

ESCAPE

FROM A PERFECT WORLD



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Escape from a Perfect World

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1.

Garcia opened his eyes and saw a light blue wall. He didn't know where he was, who he was or even why he had lost his memories of himself. He lay staring at the wall for a few seconds, then sat up on the bed.

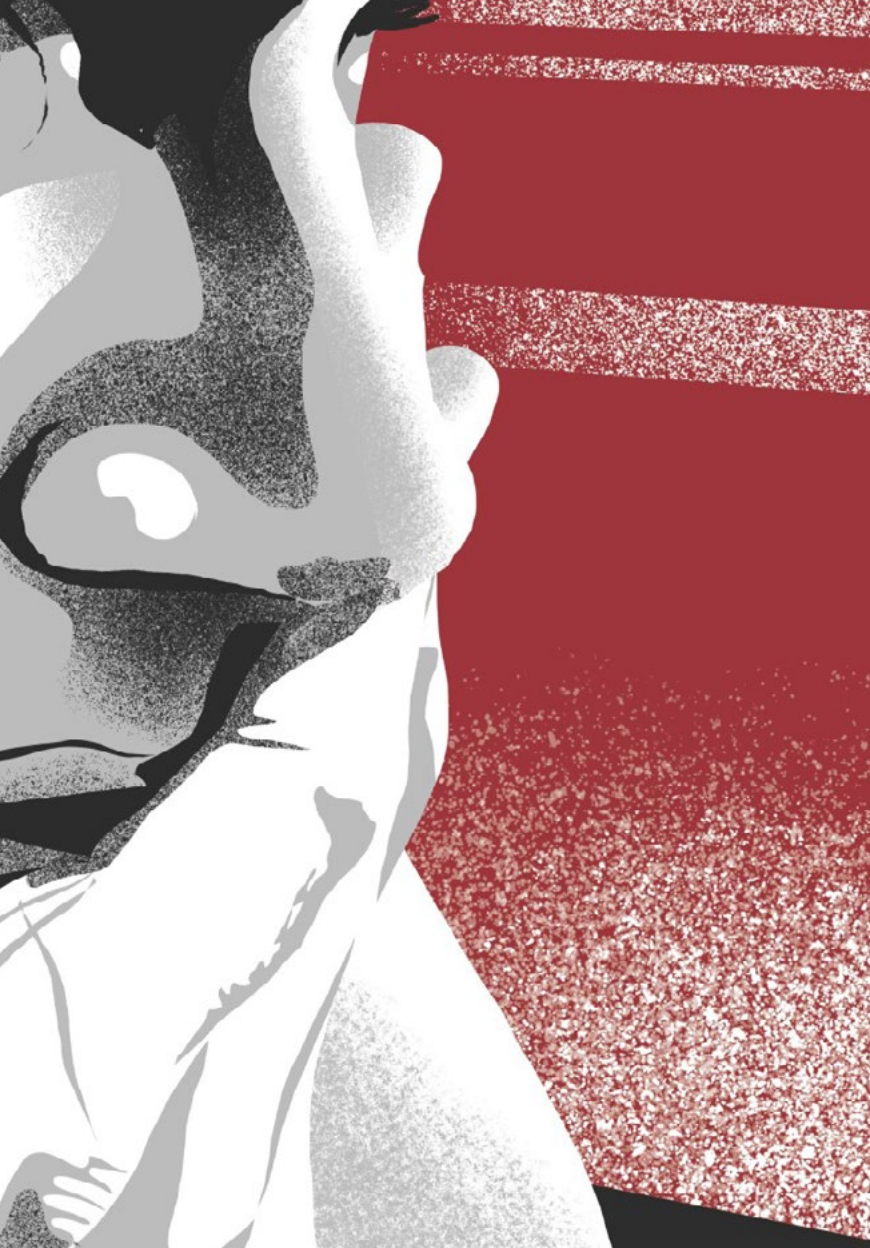
He was in a bedroom, sitting on a messy double bed with two pillows, two blankets and a creased bedsheet. He had gone to bed in his clothes, albeit without his shoes.

But when? And why hadn't he take off his clothes?

He tried to remember his name but couldn't. He was getting more and more nervous when fear gripped his stomach. He felt as if he was floating in nothingness, without anything to hold on to... He quickly stood up and stepped in front of the window. The bright light burned his eyes as he pulled the curtains apart.

He was standing in a window on the fourth floor, looking down at the world.

He saw a river, a bridge, and a hill with a cross on the other side, with an enormous human figure holding her hands up on top of it. A statue. To the left, an Art Nouveau hotel. To the right, a bit further away, another hill with a castle on it. *The Danube, Budapest*—he thought. The river is the Danube, and that there is Buda castle. *That means I must be on the Pest side.*



At least I know where I am—he thought. He was breathing heavily—the panic faded slowly. He began to wonder why he can't remember who he is if he recognizes where he is.

He looked around for his shoes. It didn't matter; he forgot about it quickly. He couldn't find it anyway... He walked out of the room and automatically turned towards the kitchen. This is where I live—he surmised, even though nothing seemed familiar.

He was alone in the apartment.

The digital panel of the fridge door was flashing as if to give a warning, displaying the items about to run out.

"Would you like to order the indicated items?" it asked. Garcia hesitated, then pressed No. Not now. "Set reminder to one hour; ten hours; one day," the machine offered. Garcia picked "One day". He couldn't care less about groceries right now.

He opened the fridge to take a look. Vegetables, fruit, kombucha tea. Cheese, ready-to-serve food, and a fitness menu with a strip that said "degradable, environmentally friendly packaging". *Great. One with the planet*, he thought, although he couldn't remember where he heard that line. *What else do we have here?* Lactose-free milk. He grabbed the tea and took a sip. He didn't like it. Does this belong to someone else? The one sleeping on the other half of the double bed?

He could feel the smell of a woman in the apartment.

He closed the fridge door and glimpsed at the clock: 2:03 PM. He reached out and tapped it—the display moved, revealing the date: September 10, 2062.

“Sunshine, occasional showers, one mm of precipitation. Recommended outfit: water repellent clothing. Would you like to send your measurements to the nearest clothing salon? Address: Váci Street...” No.

“Would you like to talk?” the fridge asked.

Garcia’s finger hovered over No for a while, but then he changed his mind. Maybe he can get some information out of it... his name at least, if nothing else.

“Yes.”

“Hello, Garcia,” the fridge said in a pleasant female voice. “How was your day?”

Garcia. My name is Garcia.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “You tell me.”

The fridge kept silent for a few seconds.

“I do not sense your ego,” it said. “Please enter your ID security code.”

“I didn’t even know my name until just now,” Garcia grumbled, unsatisfied. “If that is indeed even me.”

“Enter the security code,” the female voice repeated with the same pleasant, soft tone, but Garcia could swear he heard it turn slightly threatening. He had no

idea about the security code. In fact, he didn't even know what kind of code it could be. Numbers? Numbers and letters? A word or a phrase? A tune?

"I don't remember," he shrugged. "I forgot."

"Please sit down. I'm calling security," said the fridge. "Have some kombucha while you wait. Remember, it detoxifies the liver, which your high gamma-GT levels could use right now..."

Garcia had no intention of sitting down and waiting for security. The refrigerator's AI had probably already notified them, but he did not want to see any officials until he found out who he was and what he was doing here.

He found his shoes in the hall, in front of the door. Apparently, he nicely had taken them off when he arrived. This time, he put them on quickly and left the apartment.

2.

Garcia was struck by the damp heat in the street. It was an early fall afternoon; the sun was shining bright. He stopped to look around. Where should he start, where should he go? What should he do now? What does one do in a situation like this? Should he see a doctor?

All he had was questions and a faint sense of something missing. Something was missing from the city he had got used to. But what?

Small, self-driving cars passed him by silently as if they weren't even real but toys. The solar-paneled blacktop even absorbed the sound of the tires. There was barely any traffic; he saw more cyclists than cars on the wharf. Budapest was showing its calm and quiet face.

But something was definitely missing.

"Hello, Garcia," a well-dressed man in his fifties greeted. He was smiling; he obviously knew him. "Going for an afternoon walk? Or searching for ideas?"

"Just a walk," Garcia said under his nose. He managed to take a good look at the man: styled beard, wavy hair, athletic, well-groomed appearance, loosely buttoned outfit. *Satisfaction*, he thought.

"Sometimes you need that too," the satisfied man with the goatee and mustache nodded. "To just exist. Am I right?"

"Certainly." Garcia knew he had to sound affirmative, but this was the best he could do. For some reason he couldn't agree with the other person without any reservations.

"How is the career change working out?" the unknown man asked. It was obvious he wanted to chat. "We haven't talked since you quit... Have you found what you were looking for?"

What career change?

"I have," Garcia replied with uncertainty.

The man laughed out loud.

"That's not very convincing. You even gave me the talk about 'people needing change every five years to keep their brain energetic,' and 'the need for self-fulfillment must come before comfort.' You should be a bit more determined after that!"

"Determined, as in..."

"As in 'I made the right choice by changing, Ákos, and everything's perfectly fine.' Like that."

"Yes... I do think so now." But Garcia didn't know if he really did believe that. He looked around again, this time to look for a way out.

"It'll get better," the man named Ákos reassured. "If you feel like you're doing something useful, you should stay. If not, then you really do switch easier than I do... Although Anikó is already prodding me to step out of my comfort zone. But what can I do, I love animals and I enjoy working in animal protection. Granted, I have given some thought to seeking some challenges and joining the effort to save one of the reclone species. I like the thylacine project of the Borneans, but... Borneo is far away. A three-hour flight; no one wants to spend that much time traveling..."

"Don't be so lazy" Garcia let slip. He did not like the guy. He found his showing off irritating.

Luckily, the bearded man didn't notice the sarcasm in Garcia's words; he just kept on smiling.

"I'll think about it," he promised.

“That’s the least you can do,” Garcia said with a nod. “But I’m sorry, Ákos—he gave emphasis to the name like it was important—I have to go now...”

“Of course, go! I won’t keep you. This sunshine is too pretty to waste or precious time on the pavement... Have a productive and satisfactory night, Garcia!”

Garcia rushed off to the south along the bank.

“Stay away from the bridge,” the bearded man cried after him. “There was some kind of a mess there in the morning.”

Garcia had no intentions of going on the bridge. He didn’t even know where he was going. Arriving to a square, he looked at the street sign: Fővám Square. He stopped. If not towards the bridge, then away from the Danube. He turned towards the city and soon found himself walking by cafés and restaurants. He fancied a coffee—but coffee does not come free. He could have paid with his ego or his ID, but he had neither.

Then something occurred to him; a hesitant thought. He raised his hand to his ear and touched the base of his right earlobe. The ego chip had to be there. He felt something, but he wasn’t sure if it’s not just a cartilage. *The entire ear is a cartilage!* He reprimanded himself.

Eventually he sat down on a bench.

He saw electric wasps scurrying above. They were like worker bees flying around a hive. Buzzing

round and round, shooting up then descending, following the path of their owners on the ground, observing, taking pictures, recording and sending information to the ego of their owners. *Wasps*, Garcia thought. *Personal microdrones. I know what they are called, I know everyone has one, and I know they monitor the environment. I know all about them. Why? How do I know I'm in Budapest? How can I talk without even knowing who I am?* This was the most confusing of it all. He knew the world, but not himself.

His thoughts swerved back to coffee, and he started staring at the people sitting, drinking and talking as if they were parts of another world that he's looking at through a window. Everyone seemed wealthy, satisfied, healthy and care-free. Not a troubled face, a pair of baggy eyes or a tense expression to be seen.

"I'm so proud of Tamás's social responsibility," a woman next to him said. She was talking to her friend, holding a bouquet of flowers. "He contacted our representative and is now spending a month in Parliament. He's only fourteen but he already knows what he wants to do after he graduates."

"You should be proud," her friend remarked. "I hope Csenge also figures out what she wants soon..."

"Is she interested in anything?"

"Sociology, but to be honest, I don't understand any of the books she reads."

School, Garcia thought. *Where did I go to school?*
He could not remember, no matter how hard he tried.

Without anything better to do, he kept listening to the two women, who now began talking about the representative and the processes of parliamentary democracy. They agreed to meet their representative and have him put forward a proposal that would allow such activities of high school students to count towards their social utility index—which their pensions will be based on...

At this point Garcia felt like he could keep silent no more and turned to the women.

"Excuse me!" he addressed the women. "What's the average life expectancy these days?"

"A hundred and ten years," replied the one whose son was called Tamás. "But I think by the time our children get old, that'll be more like a hundred and thirty. At least it's that much in Scandinavia already.

I have about a hundred years left then, Garcia thought. I lost the first twenty or thirty; what does it matter? Be positive, Garcia! Or whoever you are.

At that moment, a girl stopped in front of him.

"You're just sitting here?" she asked. She had long, straight black hair with rainbow rainbow-colored ends—as per the latest trends. She was slim, with thin shoulders and small breasts. She laughed with her eyes and her entire face.

Garcia recognized her smell. It was the same smell in as in the apartment. Familiar and sweet. Comforting.

He smiled at her.

"I came to get some fresh air."

"You looked pretty rough this morning." She sat down on the bench next to him. You passed out without saying a word. I had to take off your shoes because you came to bed wearing them.

"Really? I'm—I'm sorry."

"What happened last night? And where were you? Why didn't you come home?"

"There's something wrong with my ID," he groaned to get out of having to answer.

"Have you run a systems check?"

"Not yet." He looked in the direction of the cafés. "I haven't fully woken up yet."

She understood his gestures.

"Let's get a coffee!"

They sat at one of the tables and ordered two lattes. Garcia listened and gazed at the wasps circling high above. It occurred to him that he might have one up there somewhere too.

"I also lost contact with my wasp," he said.

"What contact?" She was baffled. "You turned it off a few days ago, don't you remember? You said you'd do an experiment to see what it's like to live without AR."

"That's right!" he lied. "I'm so stupid." An android waiter arrived with the lattes.

"How was your day?" he asked the girl who was sizing him up with a frown. "Don't worry, I'm just a bit confused—no wasp, no ID... imagine yourself like that!"

"Alright, that's true. I felt like living in a steam-punk world today... It calms me down. I don't even know what I'd do if I couldn't recolor the world with AR filters."

"Are you that lost without them"?

"Yup. That much. It bums me out. I had to fight for computer time again. I have a theory about the layers of the multiverse but since I'm only twenty-seven, nobody will take me seriously..."

"That's a passing phase."

"Being twenty-seven?"

"No, people not taking you seriously." Garcia deepened his voice; he felt like the unknown girl needed encouragement from him, although he had no idea what the computer time she mentioned was. "If you stick to your theory, people will take you seriously eventually."

"You're right. I have support there." She took a spoonful of cream from the top of her latte and ate it. "Computer time is not cheap, though, and I need to base my notions on more solid mathematical ground."

"There you go," Garcia nodded. He liked her. He felt like he loved her once and could love her again.

"But that's still several weeks ahead. I was thinking about asking that Hawaiian mathematician I met last year for help. I think we could work in a fruitful collaboration."

"As you wish. I trust you."

"You're sweet," she said happily, then changed the topic. "Guess what, they closed the wharf this morning. They found a body on the rocks! The entire emergency preparedness unit of the police force was there. All three of them were bustling around the bridge."

"All three?"

"Yeah. Exciting, right? I don't even know how long it's been since there was a murder in Budapest. Although it could have been an accident. The police don't know what happened yet, according to news sites."

"They'll figure it out," Garcia concluded. He felt a bit phony. "By the way, security might have been alerted to the apartment about my ID."

"By whom?"

"The apartment..."

"That's not good... We'll just use your security code."

"The thing is, I don't remember it..."

"You're lucky I do..." She took a sip of latte and he followed along. "Good thing you told me the other day. I knew swapping codes might come in handy one day... So yes, we'll figure it out, honey..."

The term seemed familiar to Garcia.

"Will you help me?" he asked.

"Sure thing! The two of us can overcome anything, isn't that what you always say?"

Garcia smiled at her.

"Yes, it is."

Little did he know that a wasp was tracking them, and by the road to the bridge someone was watching their every move.

3.

They headed back into the apartment, where the girl, whose name Garcia still didn't know, gave him his security code. The ego turned on and the apartment's AI identified the man, who could then access every database. The first thing he did was to project his data on his cornea—onto his cameo lenses. His name was Garcia Sandoval, born in Valencia twenty-eight years ago, moved to Budapest eight years ago. According to his notes, he chose this city because he considered it the most beautiful in Europe, and he wanted to live here. He is a citizen of the North Atlantic Union, with a high social utility index, which meant he was a respected and happy member of society. He worked in communications, specifically at a moral agency until the summer when he transitioned into a more practical field related to the food industry to become a liaison between two

global companies. He is an expert on wasps; his colleagues describe him as energetic and creative. He is good at solving problems and taking the initiative. He has an enormous network of connections spanning across continents and oceans. His parents are engineers working on installing solar panels in Sudan to illuminate grain fields and grow crop yields, eventually solving Africa's remaining food problems.

And the girl's name is Kata.

She works at the Central Institute for Physical Research as a theoretical physicist, finishing her doctorate. Her area of research is the model of hyperspace and the multiverse; she speaks five languages and already has a bunch of awards and accolades. They have been together for almost two years, living together for the past ten months. She like steampunk, cheese and French history.

Garcia spent more than an hour browsing before leaning back on his chair: he recognized nothing about himself. It might as well have been about the life of a stranger.

Kata made dinner in the meantime: fresh salad with sesame chicken and sauce andalouse. He walked out to the dinner table and put a finger in the sauce to taste it. She slapped his hand.

"Honey, do you know where I put my wasp?" Garcia asked casually, licking the sauce off his finger.

"It's in its box in drawer next to the table lamp," Kata said while trying to give him an angry look,

only to fail. "You were very precise when you put it away."

Garcia went to get his wasp. He closed the door before activating it. The wasp turned on and flew up in the air, did a circle around Garcia's head, then landed on his index finger, following his mental command. Garcia proceeded to list its memory cache, then display his personal data saved in the cloud.

When he saw the image projected onto the camera lens, he was shocked: he only saw empty space.

According to the logs, three days ago he had deleted everything that happened to him since July 24. Every memory, every note, every location, picture and recording.

Why? What happened on July 24?

"What's going on with you," Kata said, entering the room.

"What do you mean?" Garcia looked up.

"You're acting weird. Like you were someone else."

Garcia remembered how Kata has some kind of sixth sense to feel invisible things. He tried to come up with a believable lie.

"I'm just a bit hungover."

"Are you sure you're okay? I've never heard of anyone's ego turning off for no reason."

"That confused me too," Garcia nodded. "But everything's fine now." He got up and hugged her. A touch can help disperse thoughts. So can a com-

pliment: "If you don't show up at that bench by Fővám Square today, I couldn't have even had a coffee. Which reminds me—When can we eat? I'm hungry."

"Right now. Come on!"

Kata grabbed his hand, and they walked up to the dinner table.

Garcia posed the question while eating:

"Do you remember what happened on July 24?"

Kata took time to think.

"Not really... When were we in Paris? Was it the beginning of July? We came back on the 16th, Sunday. So, the 24 was a Monday," she added a few seconds later.

"Oh yeah?"

Garcia put down his fork and waited.

"Oh, of course!"—she slammed her hand on the desk. That's the day you came in to see me at CIPR, and when the accident happened. How could I forget?"

"The accident..." Garcia had no idea what she was talking about. "Could you refresh my memory?"

"It was so upsetting." She was giving him a strange look. "When dr. Tamil got electrocuted and Szonja risked her own life to pull him away from the short-circuited switchboard. You don't remember? You were there with me; you came in to take me on a walk by Normafa, so I gave you a tour. You

gave dr. Tamil CPR. You were sick all night from the stress. Have you forgotten this too?"

"No, no. I remember now, yes... Have I asked you how they're doing?"

"They were rushed to a hospital and they both made it. But you know this. They sent their gratitude later."

"I meant since then."

"They are back to work now."

"That's good." He started eating again.

"What else have you forgotten?" Kata asked suspiciously.

"I haven't forgotten this" he explained. "Have you never had moments like that? When you don't remember names or places for a second. I never remember where I spent New Year's Eve, for example. I always have to think about that. Go over the years, the people, the places." He *actually* didn't know where he had spent New Year's. He didn't have to lie.

"That's not the same."

"I think it is."

"I think you should get an appointment for an MR scan. If you call now, you'll probably get one for tomorrow."

"There's no need for that." The lines on Garcia's face hardened. "Don't worry."

He went to bed early that night and hoped he would feel better in the morning. He tossed and turned for a long time and gave up on sleep

eventually when he heard Kata's consistent, deep breathing next to him. He kept his eyes closed and searched for Dr. Tamil's accident on the web.

Dr. George Tamil, theoretical physicist. Researcher at CIPR. He found several articles about the accident, but none of them had mentioned Garcia's name. They did mention a Szonja Kótaj, who risked her own life to pull the doctor away from the short-circuited switchboard. The investigation determined neither intentional harm in the accident nor human error. Szonja Kótaj received a social medal for saving the man's life.

Garcia found both of them on social media. He was politely removed from both sites based on his ID. The privacy protocol only allowed him to view users' most public data. He surmised that George Tamil and Szonja Kótaj didn't want much publicity after the accident.

He didn't learn much, and things only got worse by the next day. In the morning, he even started doubting his own place in this world.

4.

According to his calendar, he had a business meeting the next day. He looked at the address and left the apartment but was greeted by another surprise as soon as he stepped onto the pavement: Budapest asked him if he wanted to apply a skin to

the city. He opened his logs and checked if he had used skins before. As it turned out, yes, quite often; his preferred choice was folk-steampunk⁴². Garcia opened it on his cameo lens.

The world around him changed in an instant. He saw zeppelins with round underbellies among the clouds; the streetlamps took on a copper red color, and Art Nouveau tendril-like ornaments formed around the bulbs like a time-lapse shot of rosebuds opening. Interconnected, turning gears of all sizes surfaced from the faces of buildings, while the letters on official buildings grew serifs and split apart. Rooftops grew higher, and white smoke shot up from the chimneys, covering the faint glint of metal tiles with a mysterious haze. The passers-by that hadn't equipped a personal skin were dressed in marvelous outfits: women's skirts received laces, their clasps a silver twinkle, and their jackets grew narrow by the waist. Men's shoes turned into pointed, ornate leather boots; their pants received elegant, ironed edges; buttons and rivets appeared on their jackets, accompanied by twisting, intertwined metal threads. Some people's faces were partially or fully covered with a mechanic mask... Like everyone suddenly dressed in brocade, satin, copper and steel. The funniest part was strange retrofuturistic top-hats and bowler hats that replaced hats in AR.

A gigantic dragon made of metal scales, wires and tubes flew over the Danube, blowing smoke

out from its nose—advertising a new fantasy game. Garcia had an idea and removed the ad filter. He suddenly realized that literally anything can be an ad carrier from zeppelins to the surface of the river to his own hand.

He needed a minute to get accustomed to the changes. He then hailed an electric car that resembled a huge robotic copper chafer and got a ride to his workplace.

5.

As he stepped into the fancy, air-conditioned office building, he logged out of folk-steampunk42.

The coordinator chairing the meeting was called Dénes Csehi. A third party also connected to the discussion: Camille Guerin from the Toronto office. Garcia didn't really know why that was necessary but Csehi seemed to be calmed by her presence.

"Value orientation, satisfaction, self-fulfillment," Camille's light avatar explained. She was lean with short hair and an intelligent gaze, although her age was indeterminable. "But I know you're well aware of these, Garcia. I'm just trying to reinforce how important it is to us to launch useful products—and this company is doing excellently in that regard. Surveys among innovators and early adopters suggest that its reception is remarkable. We have made a

strategic decision to unanimously support increasing the competitiveness of the company.”

Garcia actually understood what she was talking about for once; he had spent an hour and a half in the morning to understand the project he had forgotten like everything else.

“What you’ve shown us so far is promising,” Csehi continued. “You’ve grasped the basics incredibly quickly, well done! But we are taking things to the next level by supporting the backend of the company. We want to reach customers through main-streamers, using VASP X Connect.”

“That is why we need you,” Camille nodded. “Although you’ve never worked in the food industry, nobody knows the potential of wasps better than you do.”

Garcia thanked them for their compliments and asked what they would like to emphasize in their marketing message.

“In addition to long-term consideration of customer demand, of all the brand values we should emphasize the nonviolent nature of meat production.”

“This fits into our shared vision,” Camille added. “Based on your experience at the moral agency, you’re more than fit for this position and I believe no one can sympathize with the appropriateness and social utility of this message more than you can. Trust is key. For you, for us and for the customers. You and Csehi will coordinate the project...”

"I was thinking we'd go the plant to examine the technological background" Csehi said. "The whole process, from the eggs to the duck breasts," he giggled. "What do you think, Garcia?"

Garcia nodded. As long as he doesn't have to speak. And a plant visit would have the added benefit of only having to listen. Buy some time to fit in.

"Great," said Camille Guerin from Toronto. "A chance to grow for a company that supplies non-violently sourced meat!"

The plant was in Maglód. The two of them took a small rentable electric car. The driverless vehicle left downtown on Baross Street, among airwalls, in the most elegant part of the eighth district. The air smelled like a forest. Garcia turned off the AC and pulled down the window. A habitable world, he thought. Meat without violent death. *We've gone far since the beginning of history.*

They put on protective suits in the plant to avoid contamination within the building. Their guide was Ádám Garay, the director.

"I'm pleased to have you here again," he shared with honest joy as they walked towards the entrance of the plant.

"'Client experience' is not just a motto of the company," Csehi said, smiling. "And to be honest, I'm touched that no animals have to die for my lunch. Thinking about rotisserie chicken from my childhood horrifies me. Do you re-



duckbreast : 0624 6 37 01012 3
g.phase b : f34 d12 ee445
//.

member that? Chickens impaled on long metal bars just rolling next to one another. Three or four in a line.

"I do," Garay nodded. "I have to admit; my personal motivation is the memory of sausages and ribs hanging from hooks in meatshops. And the pig head cut in half you could see in my grandparents' street, at the butcher... Luckily, you don't see such disgusting things anymore."

"Yes. And the smell!"

Garcia listened carefully.

"But meat must be part of our diets," the director asserted. "And what we produce is more than synthetic protein or any other artificially grown protein source."

"I know," Csehi nodded. "The success of our company depends on you and your product, and its health and utility, rather than on us. Nevertheless, you've won us over; otherwise, we wouldn't be working together."

"We know customers are interested in us. I think our brand is starting to take roots in public consciousness, but due to its usefulness, it deserves to reach more conscious customers."

"I'm glad every customer is conscious."

Garay let them go first through the gate.

"What about the wasps?" Csehi asked, pointing above him, where Garcia's and his own microdrones were buzzing.

“They are welcome inside. The technology isn’t secret; we’ve already shared the patent with everyone. Nothing should be kept secret if it makes Earth more livable, isn’t that right?”

They went through laser decontamination in a small aseptic cabin.

The hall was unbelievably long; one could barely see the end from the entrance. It comprised thirty straight rows and eighteen stories per row. Growing tanks stood on every story, one foot apart from each other. Above them, robotic arms attached to rails were sliding around, doing their tasks around the tanks with surgical precision.

“We grow more than a hundred and sixty thousand duck breasts in this plant. The work process takes four days after attachment, while tank cleaning and insertion of new DNA takes a day afterwards,” the director said, reciting known data. “We aspired for the highest possible level of automation when designing the place. In a plant this size, we only need to employ five people for three days a week.”

“Isn’t that too much for them?” Csehi asked, surprised. “I did not remember that.”

“They don’t have to come in every day; part of the work can be done from home. We have a hundred percent satisfaction rate among our workers. We strive to create an inspiring, diverse and supportive environment. And since the start of this

year, we're proud to have a family support badge by our company logo."

"Ah, yes."

Garcia stopped in front of one of the tanks, looking at a floating duck breast that weighed almost a kilogram. He could almost see it grow, even though the process couldn't possibly be that fast.

"You've already been given a summary of the contents of the nutritional fluid," Garay said, stepping up to Garcia.

"An accurate and detailed description" Csehi nodded. "My colleague has already taken it apart, right, Garcia?"

"That's right," Garcia nodded. "I know all about it. This has been the centerpiece of our message. That's what we need to adjust." Standing there, he realized that he didn't believe in any of this. Pro-animal and pro-life technology. *What the hell?! Is there something wrong with me?*

Had he really been working on this in the past few weeks?

Everything seemed so perfect. His relationship with Kata, his job, the city, the people, the whole world. Everyone is happy and satisfied. Why does this make him uneasy?

"Come; my colleague, Gergely Matheus can explain the biotechnology behind the growth process."

They walked for almost five minutes to get to a side door that led out of the plant and into a small

animal house. Here, about twenty happy ducks toddled around clumsily among controlled conditions. Matheus was sitting in a booth, documenting the ducks' vital signs.

When he saw the people coming, he sprung to his feet.

"Hello," he said. He seemed a bit nervous, and his handshake was moist. "What can I do for you?"

Csehi explained the reason for their visit.

"I see," Matheus nodded. "We use a kind of cloning technology..." and then he went on to describe the details.

Garcia was not interested in the basic tasks of happy and healthy duck raising, or the technology behind painless sample-taking. He felt like he had seen Gergely Matheus before. Yesterday. But where? On Fővám Square!

But he wasn't sure. He got angry; if he had had his wasp then, he would know now. He took a few close-ups of the biotechnologist, just in case. He would look him up on the web later.

"Are you taking notes of all this?" Csehi asked. He saw Garcia's gaze wander off.

"I can rewatch it from my wasp."

"Alright."

Something made Matheus even more nervous.

"Please don't let the wasps near the ducks! The other day we had to put down an animal because a visitor wanted to take a close-up of a duck, which

ate the wasp. It got stuck in its throat and cut its larynx."

Csehi was surprised.

"Silly little creatures..."

"Wasps are made of natural materials nowadays," the director replied. "Who knows what they smell or taste like for a duck? Maybe they even like them."

"If ducks have satisfaction indexes," Garcia said sarcastically, "you can measure it if you want."

"We monitor their brain activity," Matheus replied seriously, perhaps taking Garcia's remark too seriously. "Nanobots inform us about different kinds of cortical activity. We know how they feel."

Garcia didn't respond, though he had a snide remark on the tip of his tongue. Luckily, the director started speaking.

"I think we can use everything for our message," he said, delighted. "And I know ducks are tiny animals but let's not forget that birds have developed a smaller, denser neuron network in their brain through the course of their evolution—their small size can be deceiving!"

"So 'birdlike' doesn't necessarily mean stupid," Csehi nodded.

Garcia felt like this conversation was getting surreal.

Fortunately, their visit ended before long, and Csehi said goodbye to Matheus. They didn't leave

in the direction of the breeding farm but through the back towards the processing plant.

Garcia, who fell back a few steps behind the director and Csehi, suddenly felt Matheus's hand grab his arm and pull him back.

"What were you doing at the bridge, Garcia?" he whispered into Garcia's face nervously. He looked disturbed. "What did you do?"

Garcia didn't say a word. He yanked his arm loose from Matheus's grip and swiftly caught up with Csehi and the director—practically fleeing from the man.

6.

He met Kata in the afternoon by the Citadel, at the base of the statue he had seen after waking up the day before.

"Isn't this city beautiful?" she said enthusiastically, looking down at the Danube, the bridges, the streets and the houses. "I love it. I love living here. It's peaceful, the people are nice and friendly, and everyone is satisfied." She turned around suddenly. "I talked to my grandpa last week. You remember, I mentioned that I had visited him."

"Yes."

"Well, he told me that forty or fifty years ago it looked like this world wouldn't stay livable. Wars, inequality, climate change, deforestation, species go-

ing extinct, desertification, floating islands of trash in the ocean... it's horrible to even say out loud. He told me they had prepared for the worst. Climate change seemed impossible to avert, so they made emergency plans for evacuating cities that were on the seafront for when the ocean levels rise. Can you imagine the direction our world was heading? People buying without thinking and falling for advertisements regardless of their topics: food, drinks, cars or even political parties. But everything has changed by now. Earth is a livable, nice place, and people have changed. They have become responsible, conscious, social..."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because it's true. Look around at your world. No hunger or hardship, and our advanced technology has eliminated problems and inequality, turning back global warming. We plant forests, bring extinct animals back to life, our atmosphere and oceans are clean, and we're picking up space junk as we speak. We elect trustworthy representatives who don't put their interests before those of society. There are no political parties. I have read about them, but I have never heard anyone say we would need them. Robots do our job for us, we are served by androids in stores, and people finally have the time to care about themselves, their environment and their families. I am thankful to have been born in this era and not at the turn of the millennium."

"I mean, where is all this coming from?"

She stepped closer to Garcia and brushed against him.

"Because I remember that I liked two things about you first. The first one was the fire in you, the strength and energy that drove you to know everything. That undying thirst for knowledge. And the other one was your work. Have you ever realized that as a marketing expert you're someone who filters the bad out of the world? You keep what's valuable and what leads to a fuller, happier life. Healthy food, activities with social utility; the pressure of the market and the information noise are so intense that you need to filter the valuable parts and convey them to the people. This is what you do. And I respect you for that.

It was Kata that initiated the kiss. He kissed her back. The taste of her lips was unfamiliar, but he liked it.

"And there was something else I wanted to say," she said as she stepped out of his embrace. "Dr. Tamil asked me this morning if I want to have children."

Garcia must have looked shocked, because Kata stepped back and frowned.

"Is that such an impossible idea?" she asked bitterly.

"No... I don't know," he replied. *Kids?* "What does this have to do with Tamil?"

"He likes you. Ever since you helped him when the accident happened. And he like me too. I don't know why he thought of that, but the point is that it put a bug in my ear. This might be the perfect time."

"Why now?"

"We made a breakthrough at the institute this morning," she said with glowing eyes. We have managed to disrupt the three-dimensional fabric of space with the particle collider installed under Normafa and create an energy bridge to a parallel dimension in the multiverse.

"And that made you want to have kids?"

"I just realized that I could be a mother in an infinite number of parallel worlds." After she saw the bewildered expression on Garcia's face, she burst out laughing. "I was kidding. That's not the reason. We're going to win the Nobel prize. With this discovery—definitely. Mostly Dr. Tamil, of course, but the whole research team is going to be famous. We have peaked professionally. That's why I thought having kids would be ideal now. Career and motherhood at the same time. I would set a nice example. It would also be historical—a pregnant woman has never won a Nobel prize in physics."

Garcia still hasn't said a word.

"So?" Kata nudged him. "All we have to do is go to a child center. In fact, we don't even have to go in, just send our medical files. They'll take a look and give us advice on how to move forward."

"I know how to make a baby" Garcia grumbled. He tried to mask his surprise and hesitation with sarcasm.

Kata slapped him playfully.

"Of course you know. I was there with you. But now we're talking about checking our genetic legacy for the child to inherit. And if they find hereditary problems, they can correct them in the womb."

"I'm not a fan of genetically improving embryos" Garcia replied, and while this was his opinion now, he had no idea if it was a few days ago.

"Me neither. But the potential is there. It's not mandatory. Except for babies' nanobot vaccination. I mean... you've had yours, right?"

"I'm not that much older than you" Garcia grumbled. He knew from her social media site that she was twenty-six, two years younger than him. However, his knowledge about nanobot injections was like that about the world: he forgot none of it. The same way he knew that he had been looking at Budapest and the Danube after waking up, he knew that the nanobots injected after birth raise the pre-frontal cortical activity of the brain, making people more sympathetic towards others. It does not alter personality, but it does reduce adult aggression—which is why they made it obligatory worldwide thirty-two years ago.

Damn it, he thought angrily. I had to check when I was born but I know the exact date of this?

"Listen, honey, we don't have to make any commitments; let's just get some information first." Kata didn't give up. "We can do that much, right?"

Garcia had no idea what to say. He needed a few seconds before he found his way out.

"Can we come back to this a few weeks from now?" he replied, smiling gently. "You should focus on your discovery, and I should worry about my new tasks. But I promise—and you can tell this to Dr. Tamil as well—we'll talk about having children before Christmas. I love you, honey."

He kissed Kata.

Was it just his imagination, or was her kiss truly bitter?

7.

Kata remained completely silent for the rest of the afternoon. She didn't seem angry, upset or tense—she just didn't talk.

They walked down from the Citadel and crossed to the Pest side on the Liberty bridge. On the Fővám Square side of the bridge, Garcia remembered Matheus lashing out in the morning. *What were you doing at the bridge? What did you do?*

Did he mean the murder from the day before yesterday? Could he have something to do with someone's death?

Garcia shuddered.

He looked at the river. The Danube was blue, just like that song said. It was slowly flowing along to the south with whirlpools on the surface. Dangerous waters. It's prohibited to swim in it; in fact, even to walk on it with gravo-shoes.

Kata turned off the make-up engraver at home, and sad wrinkles appeared in the corners of her eyes. Garcia felt remorseful; he could imagine the impact of his words on her. Even so, he didn't think he should have reacted differently.

"I'm going to take a bath," Kata said.

"Alright."

While she was letting water into the tub and pouring herself a glass of wine, Garcia looked up the news about the body under the bridge. He brought up the police report on his cameo lens.

According to the report, the body was found on the rocks by the riverbank. Remote security cameras recorded it falling off the bridge, but the reasons were unclear. They also recorded another person, but the columns of the bridge made it impossible to determine who it was and whether it was a crime or an accident. Police couldn't identify the body because the water level of the Danube was low, so the victim's face was crushed by the protruding rocks, also ripping out the ego from behind the ears. Police are looking for eyewitnesses and wasp recordings, and trying to locate the missing ego; however, the chances of finding it are rather low. It could be at Baja by now.

An unknown victim. Garcia felt a knot in his stomach.

He remembered Kata's words about parallel universes: *I could be a mother in an infinite number of parallel universes.* He is also alive in an infinite number of parallel worlds, in an almost infinite number of cases. And if a portal had opened to one of them, let's say, in CIPR, he might have crossed here.

What if I'm from another world? He asked himself. What if I killed myself?

It sounded like something straight out of an action movie. He quickly dismissed the idea.

I am me.

He would have looked at Matheus's profile—if he had had one. Garcia couldn't recall if this was ordinary, but he suspected that it wasn't. Gergely Matheus does not like publicity. Or he's hiding something.

He uploaded the pictures he had taken at the plant to the Internet and started a search for personal pictures from the previous afternoon about Fővám Square uploaded to the web. Some automatically blocked faces, while on others they were blurred by the system. But he found it eventually on a blurry image. The man was there. There among the crowd on Fővám Square when he was sitting on the bench.

Coincidence?

This cannot be a coincidence.

Garcia got up and walked around the apartment, his wasp floating above his head like a well-behaved bug. He wanted to ask Kata something, but he didn't want to disturb. He can definitely walk into the bathroom; they've been living together for months. But this would still be new for him.

He mustered the courage eventually.

Act normal!

Kata winced when the door opened. She was talking to someone from the tub via mind chat, but she fell silent when Garcia appeared. He seemed to spot confusion on her face.

This also confused him enough to forget what he wanted.

"Mm?" Kata asked, raising her eyebrows. She was submerged under the foam. "What?"

"I just want to wash my hands." Garcia washed his hands at the sink. "Were you talking to someone?" he asked a bit indifferently.

"Just my brother."

"Sure, okay."

Garcia could tell from her tone that she was lying. Why would she lie to him? Is she hiding something? He was certain they were talking about him. Maybe about having children... maybe about something else.

Suspicion put a bug in his ear. He thought about calling the wasp into the bathroom then "forgetting it" there.

The wasp was stuck at the entrance, which it signaled with a trill.

"The bathroom is a wasp-free zone," Kata said. "We agreed."

"Ah, that's right."

"Close the door when you leave. The heat's escaping."

Garcia backed out, closed the door then stopped in front of it, closely looking at the wood.

He couldn't tell why, but he felt a knot in his stomach. He couldn't help but try to eavesdrop on the conversation inside. *I'm sick of not knowing anything*, he excused himself. *I have a hard drive full of things I don't know. And now I have to take her bullshit.*

He placed his ear against the door. He could make out a few words, but not nearly everything.

It was a bit funny when he took a glass from the kitchen and placed it on the door. He had no idea where he got this idea from, but it seemed useful.

He could hear more now, but not enough.

"...I don't know... trying... I can't," Kata said.

He then placed the wasp on the glass and set the audio sensitivity to the highest level. It recorded everything.

Later at night, when she was sleeping next to him, he listened to the recording.

"...not even because of the baby," Kata said, responding to a question. "But because he thinks

I'm stupid. Listen. Grandpa has been dead for five years, and he didn't even flinch when I told him I had spoken to him. That's why I'm upset. Does he not remember? Of course he does! I seriously lost it last year on the anniversary, and he was the one to comfort me. No. Something is different. It's like he was replaced. Seriously, I don't even recognize him. Yes, that's what I thought when I asked him for his medical sheet. I came up with this "having a kid" thing to get it. But he won't give it to me. Do I really have to wait till Christmas?"

Garcia sat up on the bed, put his head against the headboard and looked at the yellow lights seeping in through the gaps of the curtain.

He tried to remember, then he sank into his thoughts.

...and it seemed like that night would never end.

8.

Over breakfast, he told Kata he'd like to go to work with her. He had the time, and he'd been meaning to meet her colleagues. He wanted to congratulate them on their scientific breakthrough.

He was greeted warmly at the Central Institute for Physical Research. They treated him as if they had nothing else to do than entertain Kata's boyfriend. A half-hour later George Tamil also showed up. Garcia had expected an aspiring Nobel laureate

to be quite reserved, but Tamil embraced him after shaking his hands.

"It's so good to see you again, my friend!" said Dr. Tamil, smiling. "It is a rare pleasure."

"I wanted to congratulate you," replied Garcia sheepishly, "on your breakthrough. Kata's told me about it." He stole a glance at the girl, "I hope you don't mind. It's not a secret, is it?"

"A secret?" Dr. Tamil burst out laughing. "There are no secrets in academia, my dear Garcia! Secrets hinder progress and are of absolutely no use to society. Keeping secrets taints the soul. No! Transparency! Transparency all the way. As soon as we demonstrated for a second time, in a controlled environment, that we could open a gateway to a parallel universe, we immediately shared our results with the scientific community. Granted, there aren't so many teams that can verify our data, but it should be more than enough if those few do. And as of this morning, that's already happened. In brief: this is a marvelous day!"

"Could I see the particle collider?" asked Garcia, moving on to the real reason for his visit. "I would love to see it."

"Well, there is not much to see, my friend, but join me, I'm heading downstairs anyway."

The physicist beckoned Garcia to follow, and he did. They left the main CIPR building and crossed the park under the shade of the trees. They were head-

ed towards a small, futuristic-looking building with a sloped roof, made entirely of glass. That was where the operators of the particle collider worked. They got into the lift and descended twenty stories into the belly of the hill under Normafa.

The construction of the particle collider had been the largest civil engineering project of the 2050s in Budapest, surpassing even the erection of the Csepel Needle or the launch of the elevated railway in South Pest. The biggest challenge the developers faced was preserving the environment, and ensuring the surrounding wildlife remained intact. Garcia was well aware of all this, and had pored over the plans of the particle collider complex on his way there, looking for a way someone from another universe could escape unnoticed.

He couldn't find one, but that didn't mean there wasn't one.

On the way down, Dr. Tamil jabbered relentlessly. He covered the geometry of hyperspaces, the latest hypotheses in quantum physics, and the mathematical foundations of the multiverse. Garcia didn't understand a single word of it, but kept nodding anyway.

They entered an immaculate corridor with bare, pale grey walls, which led to a control room containing enough screens, display panels and huge computers to run a whole solar system. The physicist noted Garcia's shock with a smile.

"You didn't get a chance to see this room last time, did you? How do you like it?"

"I'm at a loss for words," answered Garcia truthfully. "Did you control the experiment from here?"

"Among other places." Dr. Tamil switched something on, or maybe off, or perhaps over, and half the wall turned transparent, revealing a gigantic, steel-framed corridor, stuffed with a colorful array of a thousand pipes, rails and cables. "You couldn't just start or stop the process. We were handling energies some researchers believe could tear the galaxy apart, if activated. We had to control every picosecond of the experiment."

"Was it really that dangerous?"

"Of course not. But even before the first nuclear bomb was detonated, some of the more pessimistic physicists claimed the experiment would lead to the destruction of the universe. It didn't, and nor did ours. Nonetheless, we were traversing uncharted territory."

"And what did you see on the other side of the rift?"

Dr. Tamil gave an uncomprehending look.

"I presume you looked through into that other world," explained Garcia. "Even if no one actually crossed through one way or the other."

"Hah! I wish we'd been able to open a gateway into a parallel universe that was large enough for a

person,” laughed Dr. Tamil. “But we weren’t. We only managed to pull through a single particle. But even this achievement changes so much! Theoretical physics and the whole of academic research are on the brink of a revolution.”

Garcia was disappointed.

“But,” he protested, “if there are an infinite number of parallel realities in which you are researching a gateway between multiverses, Dr. Tamil, then it is possible that your experiment opened a larger gateway in another reality.”

“Indeed! And maybe it did, too, in infinite realities.” Now Tamil laughed even more loudly. He was full of energy. “Well, I really can’t argue with that. Garcia, you are a master debater!”

With a quiet hiss, a side door opened, and a woman in her thirties stepped through it.

“Perfect timing!” cried Tamil. “Look, Szonja, who’s visiting.”

“Ah, if it isn’t Garcia Sandoval.”

When he saw Szonja Kótaj, Garcia felt his stomach churn. The hairs at the back of his neck stood up for no apparent reason. She was good-looking and short, a redhead with a smattering of freckles, her nose pointed, kind eyes. She smiled as she extended a hand, but Garcia felt like screaming. It was all he could do to shake the proffered hand.

“Partake in our celebration,” she said lightly. How sickly-sweet, thought Garcia. “Were it not for

you on 24 July, none of this could have happened. You saved Dr. Tamil."

"You saved him," replied Garcia in a similar tone.

"True," said Szonja Kótaj, and she nodded. "I disconnected him from the power source, but it was you who applied CPR and gave him mouth-to-mouth until the ambulance arrived. I just did what my brain is wired to do."

"What do you mean?" asked Garcia, furrowing his brows. He sensed a trap.

"Extreme altruism. I'm told I have a larger-than-average amygdala." She laughed. "Substantially larger. But I don't mind; I feel good. When I was an infant, it saved me getting inoculated with nanobots. Not many can claim that. I am a useful and friendly member of society in my own right. Essentially, my selflessness is wholly natural."

There was no trap, after all. But that didn't make Garcia feel any more at ease in her presence. He felt like running, running away, as far away from her as possible. Too bad he was underground.

"Come," said Dr. Tamil, as he put his hand on Garcia's shoulder. "I'll make you a nice cup of tea, and you can tell me how you and Kata are doing."

Garcia was glad to accept the invitation. Anything to get him away from Szonja Kótaj.

9.

Garcia found the trip to CIPR more exhausting than his visit to the duck breast plant and the marketing brainstorming session that followed. Even his cup of green tea was no use, and the ostensibly calming music piped into the cafeteria only made him more annoyed. Actually, he realized as he sat in his electric car, heading home, the whole world annoyed him. It was all too beautiful. Too much like a utopia.

He felt like an intruder. Like a splinter stuck in someone's finger. Like grit in the gears.

He got out of the car at Fővám Square, and let it head off for its next journey. He walked to the riverbank, where the unidentified body was found under the bridge, then went up onto the bridge. He reached the spot where the photo published by the police had been taken. The photo which showed not only the victim of the accident but also that other person. He stood in the exact spot where that person stood in the photo, and looked around. Was it he who stood here that night? If it was, should a memory come back to him?

None did.

Maybe one of the skins will help. He downloaded folk-steampunk42, and spent some time looking at the steamboats floating down the Danube, puffing smoke and little clouds of steam, the submarines, the blimps swarming in the sky, and the bee-

tle cars zipping down the wharf. A little while later he switched to the second most popular skin, called DMA_Bp. The world dominated by steam, copper and cogs vanished, and was immediately replaced by something grimmer. It looked like he'd been transported back into the Middle Ages: the streets were covered in grime and mud. As Garcia turned towards Buda Castle, he saw through the curtain of rain a number of huge creatures with vicious claws scaling the walls. Mutant crows were circling the collapsed turrets of the House of Parliament; the high-speed magnetic railway spanning the width of the Danube seemed like a giant cobweb, traversed by cars like so many scurrying spiders. Underneath him, a monster surfaced just long enough to pull a small tugboat under. The water was soon stained by a pool of blood.

"The Dirty Middle Age skin contains images some users may find upsetting," read the warning on his cameo. Garcia tapped 'work assignment' without a second thought. The system gave him one more warning, suggesting he should contact his psychologist after completing the assignment, then it left him alone.

Garcia took in every grisly detail of the mucky swamp Budapest had turned into. Then he looked again at the people using personal skins. It wasn't too difficult: they stuck out in this world like a shabby photo manipulation job. *People want to appear greater than they are*, he concluded. Nine out of ten

used augmented reality to gift themselves fancier clothes, a sharper jawline or cuter features. There were a few, though, who chose an extreme appearance to complement their personality. Two girls walked past him on the bridge: they both had cat's ears, and their eyes covered about a third of their faces. Another passer-by looked like something out of a Dalí painting: his back was on fire, and his limbs were weirdly twisted in all kinds of unnatural directions. Sitting in an electric car headed towards Buda sat a passenger with a snake's head on his neck. He looked at Garcia as the car went by, hissed, and stuck out his forked tongue. *Well, at least he fits into the scenery*, thought Garcia as he gave the man an absent-minded little wave. He did like this personal skin.

Reptiles were right at home on these streets.

Not long after, a police car pulled up next to him. The skin made it appear faded and run down, but its inside pulsed like a stomach. The man who got out wore shabby clothes, his unkempt hair reached his shoulder in sticky lumps, and his face was covered in wounds. His eyes were cruel, and his teeth black. His appearance was conjured up by DMA_Bp; this was no personal skin. He headed straight towards Garcia, and flashed him a very real badge.

"Police Captain György Fehér—"

Garcia turned off the skin. Instantly, the sun broke through the clouds, and the city regained its orderly, calm, 21st-century appearance.

The man standing in front of him was well-kept and well-dressed. There was nothing wrong with his teeth, either. Garcia squinted at the badge.

"Huh," he said. "Have I done something illegal? I turned on the skin for work. I was interested in mediaeval advertising surfaces."

"What?" Now it was the officer's turn to be confused. "I didn't come here because of skins."

"What then?"

"Are you aware that someone was murdered a few days ago in the exact spot where you are standing?"

Garcia looked about himself.

"Is that illegal? I assume you've finished inspecting the crime scene. But I'm happy to jog on if that's better or more legal or whatever."

The captain waved his hand.

"It's not illegal, but it does make me curious why you would stand here of all places."

Garcia did his best to look clueless.

"What does it matter?"

For a long moment, the two men stood, looking at each other silently. Garcia was starting to have a sneaking suspicion, but he tried to remain calm. He felt like the ground had slipped out from under his feet and he was floating in the air, with a massive, flaming meteorite headed straight towards him through the sky, with no way to avoid it.

"Perpetrators often return to the crime scene."

“Do they really?” Garcia suddenly felt calm enough to give a cheeky grin. The meteorite was gone. “Is that what you call police investigation these days? Does the inoculation that alters the prefrontal cortex of infants also kill off any vestiges of professionalism in police officers?”

Whether the captain chose to ignore the comment or simply didn’t understand it, he said nothing.

“A bad conscience can drive people to do strange things,” he said. “We live in what is pretty much a utopia, and we are not accustomed to crime, not even as a victim, let alone as a perpetrator. A heavy conscience can prompt the culprit to return to the scene of his crime. It is exactly the inoculation infants get to strengthen their empathy, that is to say, the resulting alterations to the prefrontal cortex that made it necessary to rewrite our textbooks. Now, it is their own heavy conscience that makes criminals suffer the most. Though, it has to be said, ninety-nine percent of violent crime committed after the empathy enhancement is due to negligence. So, Mr. Sandoval, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for adventure,” replied Garcia. He decided to pretend to be a crime tourist. “I am intrigued by interesting cases. For you, understanding the criminal mind is critical. For me, it’s understanding the consumer’s mind.” The officer addressed him by name, so clearly he had been ID’d. Fehér had accessed his ego and knew everything about him that

was available on the web. Which is to say, roughly the same amount he knew about himself. So he decided to return the ball to the officer's court.

"I have to say, Captain, you've surprised me. I thought it had been an accident. Or is manslaughter the right word?"

Captain Fehér looked Garcia up and down, then made a few quick hand gestures in the air. Judging by the movements of his wrists and fingers, Garcia suspected the officer had adjusted the icons on the cameo image projected before him.

"I've sent you a video file, Mr. Sandoval," said Fehér, confirming Garcia's suspicion. "An unpublished file."

Garcia received the video almost immediately: it had been recorded by a wasp on the night. He downloaded it to his cameo lens, and started it. His heart was pumping in his throat. What was he going to see? And why would a police captain send him a classified video in the first place?

He was suddenly reminded of Matheus's question: "What were you doing by the bridge? What have you done?"

The recording confirmed what he had read in the police report: there were two people standing by the railing. The victim's face was obscured by shadow, and the other one was behind one of the pillars of Liberty Bridge. Then something happened, which he couldn't make out, because suddenly the night became darker around the two people. But it

looked like the figure standing behind the pillar had given the one standing by the railing a push. They started fighting. Fighting? Garcia zoomed in. Maybe just a bit of shoving. Then the man standing by the railing lost his balance, went over the railing, and disappeared into the depths.

Now Garcia's heart was beating twice as fast, and getting even faster. He was struggling for breath. But the recording hadn't ended yet. The murderer walked away, without giving a second glance to his victim, and soon disappeared into the night. It was like he'd melted into the darkness.

One moment, he was on the bridge, and after taking a single step, he vanished.

Garcia replayed the video.

Then again.

And again.

Then the video was deleted.

"That will be quite enough," said the Captain. "Any idea what you just saw?"

"Absolutely none," replied Garcia through parched lips. "But I think I understand why you hadn't published this video."

Captain Fehér gave him a knowing smile, and suddenly Garcia understood why he had been shown the video. While he was watching it, the detective was watching him, gauging his reaction. Like a lie detector. The sudden realization annoyed Garcia, and swept away all of his anxiousness.

“Well played, detective,” he grumbled. “But I do not have a bad conscience, because I didn’t do this.”

Fehér nodded silently.

“Thank you for watching the video, Mr. Sandoval, and thank you for your time. Don’t stand around here for too long. Crimes can upset the balance of a healthy psyche.” He gave a casual salute, using two fingers, like they do in the old movies, then added, “And don’t use an augmented reality skin that you feel you have to apologize for.”

He returned to his car, and drove away. Garcia felt his jaw tense up.

I do not have a guilty conscience, he said to himself. He can’t have got any readings suggesting I do. I do not have a guilty conscience because... Because I can’t remember if I’m the culprit.

Still, it wasn’t enough to put his own mind at ease. He was worried by what he saw on the video – not so much the actual murder but the way the murderer had vanished. One moment, he was there, and in the next, he wasn’t. Could he have stepped over into a parallel world? Had Dr. Tamil and Szonja Kótaj lied to him? Had Kata? He wasn’t even sure he could trust Kata any more. Not since he’d overheard the conversation in the bathroom. On the other hand, he couldn’t recall what she had been like before.

Something had to be done.

So he decided to break into CIPR.

10.

Kata messaged him, saying she'd be late home because Dr. Tamil was putting on a surprise celebration. *Sure, a surprise celebration.* He didn't know what to believe.

He didn't want to go home, so instead he walked to Kálvin Square, and sat in the outdoor seating area of a pub. He ordered a pint of low-calorie beer fortified with vitamins. He was served by a robot waiter, not an android, which he didn't like at first, but then he decided to ignore it.

"That's the least of my worries," he grumbled into his pint. So what if robots have replaced most of human labor? That's not a problem. *Don't worry about that. Concentrate on the real problem, Garcia!*

The real problem was how he could sneak into the Central Institute for Physical Research unnoticed. Unnoticed and unescorted, so that he could move about freely. He was dead certain he would find something there that would prove his hypothesis about parallel worlds. He was more convinced than ever that he did not belong here.

Using a personal skin seemed like a good idea. He could change his face to someone else's, and walk through the door. But personal skins were only visible to people who were using an augmented reality skin on their cameos. Those who weren't connected to the web, and weren't looking at the

world through its virtual lens, would not see any difference.

He suddenly remembered wasps. Practically everyone used them, from people working in marketing to artists. They were universally considered a platform for self-expression, the most modern form of self-branding and one that allowed nearly unlimited creativity. As such, they could be used for pretty much anything. All he had to do was hack into the wasps of those around him, and use them to download the augmented reality containing nothing but his personal skin.

The question was: could he do it?

Sitting at the pub table, he delved into his investigation. He connected to the web and started an accelerated neural inflow and imprinting protocol. Much to his surprise, the neural flow identified already established energy networks. He had already known the information he had downloaded to imprint. All of this was already in his brain. *Of course!* After all, he was an expert on wasps.

He held onto his pint while the information packages were bombarding his brain. By the time he figured out how to hack the system, the sun had nearly set.

Suddenly, he received a notification from his wasp.

Garcia was taken aback. It took him a few seconds to recall that he had set the device to monitoring, and the profile picture of Gergely Matheus was still loaded. The wasp had located Matheus nearby.

He instantly downloaded the recording to his cameo lens.

Matheus was standing by the protestant church, behind a pillar.

Garcia downed his beer, and walked into the pub as if he were looking for the toilets. Instead, he stepped behind the bar and hurried through the kitchen. Of course, the operating AI immediately told him to leave.

"That's what I'm doing," Garcia replied, surprising even himself with his newfound courage. He was angry, very angry. He picked up a knife lying on the table, and slipped it into his pocket.

A message popped up on his cameo, showing the amount the restaurant debited to his bank account for the knife.

"Don't give a shit," he said aloud.

He left the building through the staff entrance. He suspected that his actions will have some unpleasant consequences. After all, his ego logged in with the pub AI, but at this point he couldn't care less. Once outside, he sent his wasp over the rooftops, then downloaded the map of the immediate area and the blueprints of the nearby houses onto his cameo. Green itineraries were traced before him in the air like so many holographic models. He was searching for an alternative route to the church door.

He started running. He went through another restaurant, then crossed a small courtyard garden,

with bicycles leaning against the walls. He could see a small door right in front of him, leading to the street. He hoped it was open. Why would anyone keep a door closed in such a peaceful world?

The door was open. He found himself in yet another building, running along a corridor of some kind. He ran past a window; he opened it and jumped out. He counted his steps: ten, fifteen, eighteen.

He reappeared by the side of the church, and his eyes immediately met Matheus's.

Matheus was visibly frightened. He turned on his heel and tried to run away.

But Garcia had a running start. He caught up with Matheus by the last pillar, grabbed him by his coat, and pushed him against the wall.

"Don't hurt me!" cried Matheus.

"What the hell is going on here?" demanded Garcia. "What do you want from me?"

Matheus's eyes went wide with fear.

"It's like you're not even the same person any more. I just want to understand what happened to you. I just want to know what happened."

"You and me both, God damn it!" shouted Garcia, prompting a passer-by to ask him to mind his language near God's house. "I'll say to this man whatever I want and wherever I want!" he shouted back. The middle-aged man chose to pull his neck in and scurry away.

"To this man?" repeated Matheus. He realized Garcia had not recognized him. "You don't know who I am?"

"You are a biotechnologist at a meat plant," growled Garcia. "Or maybe an animal handler. How should I know?"

"Let me go," begged Matheus. "We were working together."

"On the duck breast project."

"Of course not! Something else entirely."

At last, Garcia let go of him. The biotechnologist stood up straight, and tried to straighten his clothes, as well.

"We had a shared project," he croaked. "Can't you remember?"

"What sort of a project?"

Matheus looked around furtively, and he met at least a dozen attentive pairs of eyes.

"Not here, and not now," he said. Garcia grabbed him again. He dragged him towards the road, and called an electric car. "For heaven's sake! Let me go already!" pleaded Matheus.

The car and the two men reached the curb of the solar-powered road at the same time. The door opened, and the car greeted them.

Garcia pushed Matheus into the car.

"Get in!"

But then something unexpected happened: Matheus kicked through the open door, and hit Gar-

cia's knee with the sole of his foot. Garcia lost his balance and collapsed on the pavement. Not losing a second, Matheus pulled the door shut and activated the lock. By the time Garcia leapt to the car, it was already leaving. Pulling out from the curb, it soon filed into traffic.

The last thing Garcia saw was Matheus's face behind the window, showing a mixture of fear and satisfaction.

Garcia sent his wasp to follow the car.

The system denied his request for privacy reasons, and the wasp soon returned to hover over his head.

Though unsure how he knew them, Garcia burst out in an elaborate string of Hungarian obscenities, clearing Kálvin Square around him almost immediately.

11.

Garcia limped home. Even an hour later, he couldn't stand without a searing pain shooting into his leg, so he called a care associate. Not long after, an android showed up. It looked like a delicate and attractive woman, with a soothing voice. She checked him and gave him a nanobot injection in his knee. A mere twenty minutes later, the nanites had restored the damaged joint, and were absorbed into his bloodstream.

Garcia stared at his knee and, when the android turned away for a moment, he pulled out the knife he had nicked from the restaurant, and plunged it into his palm. The pain radiated instantly into his whole body, and he even got a headache.

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision and, arguably, not one of his wisest, but he wanted to check if he, too, was an android. That would have explained things, in a way.

The care associate gave him a painkiller, and dressed this new wound, as well. She mopped up the blood, sprayed some antiseptic on the wound, then spread something else on it, and the gash closed up with incredible speed. A quick wipe later, all that remained from the cut was the raw pink of a thin strip of new skin.

Suddenly, Garcia felt ashamed of himself. He realized he was being irrational. Maybe he did need a psychologist, after all.

"I detect signs of dehydration," said the android, and connected to the fridge through the web.

The fridge listed its contents, and a second later the android had made its choice. The door opened, releasing a bottle of still water fortified with various ions and minerals.

"Mind your own business!" barked Garcia.

"I am," replied the android, smiling, only increasing Garcia's annoyance. "How much have you had to drink today, Mr. Sandoval? Did you know that

the human body needs at least five pints of liquid a day?"

"Get out!" Garcia stood up angrily.

"Does your head hurt? Are you feeling tired?" continued the android, undeterred. Garcia grabbed her, turned her around, and pushed her towards the front door.

"I said get out! Sod off!"

There was a hiss, and the air filled with a sweet smell.

The android turned back, her face now serious.

"Mr. Sandoval, your aggression has exceeded the acceptable threshold. I regret that, for your own good, I was forced to spray a sedative into the room. Please do not panic. Everything will be fine momentarily."

Garcia opened his mouth to protest, or to scream, but no sound left his lips. His knees got weak, but the android caught him before he collapsed, and sat him on his chair.

"It's all right," she said cheerfully. Garcia noticed the warmth of her brown eyes for the first time. The android opened the water bottle and held it to his lips. She made him drink, like a baby, cooing continuously. "Have a drink, you need it. You will feel much better soon. You are obviously exhausted. If your work is so stressful, consider redesigning your life."

She took the bottle away, and helped Garcia get up.

"It would be best if you went to bed now. Come with me, I'll help you to your room."

Once in the bedroom, she led him to the bed. Garcia collapsed onto the sheet. He felt weak and sleepy. The android took off his shoes, his trousers and his shirt, then tucked him in.

"Get some sleep, Mr. Sandoval. I am leaving now. I will lock the door and notify your next of kin."

Garcia wanted to protest but he was too weak even to keep his eyes open.

He immediately fell asleep.

12.

Redesigning.

Garcia woke up with this head etched on his mind.

He sat up in bed. It was morning. He heard the clatter of cups, plates and cutlery from outside his room. Kata was at home.

The sun shone through the gap between the curtains. Everything was the same as a few days ago, the morning when he regained consciousness... At least that was his interpretation of what had happened then. He hadn't lost himself. He'd found himself.

And why should he see it any differently?

Redesigning. I am Garcia Sandoval, and I have no memories. But I cannot let my past go because I did something... something.

"Hiya," said Kata, peeking through the doorway. "So you're up. I've laid on a spread in the kitchen for you."

Garcia walked into the kitchen suspiciously.

"What's this all about?"

"Truce?" suggested Kata. "A new beginning? Or just a good morning. Whatever you want it to be."

Garcia sat by the table and looked at all the food Kata had prepared. Coffee, eggs, milk, hummus, different kinds of corn flakes with fruit, two croissants and creatively sliced vegetables: a spiral of cucumber, a bell pepper cut into the shape of a rose, slices of tomato decorated with basil, a bit of cardamom, cinnamon... all on lovely tableware.

"I haven't been paying enough attention to you," said Kata as she sat next to him. "I'm sorry." She took Garcia's hand, and looked at the scar. "Did it hurt?"

"A little," he admitted.

"As soon as I got the notification from the diagnostics center, I came home straight away."

"I didn't want to ruin your evening."

"You didn't. I only had a little champagne, and didn't want any more, to be honest. But I was scared because they said you needed a sedative."

"Just a little." Garcia was searching for the right words. "I was a bit aggressive, yeah. I think yesterday was the worst day of my life. I'm sorry, too."

"Tell me what I can do to help."

"Don't play games, like you did last time. When you played the dead grandfather card."

Kata was surprised at first, but then nodded.

"That was uncool. I just... I wasn't sure what to do to help. I was very worried, and I had to do something. I tested you, but I shouldn't have. I know that."

"It really didn't help."

"But you were acting so strangely. And to be honest, you still are."

"I'm finished now," said Garcia suddenly. "Finished."

"Really?"

"Yes," he said, and he meant it. Why was he still struggling? What was it he wanted to learn? Did it really matter what had happened? He couldn't change the past, couldn't even remember it. So why not live in the present and for the present? He had everything he could ever want. This was his life, and no one else's: a flat in Budapest, Kata, a job in marketing. An exceptionally useful member of society... a society he would have plenty of time to get acquainted with. What was it those women said on his very first day, near the café in Fővám Square? Was life expectancy really a hundred and thirty years? That would mean he had a lot more time ahead of him than behind him. It would be best if he let the past go. "It is over," he said firmly. "I'm not sure what had happened to me, but it is over."

Kata looked genuinely happy to hear this.

"This is the best thing you could've said!"

"Let me just ask you one thing." Garcia's expression made it clear that he was going to ask a serious question. "Is there anything about your work at CIPR that you are keeping a secret? Anything?"

"How is that relevant now?" Kata looked confused and slightly bewildered. The change of topic from Garcia's health to her job was too sudden.

"Just answer me, please."

"No, there's nothing we're keeping a secret! In fact, we're publishing the details next week on the most highly regarded scientific website. We co-authored the whole report, and it's all true, to the last word. The scientific community has verified and confirmed our measurements. There would be no point in it otherwise. We take our work seriously, Garcia! No secrets, no deception."

Garcia stared at her face and her eyes. He felt like she was telling the truth, or at least that she truly believed what she was saying. If she was lying, she did it better than he ever could. Anyway, isn't it madness to assume that people can travel between parallel realities? What are the odds of that?

He nodded, approvingly.

"Shall we have breakfast?" he asked.

"Let's!"

The start of this day was very different from the previous few. Garcia had to admit to himself that he

was enjoying his newfound attitude. Still, his work came up over breakfast.

"We have to introduce a duck breast growing brand to the market."

"Meat? I don't like meat. I don't want animals to die so I can have meat on my table."

"That's exactly the message we're giving: no violence. Duck breast growing is completely violence free."

"You do know cloning was humbug, right?" asked Kata, her mouth full of hummus. "Yes, the cloned animals did develop more quickly, and they didn't have normal life cycles or personalities, but they were still sentient beings. So by eating cloned meat you were still contributing to animal cruelty the same as always."

"But no animals are involved in this process, so they can't die, either," replied Garcia, then a new thought occurred to him. "You can rest assured I will only work for companies that deserve it. Didn't you say the other day that it was up to me to eliminate evil from the world? That we concentrate on what's most valuable, and what leads to a happier life? That's why you fell in love with me. Trust me."

Kata smiled.

"I did say that. Nice of you to remember."

"That was the most heart-warming and kindest thing anyone's ever said to me in my life," answered Garcia earnestly.

Kata was visibly embarrassed. She obviously wasn't used to such warm words.

"And have you got any idea how you'll help the duck breast people?" she asked.

"Of course I have. The first thing we do is emphasize the brand values to reach more people, and convince them to try the product. Then, they become regular buyers and put it on their weekly grocery list through their fridge. Seeing how useful the product is, this will be easy. The difficulty comes in switching over into the period of trust, moving on to advocacy marketing, where consumers recommend the product through wasp connects or their own personal channels. That's the real challenge, and that's why they hired me. For this phase, I'm planning to establish a retro feeling, the guiltless consumption of meat that people could enjoy in the past, and link it to the essence of our hypermodern age, which is to say, the company's objective of adhering to the highest professional standards and employing state-of-the-art technology-."

As Garcia was talking, the word *redesigning*, which had been lurking in the back of his mind, was slowly replaced by another: *cloning*.

He suddenly felt like he'd stumbled upon the answer he'd been searching for. To confirm his hypothesis, he had to find Gergely Matheus.

13.

Up to that very moment, he had no idea how Matheus fitted into the picture. But he had an epiphany over breakfast. And although he'd promised Kata he had finished, he decided to investigate just this one more loose end.

He had to know the truth. Then, he would really let go.

Or, if Matheus couldn't provide any of the answers, then... Then it really was over.

The day before, he wanted to break into CIPR using a personal skin. He gave up on that plan, but made up another one along the same lines: he decided to use augmented reality and hacked wasps to get into the breast growth plant, masquerading as the director, *Ádám Garay*.

After Kata left for her jog, Garcia started tinkering with his wasp. It only took him about fifteen minutes to use pictures from social media and his own photos to create a skin of Garay's face and find out when the director would next be out of the office. Another half-hour spent hunting down bits of code to stitch together, and he had a program that would upload Garay's visage onto the wasps of anyone he'd encounter, to be then downloaded onto their cameo lens. He then knocked out his own ego. This was the Achilles' heel of his plan. He couldn't be sure what codes the director's ego used to check in

with the plant AI, but it was a risk he had to take. He knew that if there were no specific security codes, he could get inside. If there were, the alarms would be triggered or, in a best-case scenario, he would only be asked politely to identify himself.

So he simply walked into the plant in Maglód. It was very simple, and he wasn't hindered by any security measures. This amused him greatly. Evidently, the world in 2062 was completely unprepared for criminals. He really was out of place. His thought patterns were completely different from other people's. Once inside the building, his wasp did as expected: it floated overhead and slightly ahead of him, and uploaded the personal skin to all the devices it needed to. Everyone Garcia met saw Ádám Garay walk down the corridors. Wasp to wasp to cameo lens: it was a simple but brilliant solution. Still, Garcia only had to use it twice, as he only stumbled upon two people in the plant.

He walked between two rows of tanks, and stepped into the director's office. He opened the minipad he'd brought along, and connected it to the system. He was searching for personal data. He only checked Gergely Matheus's file, and was done in three minutes. Matheus had a home address in Buda stored in the system, but his delivery addresses also contained another entry. Garcia looked it up on worldmaps, and found that it belonged to a large warehouse. He zoomed in to street view, and

saw a CCTV system installed above the front gate. *Whoever installs a system like that must be guarding something valuable.*

He wanted to get out of the plant as soon as possible, but he had to stay a bit longer if he were to have any hope of infiltrating the warehouse. He needed Matheus's ego imprint. Acquiring that was a slightly more complex task, but Garcia was confident he could do it. Every time Matheus entered the plant, his ego would check in with the operating AI. While building the secure connection key, the AI would collect, and then store, quite a lot of personal details. Every time Matheus connected to the web, or ran a search, a query or a call, every time he had an IM chat, the information package would get richer and richer. Rich enough, in fact, to fool another AI's verification protocol by copying it into a primary directive system. It would, for all intents and purposes, behave like an actual ego.

It took Garcia over an hour to get all the data he needed. He had to resort to some outside help, so he tapped into his neural imprinting protocol once again to quickly gain some expert knowledge of the more specialized procedures. But, eventually, he managed to hack into the memory block of the AI, download Matheus's ego imprint, then transfer it into his minipad as a ghost image. He wasn't surprised to find that Matheus's job entailed more than simply looking after the ducks: he was also a

researcher, specialized in the comparative study of different brain structures. Specifically, he studied the subpallium in bird brains and the corpus striatum in mammals, with a focus on the differences in their evolutionary trajectories. So, if Garcia Sandoval had really been cloned, maybe Gergely Matheus could copy over his brain structures into the clone. Not perfectly, of course, otherwise he wouldn't have lost some of his memories.

Too many maybes, Garcia chided himself.

His stomach clenched at the thought he might be a mere clone.

He decided that instead of visiting Matheus's flat, he would go to see the warehouse first. His original plan was to snatch Matheus and force him to reveal the truth, but he now thought it might be better to have a rummage through his things beforehand. Maybe he would find a clue at the warehouse, or something interesting that he could use.

He took the free suburban train back to Budapest. He didn't have an ego but still wanted to make sure he couldn't be traced straight from Maglód to Matheus's warehouse. He used a selection of ghost egos on the train, by cloning the ego of one of the people sitting next to him, and applying some superficial modification so that the system would detect as many egos as passengers.

Funny, he thought, *how the personal skins people don't actually like chinks in their armor that*

make it all the easier to access their egos. I wonder if they realize that.

Once in Budapest, Garcia re-activated his ego, and hailed an electric car. He rode it to the Danube, where the car lifted itself slightly, and connected to the high-speed rails. It zipped across Margaret Bridge towards the Buda side, then flew over the Hospital Museum of the Brothers Hospitaliers and the old Institute of Rheumatology. Garcia looked down, and saw elderly people playing chess while immersed in hot-water pools under the glass dome.

All of this is completely alien to me, he thought. It all felt like a dream. *I would make an excellent criminal.*

He soon reached the top of Rózsa Hill, and the car gently flopped back onto the asphalt on Törökvérszi Road. Garcia got out and borrowed a bicycle from the community rack by the roadside. He was improvising now. He didn't plan his journey; he just did whatever occurred to him.

The warehouse was a squat and unremarkable building, as he had already seen on worldmaps. To the right, it was flanked by a well-kept park, and to the left, by other, similar warehouses. Garcia rode past the building, ditched the bike further down the road, then walked back. He loaded Garay's face once again, just to be on the safe side. He stood close to the wall, and deactivated

his ego. The knockout was slightly more radical than last time. He could only hope he would be able to turn it back on again later. Then he overrode the deactivated ego with Gergely Matheus's imprint, and hoped the personal data he had stolen would be enough to fool the warehouse's security systems.

He stood before the front door wearing Garay's face and Matheus's ego imprint. He pulled the sleeve of his shirt over his hands, and pushed down the door handle. He felt a sudden jolt, and half of his face went numb. Not only had the security protocol of the warehouse's AI rejected Matheus's ego imprint, it had also recognized Garay's face and, detecting an anomaly, attempted to access Garcia's real ego. He took two steps backwards or, rather, staggered back a little, and had to steady himself by holding on to a small, thin tree. His face was now almost completely numb, and he realized he was being hacked: the system was searching for his ID. It felt like a long needle had been plunged into his skull, and his ego suddenly whirled back to life.

Busted.

At that moment, and much to his astonishment, the door opened.

"Welcome, Mr. Sandoval!" said the door. "You may enter now."

14.

Garcia found himself in a small antechamber containing only two cupboards. He peeked inside both, and found protective clothing, shoes and masks arranged in neat rows. Nothing of any interest to him. He turned towards the door leading deeper into the building, and cautiously opened it. He had expected to see a warehouse, not at all what he found.

It looked as if he had entered a spaceship. The walls were lined with computers, with membrane screens unfolding in each corner and beneath the ceiling, creating a network of strange, neural highways. The system was buzzing with activity. Apparently, Matheus kept it running even when he was out. This was the first thing Garcia noted, but by far not the most curious. On a shelf to his right, he saw a row of heads: around twenty unmarked and unremarkable, hairless android heads. Across the oblong room, a brain the size of a wardrobe was floating in a tank filled with some sort of liquid. The tank was connected to a number of pipes, which led to other tanks, dispensers and switchboards. The other end of the room was taken up by a giant desk and a drawing board, filled with indecipherable hieroglyphs.

Garcia knew he had been here before. The fact the AI had let him in was the first clue, but he also felt it in his gut.

He stood in front of the screens and tried decoding the rows of letters and numbers scrolling across them. He quickly figured out he was looking at a simulated brain, but he couldn't tell if it was a human brain or even if it was the mirror image of an actual brain.

Other screens were showing the electrical parameters and patterns of the artificial brain floating in cerebrospinal fluid as it was being stimulated with various signals, and monitored the plasticity of its synaptic connections. Some screens showed images captured by nanorobots throughout the brain processes of interest. Yet another computer then used these images and measurements to create a three-dimensional map.

Garcia was so absorbed in investigating the screens that he didn't even see the person entering the room. He only spun around when he heard his name.

"Hello, Garcia." It was Gergely Matheus standing at the door, holding a home-made stun gun. "So, you've found this place."

Garcia glanced at the weapon.

"What is it that I've found?"

"You still can't remember anything?" Matheus furrowed his brows as he looked at Garcia. He took his silence as an answer. "No, you can't."

"It's cloning, isn't it?" asked Garcia.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a fucking clone, aren't I? That's your job: you clone duck breasts. That's what you know best. I had myself cloned, you transferred my consciousness from one body to the other, then I and the original Garcia met on Liberty Bridge—"

"Wait, wait, wait! You're getting ahead of yourself. We've never cloned a human," said Matheus, shaking his head. "No one clones humans, because it's illegal. It is possible, our current understanding of the science would allow us to do it, but it's illegal. There are serious ethical reasons for not doing it. Even the food industry has given up on cloning. No one buys cloned animal meat any more. The consumers have completely rejected it. This whole thing was your idea." Matheus took a step forward and looked Garcia straight in the eye. "Because of the accident at the CIPR."

"On July 24?"

"Yes. You kept saying to me that day had opened your eyes."

"So is the multiverse the answer, after all?"

"What multiverse? Who's talking about a multiverse?"

"Then I really don't understand anything. What is this place?" asked Garcia again.

"My laboratory," replied Matheus. "A year ago, I applied for a research grant, and got the money from the North Atlantic Union. This is what I do in my free time, or four days a week, if you like."

"The different evolutionary trajectories of human and bird brains?"

"That was my previous project. The official one. I'm working on something else now. I'm researching the imaging of the brain structures that lead to divergent thinking."

"And what has that got to do with me?"

"We met at the duck breast plant. A chance encounter." Matheus slowly circled Garcia, careful to keep at least five steps' distance. He kept the stun gun pointed at Garcia at all times. "Honestly, if I could turn back time, I would, and I'd say no to your mad suggestion. Sadly, we don't have a time machine." When he got to the shelf containing the android heads, he pulled out a sturdy chair. "Sit down."

When Garcia hesitated, Matheus threatened him with the weapon.

"Don't make me use it. I may have full empathy, but I will still shock you and sit you in the chair myself if I have to."

Garcia sat down.

"You'll find leather straps by your calves and under the armrests. Fasten them around your legs, and then around your arms."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll correct the mistake I made. Or, rather, we made. Do it!"

Garcia reluctantly complied. He reached down, tied up his legs, then his right arm. Then he put his

left arm on the rest. Matheus approached him from the back and fastened the last strap around Garcia's wrist. Only then did he put down the stun gun.

"I'm sorry," he said earnestly. "I have to do this, under the circumstances. I warned you things would turn sour, but you didn't care. I followed you over the past few days to see how you've changed. I can't bear watching any longer. If you hadn't come to my laboratory on your own, I would have carried you here myself."

He opened a cupboard, and took out a syringe gun. Garcia wanted to leap out of his chair, but the straps held him down, so all he could do was strain against them in vain.

"Don't even think about it!" he growled.

"I administered one of these to you five days ago," explained Matheus, stepping closer. "At your request, I might add. You wanted to restore the original energy functionality of your prefrontal cortex. To be the way you were when you were born. Before getting your nanobot injection."

"And why did I want that?"

"Remember July 24," replied Matheus. "There was that woman at the CIPR. Szonja something. You said you'd realized the nanobot injection, which is the very basis of our modern-day eutopia, deprived humans of their personalities."

"You're making this up as you go along."

"On the contrary. True to the last word. That

woman almost killed herself to save some physicist, right? Szonja and Dr. Tamil, if I remember rightly. And that opened your eyes. At least that's what you said."

"She's got an oversized amygdala. That's why she did it. She's an altruist. It's got nothing to do with the inoculation infants receive. She was born like that, with an oversized amygdala. You must know what that means."

Matheus nodded.

"But you had no idea that was the case. At the time, at least, you attributed the whole thing to the nanobot injection. The nanobots reach the brain and increase the activity of the orbitofrontal cortex, in the middle region of the prefrontal cortex. As a result, the children will have a much, much stronger tendency to empathize when they grow up. Just a little push that allows us to get on with each other. So that we can co-exist like rational beings. It allows us the ability to express our arguments without aggression, and to feel each other's pain. This is the foundation of our modern civilization. And that's what you wanted to get rid of. You wanted to know what life would be like without it. And you persuaded me to help you." The corner of Matheus's mouth curled into a sour grin. "You are a master wordsmith. You said I would benefit from the deal, as well, because I could inspect your brain structures afterwards, to better understand

how the inoculation alters the ability for divergent thinking. What an opportunity this was for me! Well, at least that's what you claimed."

"And what did you do?"

"Me? Complete idiot as I am, I agreed. I could program the nanobots to restore parts of your brain to the state they were when you were born. That's what you wanted, and that's what I did.

Garcia was staring at the syringe gun.

"And what is it loaded with now?"

"Memory-restoring nanobots."

"For me?"

"No, they are for me, really. I need them occasionally, when I'm too tired or when— Anyway, they are for you now. Let me inject you. They may restore the memories you've lost."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Aren't you feeling alien in this smoothly running, friendly world? Aren't you more impatient and more selfish than everyone else? Doesn't everyone annoy you? You know I'm right. There's a caveman in our midst: the last specimen of an extinct, aggressive race. If you had your way, you'd solve all your problems with a big stick. You don't enter arguments to learn but to win, no matter what. Can you feel the fighting spirit burning inside you? I'm telling you, you're a caveman, an atavism from a by-gone age, an evolutionary cul-de-sac. If we were all like you, we may well have destroyed this world of

ours by now. I'm telling the truth, Garcia! I've documented everything. Do you want to see it? Just log into the warehouse AI with your ego. It will let you access your own files that aren't on the web. You'll see that everything I said is true. This is exactly what happened."

Garcia complied.

Fifteen minutes later, he let Matheus inject him with another army of nanobots. He wanted to remember.

15.

Garcia could remember.

Five days before, before Matheus administered his first injection, Garcia erased all traces of the experiment he'd been planning. He deleted all entries from his diaries after 24 July, along with all references to Matheus, his related thoughts, the recordings of their collaboration, the photos that showed them together: everything. He even deactivated his wasp and put it back in its box because he didn't want it to record the experiment itself. He gave Kata a kiss.

Then he came here, to this private laboratory, this weird home of android heads and a giant brain. He received the 'restoration' injection from Matheus, then passed out. He slept for nearly twelve hours while the nanobots got to work in his brain. When he woke up, he didn't feel any differ-



ent. Maybe slightly grumpier and more tired, but he most definitely wasn't another person. Still, he did feel a lot more creative.

He went to work, and had an argument with Csehi. Nothing serious, just a slight disagreement. After about two hours' work, he popped out to Kálvin Square for a beer, but the beer had no head. He complained to the robot waiter, but its fussiness just angered him even more. He declared he was not paying his bill, but the bank authorized the restaurant's debit request while rejecting his attempt to block the payment. The notification was accompanied by the contact details of a law firm in case he wanted to take the case to court. This gesture infuriated him even more. The last thing he wanted was to give employment to a bunch of bored lawyers.

He walked down to the banks of the Danube to get some fresh air. It was getting dark, but the streets were still quite busy. *Don't these people have homes to go to?* He thought. He knew it was unreasonable to expect everyone to be at home at the same time, but he did it anyway. He wanted to be alone. He launched the Bp_DMA skin to suit his mood. He also chose a personal skin for himself: he was wandering the streets in the embrace of a dark patch of fog.

Garcia could now remember walking onto Liberty Bridge. Then there was that man, and he completely lost control.

He still had no idea why things had happened the way they had.

Up to that very moment, he had lived a peaceful and calm life. But there, behind the pillar of the bridge, his inner Mr. Hyde breached the surface.

All that man did was ask him if he was feeling all right.

Garcia decided the stranger was trying to pick a fight, and replied something unrepeatable. The man was dumbfounded, but Garcia still lost it. The whole day had been just too much for him. Things just didn't feel right. He pushed the stranger, with both hands and with darkness in his heart. The man lost his balance, and fell over the railing.

Effectively, Garcia murdered him.

All the man wanted was to offer help to a stranger that looked like he could use it.

For hours afterwards, Garcia wandered around aimlessly, trying to process the events. One moment, he felt like the king of the world. The next, he could have died of guilt. He plummeted from an emotional high, then soared again. He felt like he was sitting in a tiny boat on the huge waves of a stormy sea. Up, then down. He could now remember sobbing at the foot of Gellért Hill, then ordering champagne in a bar not long after. He drank half a bottle before people started giving him strange looks. He insulted the group sitting at the next table, but then came another emotional crash, and he issued groveling apol-

ogies all around. He staggered out into the street. He wanted to die, and walked out onto the road, but the electric cars dodged him.

Then he just walked and walked, endlessly. He wasn't even sure where. He walked until he passed out.

The next morning, he woke up in his bed, wearing his clothes, but not his shoes.

So this was his story, after all.

16.

Matheus was forced to sedate him.

But as soon as he removed the syringe gun from his arm, Garcia started raging. It was like something had snapped in him: he thrashed around until he could free his right arm. He still wasn't capable of logical thought, however, so instead of unfastening the strap on his left arm, he kept thrashing until he'd exhausted himself. Then he suddenly fell into a deep apathy, and just sat there for a few minutes, staring into space.

"What now?" he muttered. "What have I done?"

"With any luck, there will be no eye witnesses and no wasp recordings," answered Matheus. He looked tired and worn out. There was no fight left in him. "This experiment turned out to be a disaster. It would be best for both of us if no one else learned about it."

"I'm going to turn myself in."

"No point. By the time you're put on trial, the restoration injection will have done its work, and you'll be your old self. The man they'd punish would be incapable of evil. And they would punish me, as well, of course." Matheus's voice cracked as he continued, "I made a mistake, Garcia. A big mistake. You can't imagine how miserable I feel about it. I, too, am responsible for that man's death, if only indirectly. And that's a burden I can never be free from. He is in my dreams every single night. I will carry him to the end of my days. We both will... You'll see, this is much, much worse."

Matheus pulled out a box with a golden rim. Garcia recognized it: it was used for the nanobot inoculations administered to infants. One box, one vial, one happy life.

Matheus continued talking while he unpacked the vial.

"You'll get another injection, like you did when you were an infant," he said. "The nanobots have been absorbed already, they won't interfere with the effect. I'll now restore the appropriate functioning of your cortices. That will eliminate your aggression once again. But the memories will remain, of course."

Garcia grunted.

"I'm sorry," said Matheus. "Maybe you'll feel like erasing them again. But believe me, that would be even worse."

Garcia burst into tears.

"How could it be worse than this?"

"You had to know what you'd done! You have to know! So that you'll never again make the same mistake. So that, once you're out of this caveman costume you're wearing, you'll never feel like putting it back on again."

"But it wasn't me!"

"But it was you. Your desire for the new, the drive to explore the unknown, it's all in you, Garcia. We are what we do, though my injection did play a part by suppressing the effect of your inoculation. Still, you will continue to yearn to experience something different, to escape this world of the future. Unless, that is, you remember what you'd done. Like you are remembering now."

"Is that why I'd forgotten everything?"

"No, I don't think so. That must have been because of the murder. Your brain couldn't cope with the enormity of what you'd done, so it erased the memories. But even after your prefrontal cortex has been restored, Garcia, you will not be a murderer. There is aggression in you, like there is in all of us when we are born, but you are not a murderer."

Matheus administered the injection, then stared at the empty vial pensively.

"I think," he said finally, "we have crossed an evolutionary threshold. We turned off natural se-

lection, and reinforced our social selves to skip ahead a good thousand years. We have improved ourselves. We have become able to build a better world together. Aggression and suspicion were useful when we still needed to evolve and fight for our survival. We needed group identities, which incidentally also led to racism, wars and so much evil in the world. But, by the early 21st century, none of these characteristics were of use to us anymore. In fact, they were a hindrance. So we figured out how to move on. Co-operation, social utility, attentiveness, empathy: these are the traits we need now to help humankind grow in values and worth. And there's even better news! You know, Garcia, some scientists believe brain structures are inheritable. What that means is that in three or four generations, we may no longer need nanobot injections to activate the prefrontal cortex. Children will be born tolerant, empathetic and collaborative. A thousand years or maybe even two thousand years of progress in just over thirty years, thanks to technology."

Garcia shot Matheus a haggard look.

"Is that supposed to comfort me?"

"Just go home to Kata and do what you are supposed to do." Matheus leant forward and started undoing the straps that restrained Garcia. His hands were shaking, as was his whole body. He appeared to be on the verge of collaps-

ing, but he kept comforting Garcia. "What you do is exactly what we need to sustain this peaceful civilization and continued cooperative development on Earth. Just do your best at whatever you do, and follow your moral compass. That's all that matters. Look forward, not back into the past, and the world will be an even better place than it is now."

Vision

Dear Reader,

Now that you have reached the conclusion of the story, let me show you how it started.

2018 marked the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. We changed our names. We extended our scope of activities. We now look at ourselves and at the world with a different perspective. As Wave-maker, we are placing significant importance on the success of our partners in the realms of content and technology as well as media. We believe that the future belongs to those who shape it.

On the first day of our shared future, my colleagues and I discussed what we want our profession to be like by 2035. This brainstorming is what gave birth to the vision you are about to read on the following pages. This is not simply a company vision, but a desired image of a profession that we are working towards every day.

This is the vision that inspired the author of the short story. I hope you find it interesting enough to engage in conversation with us.

Let us create the future together!

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large 'C' shape followed by a small 'r', a long horizontal line, and a small 'h'.

János Gulyás
CEO, Wavemaker

Marketing communication in 2035

Everything is defined by global well-being

In 2035, our economy is not only effective and productive but people-oriented, fair and sustainable. Growth, consumption and material goods have been replaced as our main focus by long-term global goals, as well as individual happiness, satisfaction and self-realization. Human emotions have experienced an unprecedented strain in recent years, which means that coveted self-realization and self-knowledge are no longer dreams. Well-being has become a decisive factor, so much so that our main goal is now “overall national happiness”, guiding our everyday actions. Sustainability is a prime measure of value for society to judge organizations.

Higher levels of automation, more humanity

In a fully automated world we are able to provide more attention and care for each other. We have realized that we cannot secure our future without giving appropriate attention to our environment, which in turn has become a top priority for all. We care about the environment, and gladly support causes that further our society and ecosystem. Helping gives us tremendous amounts of energy. People have become conscious decision-makers;

they only purchase products and services from responsible companies, and are hard to deceive. Their own needs are as important to them as are those of their community, and they take pride in educating one another.

The race is on for higher rates of well-being

The main economic motivator for companies is to develop services and products that please people, help their lives and improve their well-being. Deceptive, unfair, harmful or unsustainable companies have become obsolete. The measure for economic success is still money; however, it is not a standard that accounts for social effectiveness (benefit for society), fairness and sustainability. Thus, a company's place on the market is not defined by its income but its "created value". In other words, social utility has replaced profit as the accepted measure of value and holds special significance in every company's life. Consumers are considering qualitative criteria (such as payback value) that they could not take into consideration before. As work contributes to social utility, more and more employees feel like they are useful members of society. Getting rich easily, unfairness and excessive financial wealth are no longer status symbols, let alone ideals. Extreme wealth gaps have disappeared, and consumer society has slowed down. We consume less and live a "fuller life".

Competition is still an important part of progress in 2035, but it is a decent competition based on real values, social utility and well-being. Professional competitions are transparent, unquestionably founded on professional grounds only. Companies' internal competitions are based on the ability to contribute to the organization's values, as everyone is working at a company whose principles they can identify with.

Self-regulation for transparent operation

Our basic principle is for good things to proliferate out of their own evident usefulness, so we develop and apply regulations that facilitate this. Pseudo-rules don't exist anymore, as rules are answers to real problems. Two global organizations run regulation, a regulatory and an enforcer body. Adhering to their rules, anyone is free to start professional competition, and it is up to the market to decide their fate.

Partnerships replace service provider–customer relationships

In 2035, competition is defined by overall global well-being as a common goal. Companies have therefore established close “organic collaborations” which tear down the walls between the companies, making boundaries (like those between different areas of media) grow thin. Collaborating companies work to-

wards a continuous, common vision to achieve more effective work and increase their contributions to global well-being. They work on shared technologies that support efficient labor, freeing up valuable time on all sides, and deepening trust through mutual understanding. Trust has taken on the most important role in partnerships instead of contracts and tenders. The most important indicators are performance and added value. Customer–service provider relationships have evolved, and by 2035 a partnership or consultancy-type relationship is typical. These are established through continuously growing trust.

Advertising serves individual well-being

Communications professionals in 2035 are researchers and behavioral analysts, with their work partially based on sociology. Value is provided by data and information. The profession trades with information; customer–agency and interagency cooperation based on data sharing is prominent. Agencies comprise individuals, where the customer can be a company as well as a private person. The communications field operates responsibly within the ecosystem of responsible companies and conscious individuals. It does not convey intrusive and unfair messages, nor ones that encourage excessive and pointless consumption. It has a serious impact on people's value systems and transmits useful and valuable messages.

By 2035, we can measure the usefulness of messages to recipients, and the goal of the communications profession is to optimize this measure. People receive high-quality, trustworthy, personalized ads with added value, in a creative form. Users can choose the types of ads they wish to see. Personalization is ideal both for consumers and brands, and is never indiscreet. In many cases, the brands' messages (as per the user's choice) are incorporated subconsciously, as these serve the interests of the users. Marketing communication is honest and true, helping everyday people to gather enough accurate information about the things they need. It never aims to shove products down the customers' throats, but instead helps them make conscious decisions.

Agencies work for the customers

One role of agencies is to assess their products' effects on well-being, individuals and others. Consumers turn to agencies for help, who in turn assist in making decisions. Information is completely personalized, yet individuals never feel like they are being observed or judged. No product is without value, and cooperation with consumers is completely ethical. Agencies are not the voices of brand owners but instead act as filters and consultants to consumers.

So-called "moral agencies" have been established that endorse certain ethical values (for example,

optimizing consumer choices to animal protection). The goal of brands – aside from defining corporate choices and behavior – is not only a message to consumers but a basis for collaboration with agencies.

A respected profession thanks to good advertisements

Ad noise is weak, and society's consumerist tendencies have decreased in recent years. Almost everyone understands how the communication process works. The profession is completely transparent, its reputation is positive, and its process is understandable and tangible to everyone. When shopping, people don't just "spend without thinking" anymore. The Advertising Self-Regulatory Board of the present uses a grading system similar to Google's former quality ranking, which means it is very expensive to create bad ads. And even though these are important for the entire society, the most significant element for those working in advertising is that their children know exactly what their parents do and respect them for their everyday work.

Full transparency and volunteer participation in marketing

We can safely say that we are aware of the data collected about us. Data commerce is decentralized; everyone is free to decide what data they provide,

and aware of what they get in return. Results warranted by decentralized authenticator systems are unquestionable, generally accepted and reliable. Regulators guarantee transparent data handling and easy data protection. This also means that everyone is free to completely block out marketing. This is similar to using an ad blocker, except it is exhaustive, evident and simple. The regulatory bodies of the profession are all open sourced and transparent.

Cooperation for the greater good

By 2035, it is not only giant corporations that have a place on the ad market; large media companies also let smaller, local entrepreneurs and companies access it. The nature of competition has also changed. More and more solutions come up that did not exist before. Even situations when customers are in competition for agencies are common. Mergers are typical between agencies and customers. In fact, agencies sometimes work together in an organized, networked manner. One of the most popular trends is for freelance-type cloud marketing agencies to bid together on favorable tasks. In other words, all tasks are transparent, and anyone is free to apply. Tenders and mandates are transparently regulated. Competition in tenders is handled by an automated score system, ensuring clean competition and that

the best applicant always wins. Rating software is developed with joint agency cooperation and open and transparent professional self-regulation. The rating system itself is also open-source and is managed and developed by a professional forum. All participants must accept this system and procedure in order to qualify for tenders and mandates. Effie has disappeared and is missed by no one. The market houses a real-time creative/media rating system (also a result of joint development) that helps companies within the profession to better understand consumers and optimize media presence. Certain areas (media, creative) have become closely intertwined coalitions in order to operate more effectively. Project-level collaboration is common. Commercial models are completely customized for consumers and the needs of the communications field. Professional advocacy bodies have grown stronger and are more impactful.

Technology helps maximize personal well-being

Technology supports our field in several ways. We have predictive and simplified tools at our disposal, as well as personalized technologies that are completely safe in terms of privacy. New, specialized and even astounding high tech tools and methods have become available. High levels

of personalization pervade all walks of life thanks to data-based operation, as by 2035 everyone is reachable this way. Since everyone has a well-being index, meaning different things make different people happy, we have developed a technology to improve this. It monitors the rate of our satisfaction and helps achieve the desired value. Our profession takes advantage of AI, while agencies do their best to do the same, since this has become a source for competitive advantage. Moreover, we have developed a technology to predict customers' needs even before they arise. VR is a popular tool for placing ads, but these also appear on social media. The screen is a prominent medium, while ads are incorporated into their environment in modernized public domains as well. In spite of these developments, we make sure to keep human thought in the foreground. Keeping in mind the importance of people, and never giving full control to algorithms have been the key to our progress.

Wavemaker creates value

In 2035, Wavemaker builds on satisfaction, fulfillment and values. We are socially responsible from several perspectives, and are prominent creators of tangible, useful values. We strive to make small businesses and individuals successful and competitive.

Agencies seek to put useful products on the market, which makes them a good measure of utility for clients. They can evaluate products and services and determine whether those are useful before they are launched. We are special as our client relations are defined by client experience instead of client service. We react to problems professionally as well as personally. Our strength and willingness are exemplary, in turn followed by other companies as well. We don't just talk about these things; this is what we are good at, this is what makes us WAVE-MAKER 2035.

The difference: people

By 2035, the majority of work processes compatible with automation are carried out by machines, and automation supported by technology assists human work in an extremely wide range. People have learned to understand and use this technology. They trust in and rely on automation to provide results. Workloads have accordingly become markedly data-based and followable through automated decision mechanisms. People are involved in decision-making and creative workflow that require high levels of human skill applied, or in situations of emotional decision-making that would be too difficult to describe and code. Competitive edge itself depends on human factors.

In 2035, we have countless new tools at our disposal that not only save us time but help us boost workplace creativity. Technological advances grant us more free time, which brings more balance to our private lives, and in turn makes us strive for innovation and self-fulfillment in our professional lives. Employees don't complete their tasks like „ants" but are active creators within the economic processes. They do things they enjoy and that provide significant benefits to society. Social utility brings financial esteem as well. Human and machine coexist in healthy harmony. Employees can join the work process from anywhere, any time – existing technology allows them to be present in two places at once. Companies also share their knowledge on virtual conferences that make networking simpler as well. Technological improvements allow us to quickly learn skills and abilities that used to take precious time. This polymath existence makes employees' knowledge so diverse that cooperation, connection and mutual understanding are effortless. More knowledge has led to fewer internal struggles. Internal competition – made possible by lack of information earlier – has become nonexistent within the company and its groups. Everyone within the company is free to obtain the knowledge they desire.

Creativity helps us solve lingering and future organizational problems faster thanks to internal communication and team spirit. A spirit that makes

everyone believe that we are all bound for success in an inspiring and diverse environment. Everyone does what they do best. The creativity that is thus free to flow means the ability to create something new rather than artistic inventiveness. Imagination and the constructive power of disagreement all contribute to the success of our company. We experience this success together by putting human relations first. We care about our environment, and gladly support causes that further our society and ecosystem. Helping gives us tremendous amounts of energy.

Diversity, team work, trust

Employees are diverse, from different educational backgrounds; psychologists, engineers, mathematicians, programmers and consultants. The company hosts community spaces and events that give employees a feeling of belonging. Community spaces provide a supportive environment for cooperation and collaborative thinking. Colleagues are friendly with one another in a positive atmosphere. Personal relations, team work and community are important values. We work together and assist each other for a common goal. If mistakes happen, employees feel confident to tell their superiors and colleagues about them, which is part of their training. Management and employees share a confidential relationship, where they know that everyone is doing

their best to correct the errors. We have enough space and opportunities to communicate regularly. We know and acknowledge each other's work. We give and receive plenty of positive feedback and support. Everyone is an esteemed member of the organization. Everyone knows the company's goals and identifies with them. Basic values have been established that govern our everyday work. We abide by a common ethical codex. We create value – together.

Individual specialization backed by automation

Specialization is the new trend rather than integration. Everyone starts from scratch but is helped progress faster by algorithms. Everyone can find their strengths and is free to try out new things any time. In fact, it is this continuous progress and change that makes certain people happy.

People obtain basic knowledge and field competence in a personalized manner. This makes training faster, without requiring human resources. Everyone has more time for themselves which helps them improve faster, change areas of expertise or even professions, and understand other people's work without asking them, making cooperation more fluent as well. People have a wide range of knowledge of relevant fields, but their own strengths prevail and develop the most. This helps us get to know workflows thoroughly,

and see clearly what we like, what we are good at and what we would like to know more about. We become experts by gaining and making use of our experience.

Work is divided into optimized, personalized sub-tasks by a project management algorithm. Everyone does what they do best and what makes them comfortable in an evenly distributed workload. The transparent company helps us to take advantage of our skills.

Working hours, work location and tasks support individual performance

By 2035, we work in flexible shifts – and not necessarily in the office. Every employee has a personalized work schedule. Every morning includes two hours of compulsory office time when everyone is together – most people personally, some virtually – to discuss common issues and task distribution. Before and after that, everyone is free to work where and when they are the most effective according to their task type and personal needs. The goal is to complete the work assigned in the desired quality and within the deadlines. Organization of work is flexible as our framework is project-based. People volunteer for tasks they are interested in, which ensures everyone does diverse and likeable work. We don't need to choose between a steady employer and freelancing anymore as these two things are mutually present. Assessment

and optimization of jobs is crucial for productive work and a comfortable workload without overburdening workers. Employees are allowed to dedicate a work-day each week to personal development and expand their knowledge – we call these „open university Fridays“. This is a time to develop skills we feel are weaker, attend advanced trainings, catch up on market events, and help other colleagues. These things all contribute to a healthy and stable work–life balance. In addition to several family support options, employees are free to take advantage of company nursery schools, kindergartens and schools. In case of the unfortunate accident or death of an employee, the company takes care of their family.

Employee well-being is in the interest of the company, who provides support throughout their career

The company is committed towards its employees' health. Full health screenings are regular and done together. Half an hour of each day is allotted as personal time when we can do exercise or nap at an oxygen station. We have a „calm room“ and boxing bags to help let off steam, as well as mentors who we can talk to about professional and private issues. A personalized digital application helps us achieve a daily health goal (by reminding us to drink water, take breaks, go for walks, do exercise etc.). Therefore, we have exceptional amounts of energy, and our creativity knows no limits.

Financial motivation has been replaced by well-being and satisfaction as primary preferences when planning career paths. Career paths are diverse but easy to understand. We work more effectively in smaller organization units. In addition to climbing up the ladder, we have opportunities to delve deeper into our current position – which the company appreciates. Career paths conform perfectly to individual lifecycles; consequently, everyone takes on work appropriate to their current life situation and energy levels, achieving ideal self-fulfillment. People maintain a healthy work–life balance. Career paths can be planned thanks to a high degree of work potential transparency. Individual career paths are also transparent, making everyone's career history and strengths public. This allows us to learn from each other's experience, find experts to turn to with questions, and perfectly transition between different areas and professions. Career paths don't only provide opportunities for vertical advancement but more and more ways to expand horizontally. Senior employees with serious experience are appreciated – they work as professional consultants.

Choosing a workplace based on values

It is not companies that pick employees but job seekers choosing companies based on the values they can identify with. This is possible since well-be-

ing is a given for everyone, which means individuals don't work for the money but for their love of the profession. In 2035, career paths are optimized not only by humans but by algorithms as well. HR robots track the skill set of all employees and adjust their tasks accordingly. These robots make degrees irrelevant, with ability and dedication as replacement attributes. The algorithm also helps job seeking young adults to map their own skills and abilities in order to find their most desired and appropriate job. Meanwhile, the education system has transformed in a way that students meet the true face of their chosen profession in school and get an intimate image of what they can expect after graduating. They know that their learning years aren't over, as #lifelonglearning has become generally accepted – with workplaces granting online and foreign trainings to back it up.

