in her hand to show him how it was used and was also watching Gorbovsky. The corners of her lips : were drawn down piteously. I had noticed long ago that this sort of thing often happened to her, and the expression of her face would take on that of the person she was watching.

Leonid Andreyevich suddenly began to speak in a very soft voice in mocking sort of way.

"That's funny, I must say. What a vivid analogy. For centuries they've lain in the depths and then they rise and enter a strange hostile world. And what drives them? An obscure primitive instinct, you say? Or a method of assimilating information that has reached a level of unbearable curiosity? It would surely be better for them to stop at home in the salt water—but something draws them and draws them to the shore." He roused himself and started putting on his trousers. His trousers were old-fashioned and long. He hopped on one leg as he put them on. "But it's true, isn't it, Stanislav Ivanovich, that we must think they're not ordinary cephalopods?"

"In their own way, yes, of course," I agreed.

But he was not listening. He had turned to the receiver and was staring at it. Masha and I stared too. The set was emitting strident discordant signals resembling the interference caused by an X-ray apparatus. Masha put down the marker.

"6.08 metres," said she in a puzzled tone. "Some service station, but what one?"

He was listening to the signals, eyes closed and his head to one side.

"No, that's not a service station," he murmured. "It's me."

"What?"

"It's me. I'm signalling. Me—Leonid Andreyevich Gorbovsky."

"W-why?"

He laughed mirthlessly.

"Why, indeed? I'd very much like to know why." He put on his shirt. "Why should three pilots and their spaceship, after returning from their flight EN 101-EN 2657, become the transmitters of radio-waves on 6.083 metres?"

Masha and I, of course, said nothing, and he, too, fell silent as he fastened his sandals.

"We've been examined by doctors, we've been examined by physicists." He straightened up and shook the sand and grass from his trousers. "They all came to the same conclusion: it's impossible. We could have died laughing at the sight of their astonished faces. But, believe me, it was no laughing matter for us. Tolya Obozov gave up his holiday and flew to Pandora. He said he preferred to radiate as far away as possible from Earth. Walkenstein has gone to work at an under-water station. I alone am roaming the Earth and emitting radio-waves. And all the time I'm waiting for something. I wait and fear, fear, and wait. Do you understand me?"

"I don't know," I said, and glanced at Masha. "You're right," he said. He took up the receiver and thoughtfully put it against his protuberant ear. "No one knows. It's been going on for a month, without abating and without stopping. Wah-wee, wah-wee. Night and day. Whether we're sad or gay. Hungry or full. At work or idle. Wah-wee... But radiation from Tariel has decreased. Tariel is my spaceship. It's laid up now, to be on the safe side. Its radiation interferes with the control of some aggregates on Venus, and they're sending inquiries and getting annoyed. Tomorrow I'm taking it somewhere further away." He straightened himself again and slapped his thighs with his long arms. "Well, it's time for me to

go. Good-bye, and good luck to you. Good-bye, Masha. Don't worry your head over all this. It's no simple riddle, I assure you."

He raised his hand in salute, nodded, and walked away, lanky and awkward. By our tent he stopped and said:

"You know, do try to be as careful as you can with those septopods. Otherwise you're marking them and marking them and it's all very unpleasant for them." And off he went.

I lay a little while longer face downwards and then glanced at Masha. She was still following him with her eyes. I could see at once that Leonid Andreyevich had impressed her. But not me. I was not in the least worried by his talk about the possibility of the possessors of Universal Reason being immeasurably higher than ourselves. Let them be. In my opinion, the higher they were, the less chance there was of our getting in their way. It was like a roach who didn't care a hang for a wide-meshed net. As to pride, humiliation, and shock—we'd probably get over that. I would, at any rate. And the fact that we were discovering and studying the Universe, which they had long ago made themselves at home in, well, what of it? We'd not yet made ourselves at home in it! And for us they were nothing more than a part of the Nature we had set out to explore and study, be they three times as high as us! They were external to us! Though, of course, if they started marking me, as I was marking the septopods. . .

I glanced at my watch and sat up abruptly. It was time to get on with my work. I noted down the number of the last ampoule and checked my aqualung. Then I went into the tent, got my ultrasonic locator and put it in the pocket of my trunks.

"Help me on with it, Masha," I said, putting on the aqualung.

She was still sitting by the radio listening to the unremitting "wah-wee". She helped me on with the aqualung and we got into the water together. I switched on the locator and it began to emit signals—my marked septopods were drowsily floating about in the lake. We looked meaningfully at each other and swam up to the surface. Masha was spitting out the water and pushing the wet hair from her forehead as she said:

"But there is a difference between an astrocraft and wet weed in the branchiate sac."

I told her to get on the bank and dived in again. No, I wouldn't worry as much if I were Gorbovsky. It was all much too frivolous, like his astro-archaeology. Traces of ideas. . . . Psychological

shock. There would be no shock. Most probably, we wouldn't notice each other at all. What on earth are we to them, I'd like to know?