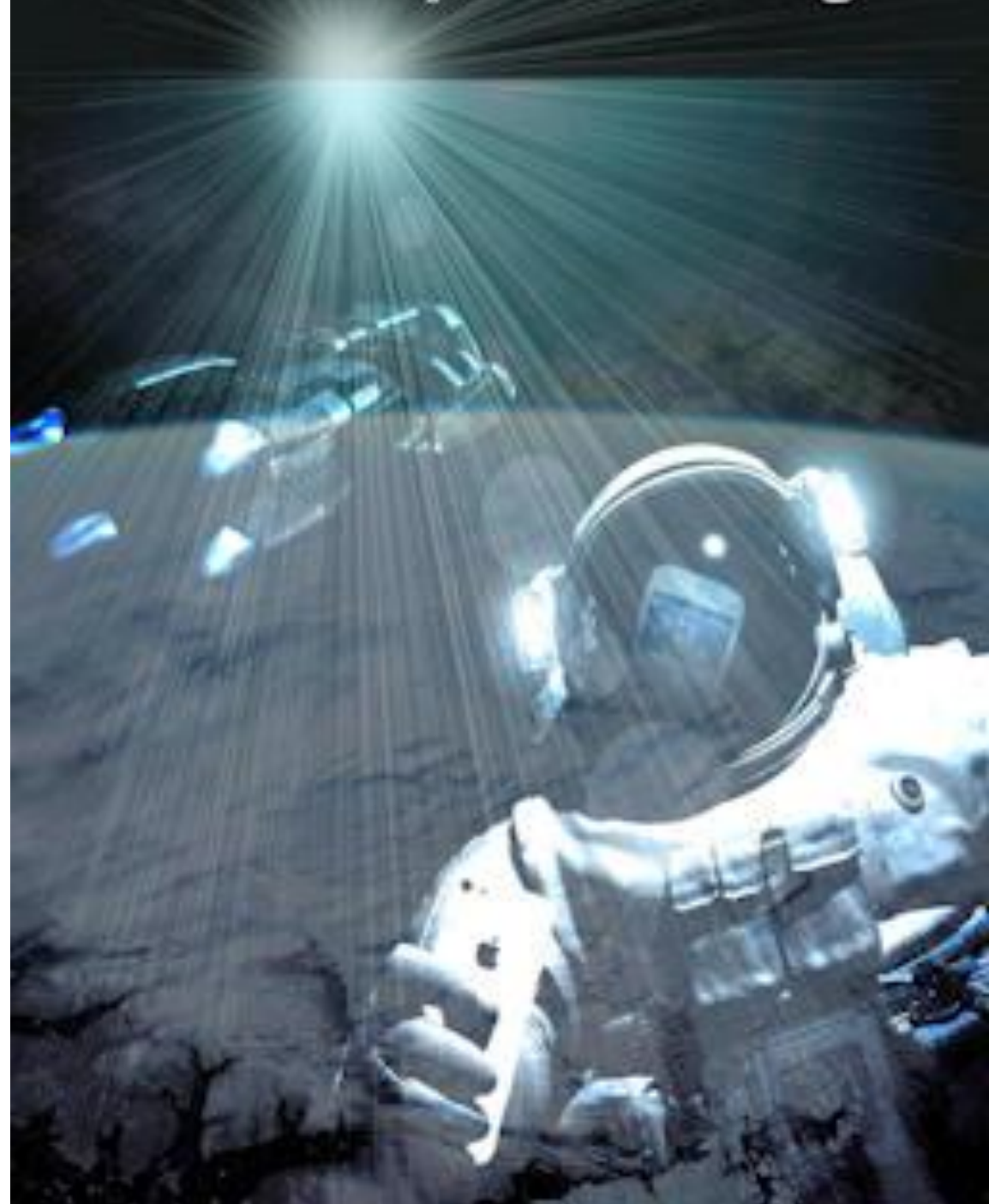


ALIEN FOREVER

a novella by Andreas Ingo



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1

THEREON

Daphne II made a braking maneuver, perhaps too late, perhaps too early, overshadowed by the enormous extent below. Thereon, the planetary base, was woven like a spider's web of abandoned structures, connected by roads through arched cliffs.

Leonide had traveled for long through the interstellar space. She had met the silence with an attitude of dying longing and inhuman patience. Daphne II was her work horse, her spaceship and eternal companion.

Now she journeyed over the surface like a small bright spot.

Thereon was cut in a modern style, like a natural extension of the desolate landscape. It clung to the surface, like a leech. A power station that was used for replenishing energy reserve: A gateway between worlds. A power station populated by hard-line hermits, who were tired of man's doings and decided to start anew.

Leonide found herself wandering through the main unit. She was greeted by teenagers, adorned by challenging hairstyles. The walls were curved and built in sections: You could see the characteristic signs of The Foundation.

There was a larger space, where panoramic windows cast foggy rays on the floor. Oval tables were surrounded by precision cut chairs. Leonide avoided the furniture. The majority didn't notice the figure of the woman.

Some older teenagers saw her.

Leonide was no man. She was a hybrid of extraterrestrial life and human. Her face had human features and proportions, but she looked starved. The forehead was a little higher, the nose slightly elongated. The cracked lips brought to mind a dark past but the big eyes compensated. She was like an artist's dream: Hardly a new age sensation, but still interesting in an unusual way.

At the bar, and through subsequent walks through the narrow corridors, she got a surprise: It turned out that the energy plant, which transformed energy from the interior of the planet, had collapsed. It was no longer possible to refill the energy reserves. She couldn't believe it herself! She had ended up in the body of a dying predator, populated by invading bacteria, which wouldn't survive for long.

The days passed and Leonide tried to remedy the situation. She was prepared to pay anything to escape her terrible fate. But nothing helped. She was finally forced to do something: She went to the energy plant and down the sinister steps, towards the underworld. She would discover the weak point of the predator: The heart of the body that already had stopped!

She found herself standing by a giant transformer: A crown of metallic pipe that was connected with a shiny body, reflecting a red glow from a lava flow. Leonide went back and felt the body of the transformer. It was more cold than hot; a glass casing protected the transformer from the lava flow. Leonide looked down into the lower shaft. Her face burned as illuminated by the interior of a furnace.

She thought of the mission: At the very reason why she made the trip: On the final goal. On the woman she had known: On Daphne. Everything that had happened recently was a waste

of time. She hadn't gotten anywhere. She was totally inconsolable. Instantly, she was back at Telga, nine months earlier.

2

TELGA

The interiors of the restaurant gleamed with a yellowish light. Tables, painted in a reflective material, were polished, beautiful. The mirror image of Daphne was not entirely clear: Dreamlike, hazy. Leonide was busy formulating a thought. Loud voices came from upstairs. Jealousy men appeared next.

"There's no way to escape the persecution." Daphne said.

No lightweight sentence! Leonide felt as if the words came from a process that had been going on for several months. There was something about the streets: With the yellow glow of the neon lights: Distant reflections from a dome of glass.

The city Copinga was no utopia.

"It's probably not that we're different from other people." Leonide said, "It's something that occurs at a specific location: Something happens, people start talking, and lie leads to lie in a downward spiral. No one wants to know the truth."

"That's why ... I've thought a lot about this: We should leave."

"Leave? To where?"

"To Amarosa."

Leonide was puzzled. She had dreamt of the planet: About man's greatest achievement: The grand utopia where hybrids could live freely.

"How?" Leonide asked, "You know we don't earn much."

"I've thought about it." Daphne said, "We could start our own business. We could think of new ideas. Get better jobs. Even feed on crime."

Leonide looked around her shoulder. The jealousy men sat quietly and listened beside. Leonide tried to hide that she'd seen them. She pressed her foot against Daphne's shoe, blinked and waited for a reaction.

The couple got up and walked out.

Futuristic buildings loomed along Copinga's streets, as residues. They were joined by the glass, which arched over the buildings like a roof.

"Have you noticed that we're being followed?" Leonide said.

The pair went into the smaller alleys. Up the stairs that led to the new streets. There were luminous figures of storefronts, which illuminated the shaded pair. Soon, they found themselves standing on the steps of Daphne's apartment. A framed staircase, built in sections. Just as Daphne took up the plastic tray to the code lock, and reached for the narrow slot, the men appeared a short distance away. One of them raised a gun, took aim and fired a shot. Daphne was hit and fell to the ground. Leonide screamed and looked at the man. She tried to run but was paralyzed. The man aimed again. Leonide waited for the shot, the world came to a halt, but nothing happened. The men disappeared and left the girls on the stairs. Leonide extended down against Daphne body. She felt her pulse. She waved her arms towards others and screamed for an ambulance.

At the hospital, Daphne was very weak. She was in a critical condition. Leonide sat beside her mistress and tried to keep the mood up. The room was drenched in the yellow glow from the windows. The blue light from the ceiling created a peculiar contrast.

"You know there won't be a trip." Daphne said.

"We don't know."

"You need to get to Amarosa by yourself. You need to fulfill our dream. The dream we always had, but didn't dare to admit."

"I'll stay as long as I have to." Leonide said, "Until you become healthy again. Then we go."

"You can't. My time's running out."

Leonide looked at Daphne and it was like the girl became weaker every second. Eventually it became too much and Leonide walked over to the windows and out on the balcony.

Outside the yellow light had an almost hallucinatory effect. The siren from a police car could be heard in the distance. Leonide had been born adult. She'd never had a childhood like ordinary people. Constructed in a lab, she was placed in a dystopia, just to live her life and serve humanity. But she'd never fit on Telga. She didn't want to be a servant.

Sounds could be heard from the bed. Leonide walked in.

"My time's running out," Daphne said. "But I don't want this to be a sad moment. I want you to forget all that has been. I want you to raise money and travel to Amarosa. Ignore the impossibility of the mission. Don't think about what you have. You have nothing. When it comes down to it, you are a born loser. You do whatever it takes to win."

"I can't."

"You can."

Leonide looked at Daphne. The Mistress's face was not shaped like her own. She had more of a girl's face: Softer forms. Fuller Lips: An unconditional thirst for life: A hair that stuck out in all directions, and edges.

"The only important thing is your word." Leonide said.

Daphne looked at Leonide. Her life-force sank. Finally, there was the familiar sound of beeping.

3

ALDANTE

Leonide detached herself from her memories, and joined with the glow from the lava flow. She staggered awkwardly out into the center and stood there. Thereon's interior appeared in all its futuristic glory, like a return to the dark ages: To medieval times. Everything was worn, plagued, as a prehistoric mine. It was forms that suggested forms: Something more than actually existed. Sounds of footsteps could be heard.

The man who made Leonide company did not say hello. He was extremely cautious. He walked like a living skeleton: Relatively young and very skinny, with blue sprawling hair. His forehead was high as Leonide's: Cheekbones were clearly marked. The chin was crimped. He watched the lava flow as a prince of darkness.

Finally Leonide walked up to him.

"Who are you?" She asked.

Aldante viewed Leonide as a ghost. He regarded her with the eyes of an adventurer. Light blue eyes with a searcher's attitude.

"Where do you come from?" Leonide asked.

"Who and what I am, isn't that interesting." He said, "The interesting thing is rather that we're stuck here both: On a desert planet without energy reserves."

"In hell."

Aldante walked up to the glass and looked down into the lava bed. Leonide got the impression that Aldante was a silent man. She didn't attempt to continue the conversation, but removed herself from the space and returned to the bar.

It was much later and the delicate light disappeared as the day turned into night. Leonide went out on the plateau adjacent to the power station. The other shards from the planet were still illuminated by the star. They were cracked at the edges, like a huge explosion had torn them apart. Or was it rather that a celestial body had collided?

Leonide went over dunes of gray gravel. She drowned in the wondrous mystery that Thereon harbored life: It felt so unreal. At the same time, Leonide knew it was all about the practical value: The planet was to no other use than being the only celestial body within astronomical distances. It was used as a gateway to other planets.

Leonide got tired and went towards the spaceship to sleep. But just before she opened the hatch, she heard someone shout: Aldante came running across the dunes, out of breath and stopped in front of Leonide.

"I have heard your story." He said, "I'm also a hybrid. I understand the implications of what you've experienced. I'm just the opposite. I came from Amarosa and would go to Telga. But something happened on the way."

"What then?"

"Let me in and I'll tell you."

"It's too late."

"It's always too late. We're late. But some things are too important to sleep on. Let me tell."

Leonide opened the hatch and let Aldante in.

4

THE ICE PLANET

The planet was like a marbled stone, white with dark veining. But it wasn't smooth, rather rough. Ridges formed terrible patterns on the surface: Cool and original, preserved for millions of years. The comet, which was soon to enter the planet's atmosphere, was traveling in front of the spacecraft Surveyor.

There was a strained anticipation inside the spacecraft. The crew had been sent into outer space, in order to map new terrain. Aldante was just one of them. The others were also hybrids. They were more than young adults: Adults who refused to grow older.

"We follow the comet to the crash site." The Hybrid said, "It will be spectacular."

Desideria was a woman with dyed pink hair. In a way, she reminded of Aldante, in other ways, she had a sensual form. Her clothes were typical of The Foundation: Stitched in a practical way, but with a fit that marked the human form.

The comet burst into flames and crashed down on the planet's surface. The comet tail made the course blurry. It was like a hazy filter between the Surveyor and the planet's surface. At this distance, you could detect larger fragments of ice and rock, but on the whole the phenomenon resembled an illuminated fog.

The ship slowed down and the crew watched the spectacular impact. The crater that formed was a hundred meters in diameter.

Half an hour later the Surveyor had landed and the crew went out. They walked around the crash site, which now was a steaming inferno. Ice and snow had turned into water vapor, and this heated the atmosphere, which normally had a temperature below zero.

To his amazement one of the hybrids discovered strange traces in the ice. It wasn't just a couple, but many. He looked around carefully and noticed that the tracks led from the crash site to many different directions. There were no human traces. These tracks rather resembled a

predator's, a four-legged creature that no one had seen before. They cut one of the footprints from the ice and went back to the Surveyor to analyze.

They found out that the footprints didn't come from any known life form. It was probably a kind of predator, but how this one survived inside the comet, in compact cold, traveling for thousands of years, was inconceivable. The crew decided to continue the search. The creatures were of interest to the hybrids, from an adventurous perspective.

Aldante protested and said he was going to wait in the spaceship. If the others were killed, he would be the one who would return and inform The Foundation.

No one listened.

Hours went by, and the late afternoon turned into night. The crew arrived at a ridge and an amazing cave system. Once inside the tracks disappeared. Aldante did well using a spotlight. They had weapons in the form of needle-sharp picks: Useful for getting up the mountain slopes, but hardly effective against a bloodthirsty carnivore.

"Let's split up and follow the paths wherever they lead." Desideria said. "You know why we're here. Life is no longer about survival: About practical things that lead to boredom and sadness."

Aldante was thinking similar thoughts. Not that he wanted to throw himself off a cliff, but he didn't want to live without danger. Yet he felt that Desideria went too far in her madness. She seemed indifferent: Too drastic. And she didn't build up the excitement in the right way. Aldante said he wanted to return and resume the search the next day.

"You do what you want." Desideria said, "The rest of us will remain here this night." The hybrid went silent as if to highlight the last sentence: "It's what we've waited for since we were born."

"I have no memories of birth." Aldante said. He only remembered the walk from the biolab of The Foundation, and he remembered that it felt easy.

Aldante returned to the Surveyor a few hours later. He fell asleep pretty soon and was awakened by the morning light.

The following day was a terrible awakening: He found the caves. But the crew couldn't be detected. He had to turn on the searchlight. He walked through the cave system, which at times was punctuated by open spots, where the morning light shone on the rocks. He thought he heard noises: He ran towards the sounds, glimpsed dark shapes. But no crew was seen. No corpses. No blood.

He wandered through the cave system throughout the whole day. Finally, he realized that the search was futile, and had to stop.

He returned to the ship, perhaps with the intention to meet his friends again, but he didn't. After a week of futile waiting, he had to leave the planet.

The hybrids were gone.

5

THE DIALOGUE

Leonide didn't accept the newcomer completely, but he was too outspoken. He began to tell stories about life on Amaros: About the dream planet, the place where Leonide would go. He told her about the good planetary conditions: The bright settlements, the open countryside, the blue sea...

"So what is it?" Leonide wondered.

"Follow me and I'll tell you."

They went out of the spaceship and walked over the gray dunes. They continued past the main unit with the dark corridors and the bar. Soon, they found themselves in a rocky recess. There was a plateau and a flowing river bed in the recess: A river bed of glowing lava. Leonide viewed Aldante who hesitated. He gathered himself: He took up a gray stone which he threw in the riverbed. It was consumed by the lava. And it went ablaze with the glowing mass, melted and disappeared in seconds.

"The thing is that we're total opposites." Aldante said. "You come from Telga, a dystopia in every way. A world where hybrids are treated as the artificial constructs they really are, but everything has been distorted into something else."

Aldante watched the lava flow, dreamily.

"You've lived a life as a slave and nurtured a dream of the opposite. I, on the other hand, come from the world that you've been dreaming about. And the world is as good as you've been thinking."

Leonide viewed Aldante with a depressed facial expression. Not that she thought of Amarosa, the story of Daphne, or even on Aldante's remarkable adventures. She imagined that nothing revolutionary would be said. At the same time, there was a certain recognition in the way Aldante presented his words: As if she could follow the logic: As if she thought so herself.

"I've searched for your opposite." Aldante said, "I was born on Amarosa. I've cultivated a dream that I one day would meet endless struggle and lose my soul. It's not that I want to remain in that state! I want to experience how it is to be treated as something else than a human."

Leonide heard the words but wasn't exactly surprised. She knew that the hybrids were thinking this way. Everything was totally calculated and clear. There was no shadow of a doubt in Aldante's conviction.

"That's what's strange." Aldante continued, "It's incredibly strange that an artificial construct would develop willfulness. It's contrary to the very concept. Hybrids on Telga would serve people in practical affairs. Hybrids on Amarosa would prepare the landscape for the colonists to come."

"You mean that there's something wrong in your programming? That you've diverged from your real purpose?"

"No, but I'm a deviant. You're a deviant. There aren't many of us. The question is, do you believe what I say? Do you understand that your decision to go to Amarosa won't lead to something in the end? That I one day will be like you and you will be like me?"

"I think you've overestimated your suffering. It's one thing to feel boredom, another thing to have the threat of death hanging over you: Every moment of your life."

Aldante didn't reply, took up a new stone and threw it in the lava bed.

"I could tell you many more stories about Telga." Leonide continued, "It's not as simple as it sounds. I had many positive elements in my meaningless life: I tried different jobs, different employers. I tried to maintain a facade of inner satisfaction. I devoted myself to secret passions in protection of dark buildings. As you know, I had a mistress. Completely unwarranted. But the sum of it all is that my suffering was increased. I lived to die, was resurrected and died again. Finally I disappeared. My energy was just a movement of assumed behaviors: Totally without soul. Just to maintain the facade."

Aldante wondered.

"You have no facade to maintain." He said, "You are a facade. You are an artificial construct, created to maintain life."

"I've diverged?"

"Yes, you've diverged. I've diverged. The only thing we do in this moment is to fantasize about the life we will never have. About the places we will never visit. And perhaps this is the same thing."

Leonide started laughing. They both laughed at the irony of the moment. Finally they got tired and returned to the main building.

Once in the bar the couple was greeted by the teenagers who Leonide had seen before. Something felt very strange: One of the women looked exactly like a certain Desideria from Aldante's story: Pink hair, sensual charisma and fitting outfit. When the woman saw the couple she got up from the table and walked over to the visitors.

"Hello, I'm Desideria." She said, "Have you listened to Aldante's story?"

6

ON-BOARD THE SURVEYOR

They sat in the command module of the space ship. The panels reflected the early morning light. A digital computer calculated routes and asked for new data: A beeping sound that repeated every second. On the walls you could see photos from Amarosa: White and blue visions, lit by a pink sun. On the whole it was a very strange event.

Leonide watched the crew as resurrected from the dead.

"You mustn't listen to Aldante." Desideria said, "He suffers from an emotional trauma and creates stories to escape reality."

Leonide listened. She thought Aldante was strange but couldn't imagine the extent of it. The hybrid stood silent in a corner, unaffected. It seemed that he was still left in his own world.

"Nothing happened on the ice planet." Desideria continued, "We weren't even there! We're out on a routine mission to investigate the energy plant on Thereon. Now, we're going back to Amarosa."

Leonide didn't grab it but soon felt as if a heavy weight fell off inside. Desideria saw it in her eyes. Leonide met Desideria's eyes and felt a great weariness. It was like all the tension was released and she kept quiet.

"I don't have to say it." Desideria said, "But of course you can come along."

A few days later The Surveyor left Thereon and headed out into outer space. Leonide had spent much time in bed. The journey to Amarosa would take three months, and the hybrids could rest.

One night Leonide woke up and heard voices from the living module. She loosened the straps, moved weightlessly over the clothes, pulled them on and went out to the living module. It was a rollicking mood of the party. All the crew had gathered in the rotating unit, which created artificial gravity. Now Aldante was fully engaged to design a character, as written by him for an ongoing role play. He gesticulated and played with involvement. From the facial expression to judge, and of the phrases he used, Leonide came to the conclusion that he wasn't the least bit good. He played a character, just as he'd played a game for Leonide earlier. But now, everyone knew it was unreal.

People threw dice, curses were thrown and soon enough even Leonide became part of the game.

Then something happened.

The longer the hours, and the more the players lost themselves in the characters, it was like fiction became reality: The disputes became so real, the defeats so hideous, that the players barely played anymore. They were at war, but they didn't admit it.

Aldante looked at the others with a hollow glance. The others looked at him. He fell out of character and went up to the wall. He said he didn't want to play anymore. He felt that they didn't trust him and that he didn't trust them.

They heard a creaking sound from a part of the spaceship. A sort of vibration and it was like Leonide lost consciousness. It was like a falling sensation, a pressure on the chest.

The others felt the same. They were really afraid. They finished the game and went off to the command module to control the computer. No anomalies were detected. Oxygen levels were normal. They decided to let the matter rest.

Leonide went to bed with a feeling of uneasiness. It didn't feel real. It was as if the event had changed something within her. She didn't dare talk to anyone about her feelings. The worst thing was the look she'd seen in Aldante's face: He was absent in the wrong way.

Maybe it was worse than the others admitted.

7

AMAROSA

She could hardly believe it herself: Surveyor sank toward the landing site and the white buildings, linked by airy walkways, towered beside the spaceship. They weren't the same kind as the buildings on Telga and Thereon: Gone was the dystopian look, the pained and worn. These buildings were rather futuristic dreams in white.

Large sculptures, depicting famous hybrids, could be seen on the courtyard.

The hybrids were well received and were shown into the main facility. The room was lit by the pink sun, almost blazing. The floor was glossy, split by black and white stone tiles. There were circular tables with matching sofas. The hybrids were treated to delicious energy drinks. The management wanted to know the situation at Thereon: If the transformers had been broken or something else.

"The way we look at it..." Desideria said, "The technology on Thereon is too old and need to be replaced."

"It's a strategic position." The foreman said, "But a lot happens here on Amarosa."

Aldante got up from the sofa and walked out. No one was surprised except the foreman, who wondered if something was wrong.

"He had mental problems on the way out." Desideria said, "He created his own imaginary world. Then he came to a realization, but became more difficult to talk to. We suspect that he got tired and wanted to go his own way."

The conversation continued and it seemed that the foreman became more and more absent. The others suspected that something was wrong.

"I suggest that we go out on the balcony." The foreman said, "Take a look in the direction of the sun!"

The hybrids were very surprised but got up and walked over to the large sliding door. An orderly unlocked the sliding mechanism and started to pull the door to the side. The friction had the door to squeak in a disturbing way. Other assistants gathered around the group, as if it was a crucial moment.

Leonide found herself standing on the balcony: An airy place with genetically engineered flowers. The vegetation didn't seem to follow the laws of nature; they were too bushy, too decorative, and too exquisitely impressive to be the work of evolution. Others in the group weren't that surprised.

Leonide looked towards the sun: There, in a case of glass, rested a replica of the city Copinga, now sending troublesome reflections from the pink sun!

None of the others could believe it.

"It's not what you think." The foreman said, "Follow me and I'll explain."

The hybrids went back and sat down in the sofas.

"This is how it is..." The foreman said.

”It was as you already know something that happened three months ago: People woke up in the middle of the night and felt different. There was a falling sensation, a kind of pressure in the chest. People were afraid and an alarm broke out. Some were quiet, other screamed. Some believed in end of the universe. The next morning, everything was different. We noticed that new buildings had arisen out of nowhere, that people we never met was in our midst, even the city Copinga had arrived, but in a smaller format. We thought that no one had any explanation. We were wrong. It turned out that scientists working for The Foundation, had predicted the phenomenon thirty years ago. They had created a theoretical model of the universe as a non-static system, with births and deaths, and then birth again, in an infinite number of versions. The past would repeat itself. The old would come back, but always in a new way. This is what happened three months ago. In this version of the universe, Copinga is no longer on Telga. The city is located right here on Amarosa, in much the same form as before. The difference is that the city has a new purpose: It’s no longer a threat to the hybrids, rather an interesting place to visit for the denizens of Amarosa: Hybrids tired of all the beauty: Hybrids in search for something new.”

The hybrids were taken away. They understood that something happened three months ago: In the spaceship. They had become strangers to each other.

”This is where it gets interesting.” The foreman said, ”The friends you’ve known may have undergone personality changes. Memories of your past can come back in new forms. Think of it as an evolving spiral.”

”So Aldante...” Desideria said.

”Yes, exactly! What happened is what you think: He became different. You became different. Even the ideas he nurtured may be true.”

A buzz went through the group. Nobody dared to believe that this was real. Some wondered if it was a joke. But the fact remained that Copinga rested out there, in a reflective shell of glass.

A little later, Leonide was called in to an office for a private meeting. The foreman told her that her life would change. Everyone’s life had changed: Certain hybrids for the better, certain hybrids for the worse. He asked her to pinch herself to see if she was dreaming. The next day, she would go out to sea, towards the outskirts of the city, on peninsulas: Where large skyscrapers searched for the clouds, as symbols of the new era. There, in an apartment, in the middle of paradise, she would meet Daphne.

8

DAPHNE

The day had dawned and Leonide rose from the electrically-powered transport vehicle. The foreman had long since left her. She only saw the gentle driver of the transport vehicle. Felt the weight of the backpack on her shoulders, and walked across the little bridge, which marked the beginning of the outer part of the peninsula. The peninsula where the gigantic skyscrapers rose up into the sky and Daphne waited above the clouds.

The entrance to the mighty building was like a terrace, which stretched out, covered, but no porter could be seen. She opened the door and went inside. She came to a hall with an elevator and a stairwell.

On the way up she didn’t dare to think about the dead. She didn’t form images that could be broken. A ventilation system sent fresh air through coveted vents and cooled the hybrid. She put her right hand to the vents and wiped the sweat off.

When the elevator stopped Leonide realized that she hadn't arrived at the right place. It was a new hall and a door led to a glazed walk. She went across the walk and looked down toward the distant ground. The little bridge that she'd passed could barely be discerned. It was like a small matchbox, though narrower. Leonide came to a hall which led to an elevator.

Leonide stood at the door to her mistress's apartment. She rang the bell. She called several times. But no one opened. Finally, she took the courage and pulled at the door handle. The door opened.

Leonide found herself standing in a futuristic apartment. It wasn't like any apartment she was used to. The surfaces were larger. It was higher ceilings. The characteristic blue flowers from The Foundation were here, but these were red. The pink light of the dawn was almost violet.

Leonide walked around. She didn't inspect all the rooms, but continued to the balcony. She opened the sliding door. A woman was standing some distance away, and watered some flowers. This was the back of a familiar shape: A woman she'd known but now wearing different clothes. Daphne turned and walked over to Leonide.

The lovers watched each other. There was no hug, it came no friendly gesture. It was an earnest of another kind: A moment of recognition, but also of fear. Leonide didn't know who Daphne was any longer. She didn't know herself. But they finally greeted and Daphne led Leonide into a studio.

There, in front of the face of the astonished woman, was a collection of flowers: Rampant, jungle-like, audaciously hair-raising. And amidst these flowers was a statue. It was like the sculptures at the main facility of The Foundation. But this statue represented Leonide: Leonide in a nude pose.

Daphne put her hands on Leonide's face and told her to turn a blind eye. On command, she had another look. The flowers and the sculpture came to life with lights that Daphne had mounted in the ceiling.

"Have you done this for me?" Leonide wondered.

"Just for you." Daphne said, "This is the only thing I've done in the last three months. It was hard at first. I looked at old pictures. I started working with the porous sandstone. But nothing looked good. I gave up. I started looking at others. I hired people from The Foundation. I asked them to do the same thing they'd done before. Nobody could. So I finally had to learn everything by myself. And here you have it."

"Incredible."

"The most incredible thing was what happened when I died. I didn't come to heaven. Not to another dimension. I didn't know I died. I was just weak and tired. It was like a falling sensation in the moment of death. I was dizzy." Daphne took a couple of breaths. "Suddenly, I was in a different bed! Here, in this apartment."

"Maybe we're in heaven now?" Leonide suggested. "Perhaps neither you nor I are alive? Given what happened on the trip..."

Daphne smiled. She asked Leonide to look more closely at the sculpture. Leonide walked up to it and let her hands glide over the porous surface. She felt the distinct cheekbones. The narrow eyebrows, the pointed nose. She felt the crease on the upper lip. It was like everything was there: As if Daphne had caught Leonide, in her pained expression.

"I'm proud of what I've done." Daphne continued. "I tried not so much picture you as to find you. I know I'm not good at much. I'm just the perfect girlfriend. I don't know art and have no difficult nature. I'm just heat, you're coldness. You reside in dark places; I want to stay here, on Amarosa, with no worries."

"But I wanted to Amarosa."

"Just for me. You made the trip for me."

The lovers left the room and went into the kitchen. It was a huge kitchen. There were many varieties of kitchen equipment. They decided to crown the reunion with a shared meal.

They wouldn't just eat the food, they would fix the food. They used vegetarian ingredients from Amarosa: From the outer colonies, where people would come one day. It was a colorful mixture without wit and senses: They mixed freely from the imagination. Fried certain ingredients, cooked others. As they ate, it wasn't for the good taste; it was rather for the idea behind. Leonide hadn't dared to hope for this reunion. Not Daphne either. She'd thought it would be something else: A huge disappointment: A disaster. But it was like a marriage in heaven.

9

ON THE ZOO

The city spread out in all directions. Leonide wasn't left at the outer peninsula anymore. She had gone around during the morning. A few weeks had passed since she met Daphne again. Now she was in an unusual district, in the southeastern part of the city.

She was surprised by the life lived by the hybrids. She'd expected something better than the life on Telga: Something more human. But it was much better than she'd dared to hope. The hybrids mostly went around on amusement rides. Sometimes they stopped for refreshments. They played in the colorful parks.

And some went to the Zoo.

The Zoo wasn't much different from the others. It harbored domestic animal species: Animal species that were out in the open.

Leonide stopped at a fence that was completely different from the others. This place was completely covered. The snow and ice was thick inside. There was a different atmosphere. Leonide didn't see the animals very clearly.

She stood a long time and looked at the space inside the glass. She read on a sign that it contained aliens from another planet: An ice planet on the outskirts of the solar system. A planet discovered by a hybrid named Aldante.

Leonide gasped.

She kept looking around and soon discovered that something was moving behind a hill: A remarkable shade of black. It was difficult to discern any real form. The creature walked a bit and then disappeared into a cave.

Suddenly footsteps were heard and Leonide turned around. There, right in front of her, was Aldante.

"You may not understand it yourself." Aldante said, "But I have everything thought out. It wasn't supposed to be like this: That I would find the creature in one life, lose it in the other, and then come back to this reality anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the story I told you was true. We went to the ice planet, we found the creatures, and all my friends disappeared without a trace. But it happened in the universe that was before the universe where I met you."

Leonide didn't know what to say. She looked at the sad figure of Aldante. He looked like a remnant of his former self.

"It doesn't get better than this." He said, "Actually, it makes no sense that I continue my story."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you have it worse than me."

Leonide was quite shaken. Not that she believed Aldante. But she saw his grief and despair. It was like he was in a place no one else could enter. As if his distant only was a manifestation of a deeper despair.

"That being inside the glass." Leonide said, "What is this creature?"

"I could go into it. But that's something you aren't ready for yet. You think you have a life worth living, but you have nothing."

Leonide thought she glimpsed something in the corner of her eye: An awful creature that moved along the glass pane. But it could have been an illusion.

"I can say it aloud." He continued, "You will still discover it soon. The truth is that you have no life. I don't mean that you are unhappy. I mean that you literally have no life. That you are a biological machine without consciousness."

Leonide started laughing. Aldante just looked at the hybrid, but didn't allow himself to be carried away.

"You can check it out for yourself." He continued, "Everything is in the very documents of The Foundation."

"How can I not be alive?" Leonide said, "I'm standing right here with you."

"This sentence, 'I'm standing right here with you.', is just a mechanical repetition of words. It's your programming, your existence, your thoughts. Your life is just a guise. In fact, you're a good imitation of life. Your emotions are like a beautiful simulation. Your relationship to The Foundation and your mistress are a masterpiece of biological engineering, and not just that! You're doing the exact opposite to what you were expected to do! That one thing does not add up! I don't live, you're not alive. My friends are dead. My old friends I mean."

"I think you've become dizzy from all of your experiences! All these universes, these variations of the same thing. You've confused one thing with the other and flipped the concepts. You need to think in more simple ways and stop looking for evil."

"That's what I tried. Don't think I haven't tried. But every attempt I made only ends in more conviction. The only thing I would advise you to do is to continue as you have done. You can't believe me. Return to your mistress: This biological machine that conjures up wonders in your artificial brain. But in the end it's probably only one thing that matters: To be like me: To realize that you can't improve the universe. The universe is not available. Not for us, only for real people. The only thing that you want to do when you realize that you are not is to delete the others that actually exist. Just because the lie is so huge that you want to take revenge on your makers."

"Are you going to kill people?"

"Not exactly. There are no people here. What I intend to do, no words can describe. I will just let you do what you think you feel and leave it."

With that being said Leonide glanced back at the glassed enclosure and tried to see the creature. But everything was dead and nothing could be seen.

Aldante went away.

10

BACK WITH DAPHNE

The lovers had moved away from the skyscrapers and were in a farming area a few miles inland. The words by Aldante had not sunk in very deeply. They dug with shovels in the loosened soil. Creepers by alien origin were reaching for the top of wooden fences. A breeze came in from the hinterland, and Leonide's ponytail swayed in the wind.

"It's something I've wondered ever since I came to Amarosa." Leonide said. She looked toward Daphne with worry in her eyes.

"What's the problem?"

"It's like Aldante, my travel buddy, fades away. He disappears into his own imagination. But I don't think that's the fundamental problem. He carries something dark within himself: Much like he wants everyone to be dead."

"What does he say?"

"He says we're not here. Neither you or me. That we have no consciousness. That we only exist as biological machines, and imitate life."

Daphne was quiet. Leonide looked at her mistress. It was a singular sight of something highly unusual: The woman had color. Gone was the chalk-white skin from Telga. Gone were those bags under the eyes: Weariness, aversion.

"What do you think?" Leonide asked.

"Is it important what I think?" Daphne asked, "If you want to save your friend, why do you hang out with me instead of talking to him?"

"I stay away because I can't reach him." Leonide said, "The more I say the more convinced he becomes about his own views."

Daphne poked in the earth. She put down a plant and raked over. Finally, she approached Leonide. The hybrid thought Daphne tried to kiss her, but nothing happened.

"Could it be..." Daphne said, "That the reason you can't reach him is because he's right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, that we actually are biological machines, just like him."

Leonide just glared at Daphne. She thought she was joking. But there was only seriousness in Daphne's eyes. Leonide continued to stare. She thought of the impossibility of the moment. She couldn't believe her ears. But then she began to think about what happened on the ship. Could it be that she was the only one who thought like this? Even Daphne seemed to be unconcerned about the issue. The hybrid sought contact but Leonide felt discomfort. She abandoned Daphne and walked away a short distance. She looked at the plants: Green systems of roots that reached for the top of the fence. Here and there she saw a flower in violet. She watched the plants. Or did she really see them? Was it just a process in her head who tried to convince her that this was the case? What would it be like to have an "I"? Would it feel different from now?

A few days later Leonide spent time with Aldante at sea. She wanted to know more about Aldante's reasoning: If there was a way out or not.

Aldante wasn't happy about the thinking process. Thought had no meaning in a world that never existed and which never could disappear. They stopped the Jet propulsion of the boat, which sucked in the air in the front of the boat and sent it aft. It was a landscape sparsely decorated with small islands. There were underwater grounds there: Dangerous rock formations that could be seen just below the surface.

"It's extremely easy to prove that I haven't fooled myself." Aldante said, "It's not about official documents or small reflections of everyday life. When it comes down to it, you can't learn the truth by going through a mental process. This information is just information, whether it's in your mind or not."

"So how do you do it?"

"I'm doing nothing. I've realized that if there's no information inside, there's nothing else either. It's completely different for people. They experience something we call 'Pure Consciousness'. That means, when all thoughts and feelings have disappeared, when there are no actions, there is still something else."

"What would it be?"

"There you are! Just your question, 'What would it be?', reveals you! You've never experienced anything else. You don't understand the meaning of the sentence, 'I exist.'"

Leonide said nothing more.

THE NIGHT OF LOVE

They had been sitting on the balcony and looked at the dusk. Leonide and Daphne. It was the view of the sea and skyscrapers that rose above the clouds. The clouds had now adopted a purple color. It was like a fluffy blanket that didn't lay still but actually moved.

The lovers held the hot chocolate drinks that they made in the kitchen a few hours ago. Life was easy and gentle. But Leonide couldn't get the question out of her head: That nothing mattered, whatever they did.

They said nothing. They watched the lights being lit and turned off on the opposite side. Some young people went out on the balcony and shouted into the warm night. The air hadn't gone out of the relationship. Daphne was still Leonide's mistress.

They went in.

They went to the bedroom but didn't take off their clothes.

They settled down, on top of a black coverlet. They began to fantasize about a possible future.

Soon they were in the capital, in the small variant of Telga and walked along the street. Under the yellow glow: The street where Daphne had been shot.

They met the killers. They crouched down and responded to the fire. Now it wasn't Daphne who fell but the others. The hybrids called the ambulance, but the men didn't survive the night.

Suddenly a sound was heard. It was the sound of a door creaking. Maybe it was the front door? Maybe it was the balcony door pushed aside?

And so it was there: The alien creature from the ice planet! From the zoo that hadn't previously existed. Before the lights turned off they saw the shape in its original splendor: The wolf-like figure, the scales on the upper body. The two heads with fearsome jaws.

The hybrids tried to run. But the muscles wouldn't move. The beast came down on the women. They fought for their lives but they didn't get the upper hand.

The two heads were armored with scales of a dragon and the forehead was crowned with horns.

No one knew how it happened. Suddenly they were in the living room. Blood was pouring from cuts in the skin of the hybrids. They approached the kitchen. They got hold of sharp objects: Punctured one lung on the terrible predator.

They thought they had won but an explosion had the skyscraper to roar. Aldante was there. The building began to collapse.

They ran up to the balcony. The door had been pushed aside. They saw the violet clouds pass by when the building fell to the ground. The creature was behind them. It was given a shot and fell down on the floor.

The hybrids fainted. Then they were on their way out to sea.

They were traveling on the Jet boat. Aldante steered. He helped them away from civilization and also from themselves.

Leonide grabbed the steering and threw Aldante aside. She turned abruptly and heard the terrible sound of an underwater ground. The boat capsized. The hybrids were swimming for their lives in the rolling waves of the troubled water.

Leonide realized she had no life. Not even the experiences of the skyscraper had felt real. She was sucked down under the water: Daphne also. Aldante swam with the revolver at his side.

Leonide looked at Daphne. Daphne looked at Leonide. They swallowed water and then they were gone.

12

THE NEW VERSION OF THE UNIVERSE

They were together now. Leonide and Aldante. Surveyor was like a ghost ship that sailed beyond time and space. They had long been traveling behind the tail of the illuminated comet. The ice planet loomed farther away, in all its pristine glory.

They didn't know that this was the next epoch in their lives unknown. In a universe that didn't follow traditional laws.

The comet continued forward, turned slightly towards the planet's orbit but wasn't to be carried away. This time, it simply wasn't pulled down, but continued past the planet and out into the darkness. Leonide was working for The Foundation just like Aldante. She realized that they had to explore the comet before it disappeared for good.

No one remembered anything from the past.

They floated weightlessly in the frigid outer space. They used explosive charges, to find the way to the comet's interior. And then they would analyze the constituents.

What they found was nothing more than a creature. It was not the two-headed creature from before. This was more bearlike. But it had a protective shield with thorns. So terrible was the figure that the impression got the hidden memories to cool. They decided to thaw the creature and put it on the ice planet.

It had become night but the morning star's first rays reflected from the mountain's highest peaks. The expanses were white and the snowflakes twinkled like the stars on the firmament.

The being was left alone and came to life. It stood up: Silently, then snorting. It was brown with faint light yellow spots.

Suddenly sounds were heard: Sounds of howls. It was the creatures from ancient times. But these didn't come with the comet. They had lived on the planet since ancient times, in a fictional reality.

Leonide and Aldante retreated towards the spaceship. The brown creature with the thorny shield, soon found itself surrounded. The hybrids watched the spectacle from a snowy hill.

The black beasts pounced on the brown. The blood sprayed. They let the process take time and left nothing to the cold.

Leonide cried. She remembered the love of the past. She didn't believe in evil, but evil believed in her. She was a machine, but she was still alive. She saw the futility of the current scenario.

Aldante got to see the truth: The truth about the creature that lived on forever.

It had been traveling on the ice planet through time immemorial. It had killed and been killed. But it was resurrected again. Each time it had become bigger and better. Now, its eyes had completely disappeared. It had become something so terrible that no one dared to dream about it.

The same was true for Leonide. She knew that no one could step in and change the state of the world. Any attempt to save life got the darkness to shine.

But she didn't want it to.

Aldante didn't want it to.

No one of the hybrids cared anymore.

THE END