

Even If They Leave

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Dr. Zentano was undressing when the gong on the front door struck. He looked at his watch—at this hour and without a telephoned notice? He put on his robe, took the pistol from the nightstand drawer, released its safety, and went out into the hallway barefoot. He strode along the wall, careful not to touch it. He stood to the side of the door and slowly opened the peephole, but he couldn't look through it without exposing his chest. It was an ordinary door, not armored like most of the housing in the palace. They had laughed at him when he once suggested that they put an armored door on his as well. Who would shoot the doctors?

After sensing no noise from outside for a long time, he gained the courage to look. And he unlocked the latches.

"Did I wake you?" Dr. Strauss said. "Pardon me!"

"I was in the bathroom," Zentano lied. The midnight guest walked straight into the open bedroom.

"Get dressed, they'll call you. I wanted to exchange a word or two before you get there."

Zentano cursed softly but immediately took off his robe and grabbed the top shirt off the back of the chair. Dr. Strauss looked uneasily at the bachelor chaos in the bedroom.

"Talk, talk! I was thinking it over a while ago," Zentano whispered, buttoning the opal buttons on his cuffs.

"Something disturbing is happening. In the course of an hour, I was summoned by three: Melis, Biko, and finally the boss. The generals, as usual, lied. They didn't tell me exactly what was wrong with them. They were gripped by a fever and they couldn't sleep, although they obviously hadn't been to bed at all. They had the feeling that someone was standing next to them, that something was questioning them. I gave them a sedative..."

"Is it their first time?" Zentano interjected contemptuously.

Melis was the adjutant general, and Biko the chief of security. It was normal that they would face such moments since even he, the psychiatrist, couldn't withstand the fears that were filling the presidential palace; not a palace, but a fortress packed with weapons and fears, as if under a state of siege.

"The boss was more candid, but he wants you to examine him too."

"What's with him?" Zentano groaned, leaning over his shoes.

Despite Zentano's assurances that he had inspected the room for wiretapping devices, the president's personal physician did not switch to the vocabulary they used in their rare meetings outside the palace. The two were forced to have their own plot against the dictator so they could survive when he fell, because few are those dictators who don't fall in the end! Once they had both believed in his ideas, and they became members of his party which he himself later disbanded so as not to hinder him in governing the country. Then they regretted it, but it was too late. A personal physician could not resign with impunity to return to private practice. If Zentano, the psychiatrist, in particular, left the palace before his boss, it would be in a "lethal condition," as they said in their parlance. And it would be caused most cruelly by General Biko's thugs. In this situation, willingly or not, you become a conspirator.

"Auditory hallucinations of a rather strange type," Dr. Strauss said. An internist and cardiologist with a rich medical culture, he possessed all the qualities of a luminary in medicine, but he was also nailed to a single patient, like the ancient rowing slaves to their galley. "Some being from another civilization had been interrogating him, asking him awkward questions, and so on."

Dr. Zentano thought: "The beginning of the end!" Then he thought: "Although, a beginning like this can last monstrously long..." and his smile disappeared.

"Examine him, and let's think about therapy together tomorrow," Strauss added.

The psychiatrist understood his insistent gaze. The two had long since realized that they had the power to speed things up in their country, but they were still afraid to use it. They were not sufficiently acquainted with those forces that would claim the inheritance in the palace, and they did not have the necessary connections.

"Will he call me, or what?"

"Go! I told him that if he doesn't need us tomorrow, we'll go around eleven o'clock for some new medicines, to accept them personally."

Zentano approved of his foresight. That exact message was the reason why Dr. Strauss hadn't called him on the phone—so that Biko's people wouldn't hear it.

"Did you tell him about Melis and Biko?"

Strauss smiled for the first time. "Of course not. Why bother him?!" And he asked suddenly with the same insistent look as before, "Did you give them..?"

Zentano waved his index finger in the negative in front of his nose. Such an option had already been discussed. It would be more than foolish to intensify their madness with medication. In that state the three of them would become even more ferocious.

"Go now!" Strauss repeated.

The psychiatrist reengaged the safety on the pistol before putting it in the special holster under his jacket; he was entitled to a weapon. Then he picked up his bag which stood in constant readiness on the nightstand. In the corridor the two parted with only a wave of the hand.

At the door of the presidential apartment, two of Biko's gorillas with automatic machine guns around their necks stood up sleepily in front of him. Zentano opened his jacket so they could take his pistol. One lazily felt the doctor's body while the other peered into the medical bag. The other two, forewarned of his arrival, were stretched out in armchairs in the vestibule of the bedroom and they didn't pay him any attention. Zentano looked at them, trying to remember their faces. Biko was constantly changing the duty assignments in the palace. Zentano took a breath, softened his facial muscles; it was time to be just a doctor.

The president laid the newspaper beside the whiskey bottle. He wasn't sitting in the huge bed—an imperial style—but in the corner where he received his intimate guests.

The psychiatrist greeted him with restrained dignity. He said, "You shouldn't have been drinking before I examine you, Mr. President."

"I don't think I need you anymore. This is more reassuring," the president responded, slapping the paper with his palm and shifting in his operetta sleek pajamas. His entire bedroom was jammed with the same sleek splendor. "All everyone writes about is how much the people love their president, how loyal they are to him, and how happy they are under his government."

Zentano lowered his head, and pulled the stethoscope out of his bag.

"You don't have any complaints, do you?"

"I'm not interested in politics at the moment, Mr. President."

"You're cunning, you devil! I can't understand why I trust you so much, even though the generals have been driving me to remove you for a while now."

"Maybe that's why," the doctor allowed himself a smile. "Surely, the one who replaces me would no longer be only yours."

"They must be pulling your soul out to make you talk about me, huh?"

"They've never allowed themselves anything reprehensible, Mr. President. I can assure you that they are just as loyal to you as I am. But again, I ask you not to distract me now. A psychiatrist doesn't listen to noises in the abdomen and chest, but..."

"Is there anything in my mind but politics?" laughed the head of state. "Then what are you getting these headphones for? Strauss already examined me and measured my blood pressure. It's normal."

"I need to form my own picture of your general condition at the moment."

"Forget about that! Sit down and talk! A whiskey?"

Zentano sat across from him but flatly refused the drink. "So, what are we complaining about? Wait with the whiskey, please! After the examination!"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong. But I was just sitting there with nothing wrong, and I suddenly went crazy..." the president said and vigorously shimmied his small body. Apparently, he had already gotten over his fears. "A voice greeted me politely and asked if it could ask me some questions. It described itself as a being from another civilization. It wasn't possible for it to show itself to me because...I don't remember what its reasons were, but it assured me of its peaceful intentions..."

"Is this the first time?" the doctor interrupted.

"The first. Just a while ago. So, I talked with it. Then I told it to go to hell."

"What questions did it ask you?"

"You can't imagine all the naive and stupid questions! And they're supposed to be another civilization. It was like it was testing a fifth grader in civics. The social structure of humans, how governance is conducted, how and why I was chosen to govern this nation..."

Dr. Zentano nodded amiably, but from under his half-closed eyelids, he was looking with a sort of distracted calculation at the withered face.

"And what did you say?"

"I told it to go find Machiavelli and read it. Things haven't changed much."

"And how did you tell it to go to hell?"

"I told it to get out of my head. And that everything it was asking me about is in books, that there's a whole heap of professors of legal sciences, interrogate them."

"Didn't it ask more intimate questions?"

The president was engrossed in his own memory, his hands waving impulsively.

"After I told it all that, it wanted to ask me some personal questions, how we develop ourselves, humans, and something else I don't remember, but I told it to go see my wife if it wanted to know something intimate about me." The president laughed excitedly and added with even greater pleasure, "Although, between us, Doctor, she's already forgotten my intimacies."

Zentano didn't react to the joke. He was already sufficiently immersed in the private life of this small person, who was constantly trying to demonstrate his self-confidence to as many women as possible, since it wasn't enough to do it before the entire nation.

"So what, the voice is gone, is it?"

"It apologized for the inconvenience and left. It was very kind."

"So it left right away, you say?" The doctor emphasized his distrust. A hallucination doesn't leave just from a command, not even a presidential one.

"If it hadn't asked such idiotic questions, I would have kept it talking. It's interesting to talk to invisible people, isn't it?"

His fingers, however, contrary to his words, were drumming something in morse on the glossy tabletop—an antique item, also from someone's boudoirs.

"And you sensed a presence?"

"Of course. But not in a specific place. There was something there and then it disappeared."

"After the whiskey?"

"I suppose so," the head of state admitted, and a shiver ran across his oversized pajamas, like the shiny surface of a lake blown by a low wind. "But I hadn't been drinking before that."

The psychiatrist got up, though he had no desire to hear the intimate confessions of this ferocious fellow who regularly unburdened his mind before him in psychoanalytic sessions. The president insisted on them like he did his daily massage, his sports workouts, and the always encouraging predictions of his court fortune teller, because he insisted on ruling over the tormented country for at least another three or four decades.

"Lie down, Mr. President. I have repeatedly permitted myself to advise you and your wife to stop these spiritualistic sessions, to banish your favorite astrologers and fortune tellers..."

"I don't need to lie down," the president said in defense of the mysticism that inevitably conquers such people and regimes. "If you know more than they do, tell me now what it is!"

"It is my duty to examine you."

"And you'll say it's nerves, I know that myself. First, tell me what you think!"

Dr. Zentano sat across from him again, smiling professionally.

"There's nothing to worry about, of course."

"Of course," the president mocked him, jumping out of his armchair and stamping the carpet barefoot. "At least, don't start with the de jour reassurances! It's alarming!"

The doctor patiently studied the president's yellowish legs kicking the embroidered oriental slippers away before they stood, then he startled him with a loud and sharp command, "Sit down and put on your slippers!"

The president abruptly interrupted his walk, stared into Zentano's eyes in surprise, couldn't stand their hypnotic power, and obediently returned to the couch. He softened, almost collapsing in his pajamas which were all wrinkled. The doctor grabbed his wrist; it was unnecessary, but measuring the pulse calms the patient and gives the doctor time to dig through their knowledge, or if not, to compose it. What to tell him? Auditory hallucinations are associated with very specific diseases from which the president did not suffer. The easiest thing, really, would be to turn him into a writhing worm, like he had on other occasions, with two or three sentences and the even, glassy shimmer of his green eyes. From time to time, the dictator needed to become a remorseful child in front of his doctor who would wash his guilt away after the mischief had been done. Zentano didn't want to give him any relief tonight, but the president would still insist on an explanation. What to tell him? A psychiatrist is obliged to be able to explain to the patient what they themselves do not know, like the coffee reader who sees all in the tiny black mud at the bottom of the cup.

"Mr. President," he said cautiously, "You're right. It's troubling. It really is troubling! But it is only the onset of something that could be easily overcome, as long as it is well understood. This is a natural crisis for men our age," Zentano delicately grouped himself in, although he was ten years younger. "Don't take offense, Mr. President, but you and I are already beyond the ascent of life, on its opposite slope. There, the rhythm changes abruptly, and this leads to all sorts of jolts. Let me make it clearer for you: picture it as a hill. We make our way up, happy and out of breath, and we hurry to reach the top and our entire organism is subordinate to the struggle to propel itself towards its goal. It usually doesn't turn out how we imagined or wanted, but that's not even the main trouble. Lulled by it, we miss the top without realizing it..." A rather questionable illustration, the psychiatrist told himself, but he had already said it, and everything said must be explained further.

"And so... you see, Excellency, lulled, we fail to stop at the peak, to rest, to look around, to consciously digest what's been accomplished, to prepare for the bitterness of the future. Instead, we keep the same pace, without rest, continuing on without transition, until one day, shaken up, we realize that we are now going down, not up. And going down is different. There our struggle is not to climb to the end but to hold the momentum of the rush, like shifting gears going downhill so the clutch can hold the car, to serve as a brake. But as I was saying, we are unprepared because no one can teach us how to make our way across the hill, and we find ourselves surprised and realize with horror that we are no longer in command of our own labors or our own time, that

the time ahead of us sucks us in like an abyss, and with ever-growing speed, but down there, Mr. President..." Zentano made a pause, in which he skillfully played the dramatics of the doctor who feels obliged to tell the whole truth to his patient. "Down there, Excellency, at the foot of the slope lies another goal, not our goal, not the one from before. Down there we can see, from afar, our open grave."

"Hey," the shiny man snapped. "Is that what you came to talk to me about? Death?"

Zentano squeezed his wrist tightly, calming him with a look.

"I'm answering you, Mr. President, as you should start answering yourself. Otherwise, the questions you heard from that voice will cease to be naive. Besides, they weren't as naive as you thought. These are all existential questions and they're frightening precisely because of their apparent naivete. You've missed your time for asking them, and now, on the opposite slope, it's quite natural for someone else to ask them. They're being asked by the other, which has been dormant inside us all along, while we were deluding ourselves that we knew what we were after, what we were striving for, while we were ascending to the supposedly consciously chosen goal, unlike that one goal we have now, that offends our pride, that makes us equal to everyone else, that we can neither abandon nor circumvent."

"Enough, I told you," the president shouted, pulling his arm away from Zentano's. "I know we're all going to die. Tell me something concrete! I don't have time to ask myself stupid questions. Who will govern this country if I sit down now to ask myself how I'm organized and what I live for?"

"I haven't recommended anything yet," Dr. Zentano said soberly, and he internally mobilized because his patient wasn't stupid. "I'm just explaining to you the intimate conditions of advanced age. Freud says: 'We all know that we will die, but we do not believe it in our subconscious.' I would add: The subconscious is the animal inside us, so it does not believe; the animal doesn't know what death is, but it sometimes anticipates it. However, our subconscious is not as dumb as the animal, when it's scared, it can ask questions..."

"Eh, I'm only fifty-three!" the president said indignantly.

"Exactly! I would say that's the end point of the crisis. Later, you will stop questioning yourself, reconciliation will come. And you surely wouldn't be hearing that voice now if you lived someplace else. You're surging with too much energy to fit in this tiny country where you climbed all the peaks too soon, Mr. President. If you had been born in a powerful and wealthy country, you might have started a war, and you'd still be questing for domination over the continent, over the world. You would aim for the great goal until the end. The larger nations are the active ones; those like us, tiny and poor, are doomed to question themselves and tremble for their own survival."

The compliment on the excessive energy did its job but prevented the president from catching the hint about trembling and asking questions. He shouted almost enthusiastically, "Smart you are,

you devil! That's it. I just have nowhere to go in this damned country!"

Zentano smiled. His patient called it "my blessed mother" in front of the microphones with the same passion.

"What would you recommend?"

"Stand up so I can examine you!" the doctor ordered again sharply, remorseful for his compliment and for all his dubious scientific nonsense. "Remove your clothes!"

Perhaps out of gratitude, perhaps in anticipation that the exam would immediately tell him where to direct his energy, the president readily took off his pajamas.

"Kneel on the couch, back towards me!"

"Are you going to torture me again?" murmured the little man, who made an entire nation tremble.

"Yes, again," Dr. Zentano said relentlessly, taking a long, shiny nail out of his pocket. "I need to check the flow of nerve currents."

In this case, both his answer and the procedure were pointless. A nail or similar spike was used by neurologists to check for skin reactions, but the nerves of the president, who maintained himself with well thought-out diets and a love of sports, were overly strong for his age. But Zentano found in it the possibility for his one small revenge. This nail, which his former neurology professor had jokingly presented to his students as the neurologists' second major tool ("We're worse than carpenters, they have a bunch of other tools and we only have a hammer and a nail!"), had come back to his memory when, a few years prior, he'd had to evaluate his colleague from the presidential prison.

The doctor who worked at the prison, where prominent political opponents were held, had asked to be released for health reasons. The president gave Zentano and Strauss the final decision, and they both found their colleague to be an irreparable wreck. The man who had witnessed the monstrous inquisitions in the presidential prison had for years intoxicated his conscience, not only with alcohol but with some of the opiates used to forcibly drive the prisoners insane or to end the agony of their broken bodies. They recommended him for retirement due to illness, and thus unknowingly signed his death sentence. They hadn't considered that neither the president nor General Biko would leave such a stray witness alive. It was then that Dr. Zentano truly realized that the same thing awaited him as soon as he lost the trust of the dictator.

The same pathetic man who was on the couch now nearly naked, kneeling in front of his own portrait hanging on the wall. Like in front of an icon. The psychiatrist looked in disgust at the fat folds on his back and thighs, the protruding knobs on his shoulders, and the sagging leather pouch on his abdomen. And he slowly poked the nail under his ear, drawing a line all the way down his neck to the end of the shoulder blade. The president groaned and shook.

"Calm down!" Zentano continued to order, but he scratched the president's thigh with even more pressure, so he jumped.

The lines bled instantly, like a scratch from cat claws.

"All right. Very good! I envy you, Excellency!"

Under the guise of praise, the nail drew more and more ferocious scratches on his back, on his emaciated thighs, on his thin calves, and on his tender, yellow feet. The pain was most intense there, and Zentano repeated it several times. The president was shaking on the couch springs, squealing, howling, but he endured. Zentano stood up abruptly. Unexpectedly, for the first time, he wondered if his high-ranking patient was voluntarily allowing himself to be tortured, wanting to empathize with the torments he had inflicted on his opponents in the basement of the palace, if it gave him the pleasure of the masochist. He wanted to drive the nail somewhere with all his strength, the most effective place would be into that hole between the skull and the neck, but he just threw it in the bag.

"Just as I thought, Mr. President. The voice has nothing to do with your nerves. It's only that inexhaustible raging energy which doesn't see itself being utilized enough. Maybe a trip, a romance; but excuse me, a true romance, falling in love, I mean, with a woman, whom you've chosen yourself..."

The president laughed briefly, slipping back into his shiny pajamas with visible satisfaction.

"Where would I get such a love, brother? Should I go to the discos to look for a girl? The president is the least free man in this country. But if you come across one that you think I can fall in love with, feel free to bring her here! You know me better than Biko, who brings me all these whores according to his own vulgar taste. And they're his agents, of course. I don't even need them, you know, I just enjoy checking on his spies without telling them a word."

"Unfortunately, the president's doctor is just as free," Zentano responded restrainedly. Educated in grace and attention to humanity, he took as a personal insult the vulgar jargon with which the dictator sometimes tried to show himself as democratic, close to the people. And every time, Zentano wondered how it was possible and why this life should allow itself to be saddled by such nothingness.

"Excellency, have another glass of whiskey and go to bed! You don't need anything else for now. And I'll think about how, together, we can shut up the mouth whose voice we're uncomfortable listening to. Allow me to leave now."

"Thank you, Zentano," said the president paternally, already clutching the bottle. "You're a wonderful boy!"

The psychiatrist walked the long corridors to his quarters in that unpleasant midnight wakefulness that drives you to ask yourself unpleasant questions. The wonderful boy, Dr. Zentano! At his age, everything wonderful had already gone to hell, but despite being well-read, and though he had just referred to his own age, he continued to deceive himself. He was still soothed by an idea and a belief that the wonderful would return as soon as he managed to escape from this accursed palace where he was imprisoned like the legendary master Daedalus, with his legs broken by the tyrant, in a hopeless labyrinth. And he, like Daedalus, had no choice but to patiently, feather by feather, bind his wings and fly to freedom.

The feathers were the words of his future book. Drawn carefully with stenographic signs incomprehensible to anyone else, they told of the corruption in this palace. With the pleasure of revenge, they depicted the physiological and mental ugliness of the dictator and the people around him. The book was ready and lying in a safe place in the city. He would release it the day after the fall of the regime to buy his freedom. And use it to wipe the stains off his nameplate.

"I'm a doctor," he repeated to himself every time he exited the bedroom of the president or his hysterical wife, "I have no right to refuse help to anyone, the doctor's oath obliges me..." He would say the same to the future jurors of the revolutionary tribunal who were invariably waiting for him in the corridor. But the pathos of unvoiced self-defense wouldn't silence the question that the tribunal would not fail to ask him: "Does the oath oblige you to deprive thousands of people of your competent aid for years, giving it to only two or three monsters?" He made endless speeches in response to this question—in the toilet, before going to sleep, in his dreams.

"And what have you done this time?" Dr. Zentano wondered with his first lonely steps down the hall. "Just look, he turned you into a pimp to look for girls worthy of falling in love with! Or perhaps, possessed by the idea of applying his energy somewhere, he drafts his new reform beside the whiskey bottle. Some of his favorite reforms, which usually sent hundreds of people to prison and stirred up devastation in the country... But doesn't the old maxim apply here: the worse it is, the better it is? And isn't it time now to stop denying Strauss your cooperation? True, he's in a hurry because he hasn't thought or dared to write his own book, but he enjoys the trust of the generals, and you know how to disable them, how to send them to the hospital longer. Why not lead the anti-regime forces yourself? How long will you wait before Biko cashes your check?"

Zentano reached under his jacket, but his hand immediately let go of the pistol grip, pulling the pen out of his inside pocket. The figure that popped out of the alcove near his apartment was familiar to all his senses. He pointed the pen.

"Hands up!"

"Jorge," the young woman replied in a whisper. "Go to the lady, immediately."

"Ugh," Zentano groaned, reaching for her waist. "I thought you were coming for me, and I was happy to see you."

"Run! Run to her because she's flipped again!"

He overcame her resistance and pressed her to him for a second as if seeking support. Then they walked silently to the other wing of the palace. He really was happy to see her. Not that he loved this woman so much; she provided him consolation with her similar destiny.

The first lady, who had gone to great lengths to play the traditional role of muse for all the arts in the country, had abducted this talented artist from the National Theater where she had just begun her career as a set designer. She had given her the title of companion and advisor, but the first lady paid separately for her drawing lessons, which the two of them took together on Zentano's recommendation. He had prescribed for her to paint as a remedy for her upset nerves. The first lady also paid her companion another salary for the position "Head of Palace Wardrobe and décor," and, with all this generosity, had bound her to herself in the same chains of slavery as Zentano. She had sent the woman to him as a mistress, almost as an order, probably to secure the only two other people she trusted. Her astrologer was too old to need such attention.

The two had obeyed and impassively entered the embrace of a comfortable, formal love affair (because it protected them from palace intrigue). They were both guarded for a long time until they finally got tired of it, but they still didn't become completely honest. They were honest with each other in body only, betraying a yearning for warmth, the need for an ally. Otherwise, their lovers' moments, like the one now, passed almost in silence because neither of them yet knew what and how much the other was reporting to their common masters. The most they allowed themselves was to refer to the masters with epithets, but such small audacities in this country were allowed to artists and doctors.

"You come, too," Zentano suggested in front of the first lady's room.

"No. She's all yours tonight."

"Did something happen?"

"The usual hysteria."

"Shall I come see you after?"

"I told you, tomorrow! And she probably won't leave you any strength for me," the girl replied, still combative, and slipped into the opposite door where she inhabited a small, artistically furnished apartment.

The first lady greeted him from the bed, curled up in a bun. She shouted, "Jorge, I'm going crazy! If I'm not crazy already."

He grinned in an exaggerated radiance, "Madam, a Woman who isn't capable of going crazy from time to time does not deserve this holy name."

"Jorge, this time it's serious!" she said, turning over on her back, slipping herself up on the pillow with visible relief at his appearance.

"Of course. Did I ever say it wasn't serious?"

He always agreed with his patients initially, refuting them only with a demonstrative casualness, which actually did have a reassuring effect on them. And he managed to keep that expression on his face now even though, on the inside, he was still boiling from the sting of the artist. As if to prove her right, and as if taking from the master what her slave had refused him, he sat on the bed and unceremoniously threw back the satin blanket, threatening the slave: "No, darling, when this one here is swept away by the whirlwind, it won't save you that you were my mistress, your starving colleagues will eat you along with your paintings. Only I can save you, but I will consider it..."

Above the navel, the first lady's nakedness shined in front of him because her nightgown had twisted around her breasts. He ran a hand over her smooth belly, and her hips were trembling like a tired horse. The thin, faded scars of the cosmetic surgeries which had removed the excess from her abdomen and thighs were also trembling like cobwebs.

"I'm cold!" she moaned.

Zentano's desire, however, had faded at the sight of the familiar, repeatedly cut nudity.

"Madam, why must a magnificent woman such as yourself resort to medical attention to keep her warm?"

"Jorge, leave the jokes! Something terrible is happening. I started talking to myself. Am I getting old?"

Her question was uttered with all the horror of a truly aging woman.

"Let's pray that everyone ages like you, darling." A psychiatrist is obliged to be able to speak gently, even to such thin-lipped and long-nosed faces. He covered her again, affectionately cradling her hands in his. "Is there anything else? Talking to ourselves is not the worst case. After all, who else should a person speak frankly to but themselves?"

He almost let slip, "who else in this country," but the swallowed part didn't disturb his composure.

She looked around timidly and asked in a whisper, "Don't you feel a presence? It's like there's someone in the bedroom."

He looked reflectively around the huge, beautifully furnished room. It wasn't nouveau riche like the presidential bedroom; here was found the skillful imagination of the artist-slave. The first lady didn't sleep like her husband in imperial and royal styles.

"Ma'am, other than the presence of a heightened sense of civilization, I feel nothing."

"Exactly!" she said with another bout of trembling, and he laughed, shaking her hands.

"Aren't you used to it already?"

It was only then she realized that in addition to her furniture, he had in mind the state-of-the-art eavesdropping systems that General Biko had installed in the palace. Whispering, she turned her head on the pillow, "No, no! The voice said just that: another civilization!"

"Wow," Dr. Zentano was merrily indignant. "Television has been serving up too much science fiction lately! You will have to get that under control, ma'am. Just look, the population has begun to rely not on themselves and their leaders but on foreign..."

"Jorge," she interrupted, and he thanked her for her stupidity which allowed him to make sometimes dangerous double entendres. "Do something, Jorge! I want to sleep. I have an important job tomorrow, and I'll be trash."

"Even if you sleep all day, you'll still be trash," he said her words to himself, but otherwise said with his most good-natured irony, "Madam, I would rather not ask you now what you talked about with this other civilization. These things are too intimate. Do you have a specific desire, something that you feel would help you? Because my opinion is that a valium will do the job."

Not only the first lady but most of the grandes dames and rich people in this poor country paid dearly and overpaid for their personal psychoanalysts. The former monks-confessors had been reborn in them, and often they weren't even doctors, just sweet-spoken and quick-witted charlatans. Zentano knew, of course, their enchanting technique, which in some cases did have a psychotherapeutic effect. He was forced to use it so as not to be expelled, but he feared that it might destroy the serious psychiatrist in him. So he usually tried to divert the first lady from the psychoanalytic session, taking the risk that she might want him to lie down next to her. Once every two or three months, she would make him close his eyes and intensely imagine some girl he had once desired so that he could kiss her fishy mouth. That's what the artist had been hinting at, but her mistress, thank God, preferred the fantasy to the actual male embrace.

He had begun, some years before, to try and get to the root of her strong obsession with fantasizing. He would have her writhe and moan for half an hour in an imaginary love act, and she assumed that she was showing appreciation for the otherwise exhausting psychiatric method in a very stately way because it both relieved her sexual hunger and guarded her from reckless adventures. Thus, thanks to her psychiatrist, she was considered among the population to be a

stupid and evil, but otherwise very moral, woman whose name was not associated with any such gossip. And her protégés—artists, writers, actors—could sleep undisturbed.

Zentano had cursed himself for his attempts at that time, and he still regretted it now, seeing her “stateliness” reawakened. She looked around, as if to make sure there were no witnesses, lifted herself, and slid her nightgown over her head in her usual gesture. She pulled off the blanket and lay down in her learned position. There were whitish cobwebs around her chest, as well. Through them, the surgeon-designers had stuffed some of the fat they had removed from her ass to make her breasts as big and hard as an ancient statue.

“You are beautiful, madam,” said Zentano, without looking at her. “One can’t get enough of looking at you. Why must such beauty...”

“Imagery!” she interrupted, taking his words as a self-offering. The psychiatrist swallowed the disgust in his throat. He rubbed his face sluggishly with his hands, rubbed it for a long time, and when he removed them, he met her wide-open eyes. They weren’t, as they usually were, coldly commanding but warmed now by expectation. He carefully stared into them, took her hands again. He didn’t have to do much because she was nearly self-hypnotized by her desire. The man she needed right now must have been in her brain already. Zentano only had to tell her, “Oh, how you love him! And here he is in your arms, eager and strong, and you both throw yourselves into each other with all your passion. Accept him... accept him... he is inside you and you are inside him... and you are infinitely, infinitely happy...” But even though these words were unnecessary, he sometimes did sincerely feel sorry for her and would involuntarily tell her a few nice words to encourage her imagination towards the more human side of the experience.

He did that now but hastened to turn away from the poor thing who was already squeezing her breasts to blue on behalf of her imaginary lover and tossing her outstretched legs through the air. In the past, every now and then, a little of the voyeur’s vicious pleasure would pop up inside him, but since he was a normal man, in most cases, long after these sessions, he could not desire a woman. That’s why he immediately occupied himself with the illustrated magazine from the nightstand, so as not to hear the dog’s whimper of the first lady who was striving for her lonely orgasm.

And at that moment, a quiet, melodic, almost delightful voice asked him with sweet curiosity, “Excuse me, what is she doing right now? Why is she doing that?”

The magazine fell from his hands, but again the voice brought him out of his stupor, “Do not be afraid, we beg you. She told you we are from another civilization. We want to understand...”

The doctor’s duty held him back long enough to interrupt the first lady’s contranatural love ecstasy with two excessively strong slaps, after which Dr. Zentano simply fled.

He set the two latches on the front door, locked the living room door behind him, set the pistol on the drink table with the safety off, and slumped in a nearby armchair. Only then did he realize that he had become ridiculous in his panic. "You're a psychiatrist, damn you. If Biko has decided to drive his masters crazy with some kind of cheap trick, at least don't you get taken in by it! Leave the mystical to them, they can't live without it. But it wasn't a hallucination, although... Here's what it was, the two of them had so insistently suggested that it talked... No, no, it was no accident that the generals had played their trick for Strauss first, to prepare everyone!"

He jumped up again and found himself in every corner and cabinet that could be outfitted with listening devices, or "bedbugs" as the European press had once called them. However, producing sound, as far as he knew the technology, required speakers, and they were always bigger than the microphones.

The voice had come from behind him as clearly and authentically as if its owner were in the middle of the living room. The pistol lay loaded on the drink table, but the voice had seemed created to soothe, not to frighten: soft, warm, something between alto and baritone, neither feminine nor masculine, with evenish intonations in its courtesy.

"Do not be afraid, we beg you!" said the voice, while he was in the middle of searching the living room. "We will just ask you about some things. We understand that you are the person who can best explain to us..."

"Where are you talking from?" Zentano hissed, looking around.

"We are here with you. You cannot perceive us because we are a different type of intelligence, structured differently. We want nothing more than to understand your intelligence."

"If you speak our language, then you know our intelligence too. Language is a manifestation of intelligence."

The psychiatrist was regaining his composure. After all, a voice posed no direct threat. The living room was locked, the gun close at hand. There was no feeling of anyone's presence, as the first lady had felt. He forced himself into a natural behavior, but to support it, he needed support himself. He went to the bar, trying to act like he was alone in the living room. He pulled out a bottle of whiskey and a glass. Overly casual, he took ice from the built-in refrigerator, sat down in the armchair next to the pistol, and prepared his drink intently: first the ice, then the whiskey on top to shatter it, then the spritz of soda. Shake, and the heralding, blissful gong of ice and crystal.

The voice seemed to have gone away, embarrassed by Zentano's objection, but as soon as the glass touched his lips, it spoke, "What is that, and why are you drinking it now?"

"Eh," the psychiatrist was angered by the idiotic joke. "You were going to ask something about intelligence, weren't you? I see no intelligence in this. And it's best to postpone the conversation until tomorrow. It's too late, I'm sleepy."

He still believed he was talking to the undiscovered installation of Biko or Melis, or both, but then the voice made a confession that was beyond the capabilities of their agents.

"We still cannot comprehend what is important to you. You said that language is an expression of intelligence. We have studied it relatively well, but it gives us such contradictory information that it prevents us from grasping the motivation for human behavior in most cases. That is why we came to you, to the most prominent humans here. You are surely the smartest and most knowledgeable since you manage the other humans."

A few large sips of whiskey were already affecting the "motivations for his behavior." Zentano decided to serve the generals a bit of culture. "An old specialist in social sciences, Montesquieu was his name, said two centuries ago: If people only knew with how little intelligence they're sometimes governed..."

"Is that true?" the voice asked with unshakable naivete.

"Uh-huh!" the psychiatrist confirmed casually with a glass to his lips.

"But if he said it a long time ago, then they do know it now."

"They don't know it."

"Here is another one of those contradictions we told you about that are preventing us from..."

"Eh," Zentano again raised his voice menacingly, angry at this silly game, but he restrained himself and decided to keep playing it with the help of his wits. "Has someone sent you to us, or did you decide that we're the smartest on your own?"

"We realized that we needed to come here."

"Then you really don't understand anything about the motivations of human behavior."

For some reason, the invisible kept talking about itself in the plural, apparently missing the very same wits that Biko's agents were. "Well, we do understand that you are the specialist in these issues. That is why we will rely mostly on you. So, be so kind..."

This definitely looked like the beginning of an interrogation, and the psychiatrist interrupted it, "Here, you're wrong again. I'm just a doctor. I can treat five or six abnormal motivations in a person without even being sure if they really are abnormal. If we recognize them as normal, however, our psychiatry would have to close shop, and we don't want that. Look, I can tell you something more specific about the human structure. So, let's start: protein is the basis of all life on this planet. It consists..."

"Pardon me," the voice interrupted in turn with the same even kindness. "The chemistry of life here is already known to us. We want to talk to you about something else. But now you have told us something interesting: you treat illnesses that you claim may not be illnesses. Earlier, for instance, what did you cure those humans from, and why?"

Zentano poured himself another whiskey, took a sip, thinking resignedly that when General Biko brings him before his court in the basement of the palace tomorrow, he will hardly serve him whiskey during the interrogation. And Zentano tried to rehearse how he would behave before him. He knew that no acquittals were issued there, so he had no choice but to preserve at least his dignity. He replied with professional indifference, "From their fears."

"From their fears," the voice repeated in a very human voice, as if assimilating the answer. "Is it abnormal for a person to be afraid?"

"There is a natural, useful fear, but this one is harmful." The psychiatrist would justify himself in the same way, in the other court, after the fall of tyranny. "It damages the nerves, blinds and confuses their minds. This fear makes them cruel and reckless to the people they govern."

"And what exactly are they afraid of?"

"Of the people they govern."

"We do not understand. So you are separated by some conflict here? Are you chosen as a doctor by the humans who are governed to protect them from those who govern them? Is that how we understand it?"

The psychiatrist blinked with desperate gaiety at the clumsily disguised trick. "Eh, you really are some cuties! Why don't you show yourself though? I'm very curious to see you! And it's impolite of you to be invisible to me in my own home."

"We have explained this to you. It is not possible for you to perceive us with your senses. Maybe when we study you well, we will find some way for more direct contact, but for now it is impossible, believe us! We are also troubled by this; it bothers us very much that humans are afraid of us. But at least you, as a doctor and a scientist, are trying to accept the situation. Our future relationship with humankind will depend the most on humans like you."

The doctor laughed, "And you suppose humanity will let you interrogate it like this?"

"But how else can it be studied?!" The humorless invisibility still didn't get it. "Our intelligence does not allow us to apply the methods by which you study other beings."

"They must have hired someone from television," Dr. Zentano thought, "from the scientific-fiction editors. Still, it's such a trite theme—for some higher civilization to start cutting up people the same way people had cut animals..." He didn't finish his thought, however, because he had reminded himself of the methods by which they "study" political opponents in the dungeons

of the palace. The late prison doctor had described them to him in great detail. The trembling courage of the whiskey in his chest melted like a mirage after the passing of the sun. With the last remnants of it, he said, "Then prove to me somehow that you're present! Something to show us that we really are talking to the unseen from somewhere. At least pour me a little whiskey!"

Nothing moved in the room. The air remained just as thick and stuffy, but now there did seem to be something in it, as if a presence could be felt. Zentano smiled ironically, both at himself and at his patients. A person can fill up any space with their own imagination, especially when they're frightened, and they've been frantically racking their brain over what explanations can be extracted. He suddenly pulled away from the table, and sank into the back of the armchair.

The bottle had risen smoothly into the air. There, it tilted over and confidently started pouring its contents into the large crystal glass. It filled the glass up by itself, to the brim, and silently returned to its place. No, it wasn't completely silent. Zentano realized afterwards that he had heard both the gurgling of the liquid and the hollow thud of the bottle's thick bottom against the wood.

In the altered silence that followed the explosion, he leaned over timidly, extended his index finger to the rim of the glass, and examined it. It was wet. No one would fill up a glass like that without leaving room for ice or soda.

"Hey, I thought I was a good hypnotist," he laughed almost soundlessly, losing his voice. "Bravo, Bravo!"

But the other voice hadn't gotten lost, it called out with an unchanged lyric and timbre—not alto, not baritone, not female, not male, "Now allow us to ask you our questions!"

"Let's wait and see if I can drink what you poured!" The straight whiskey choked him, shattered his esophagus, and it shattered his doubts about being hypnotized. "What do you want from me?" He coughed out his question roughly and then went on coughing.

The voice waited for him to calm down. "To understand humans, nothing more!"

"Then go to the humans!" Zentano screamed and jumped out of the armchair with clenched fists.

"But are you not the best, the most knowledgeable..?"

"We are not."

"If you have been chosen to lead..."

"Nobody has chosen us! We elected each other. Go somewhere else!"

"Where?"

He slumped back in his armchair, realizing the powerlessness of his threatening outburst before the invisible woman or man. He moaned, "So this is how we'll be interrogated?"

"We have no other way. Our mission is to describe human civilization," the voice announced, again with an even courtesy.

"And then?"

"Then we will leave. But we did just arrive, and it is still very difficult for us..."

"All right, ask!" Zentano surrendered, and he went for a new glass to dilute some of the whiskey in. And on the way to the bar, it may be that he was also thinking that science-fiction had been doing a good job all along: this little trick with the whiskey and he immediately believed he was talking to an alien civilization and it didn't even astonish him!

"You must be tired already," the foreign civilization unexpectedly took pity on him. "We have comprehended your condition. It will be good for you to rest first so that you can better explain things to us. The important thing is that you have accepted us. Only one more question, we beg you! It is necessary for us to clarify the basics of tomorrow's questions. May we?"

"Please!" the doctor replied officially, as if he were already conducting negotiations on behalf of humankind.

"How should this idea be understood: 'A conversation about trees includes being silent about so much wrongdoing'?"

"Whose is it?" Zentano frowned.

"One Bertold Brecht. As we were told, a writer. He is not alive."

"Who's telling you that? Did someone here tell you?"

"Yes."

"But who?" the psychiatrist insisted feverishly.

The voice seemed not to know discretion either, "A woman, an artist. How can you explain it to us?"

"The meaning is clear. You shouldn't talk to people about trees."

"And why?" the voice asked, still just as melodic and just as unhumanly naive.

"It isn't done! Hardly about trees! Yes, yes, hardly about trees if you want people to talk to you at all!"

"Again there is a contradiction..."

"Ugh," he stood up. "There should be only one! Come on, let me sleep already!"

"Yes, yes, pardon us," the voice hurried to say, but apparently it hadn't mastered the meaning of human intonations either because there was no guilt in it. "Thank you very much!"

Zentano remained standing, expecting to discern some other movement, until his muscles couldn't take the strain and they softly trembled, as if from severe exhaustion.

"Hello," he cried out softly. "Are you still here?"

No one answered him. "They left," he established, but he wasn't relieved. Again he poured straight from the glass they had filled into the other one, diluted it with soda, repeated aloud to hear his own voice, "They're gone!" Indeed they were gone, but now their presence seemed to be quite palpable. It was probably their questions, which continued to lie stratified in the thick air—the asked and the unasked alike. He dared not open the window for them, and he slipped around like a thief under their weighty roof from one wall of the spacious living room to the other. He tried to defend himself with desperate scorn: "Let's really talk about the trees! Don't trees do the same? Doesn't one tree drink the juices of the other? Doesn't the mighty, with its crown, weigh on the heads of the small? Poets and artists have it so easy! A beautiful metaphor, and imagine if it were lost!" But they hadn't come for metaphors or pictures, and that's why they had come to him, from the artist—to him! She had sent them to him, damn her to hell!

He cursed her and at the same moment longed to hide in her embrace. How would he answer them tomorrow? They had come to him, they came to the specialist in humans, and he didn't even know anything about this girl who, for two years now, has been the only person close to him here! A brave girl for allowing herself to quote such ideas in the palace! For not being frightened by their questions and not thinking herself insane like her masters! She truly did deserve to be saved! But would there be any salvation for them?

Passing the table again, he grabbed the glass and emptied it down his throat. From the dictator, perhaps, but from their questions, from this multitude speaking with one voice? They would be back, tomorrow or in an hour, or in minutes. Does this other intelligence know how long it takes for a man to rest before his answers?

Even if the dictator did fall, even if he, Zentano, immediately published his book and broke free from the court, they would still come to him! They would mercilessly ask him, the specialist in humans, their naive and childish cruel questions! Like his son used to ask him, before he sent him abroad with his mother after the divorce, to break him free of the palace. Once, in the time of their one-hour walk, the boy had asked him eighty-three—Zentano had planned to count them in advance. The last one was, "Dad, who ate this chocolate?" He had found a piece of colorful foil in the street.

His throat bubbled into something between laughter and tears because he could see his boy running with his bowed legs, carrying the foil along with his eighty-third question. Who ate the chocolate! Who's been eating humankind's chocolate!? They too would be asking him about things like that, not about trees. And even if they leave unnoticed, the way they came, their questions will

stay behind, because everything said stays behind. Like that one about the trees. The questions will stay on Earth. Fuck Earth! They will stay in it, beside it, and they will deafeningly resound in his dream private office which is about to open after the fall of tyranny. And he won't be able to ask his healing questions to his numerous patients because he himself will have to constantly answer. Someone witty once wrote that psychiatrists ask so many questions to deprive their patients the opportunity to ask them any back. Indeed, no other doctor is as afraid of their own patients' questions as the psychiatrist. If they're a real psychiatrist, of course, not a charlatan or an ignoramus. And he was afraid, he had always been afraid, but from now on he would be twice as afraid. And nothing would cure him from his fear anymore.

The next time he passed the drink table, his hand caught the pistol grip instead of the glass. Dr. Zentano looked at the raised safety, looked towards the window. The darkness in the nooks behind the curtains had brightened. The hour had arrived when Biko and Melis would gun down the president's opponents. He carefully, as if trying not to damage his teeth, put the short cold barrel in his mouth. He rested it on his palate, in that tiny and thin arch that humans, infinitely naive in their arrogance, had named after the infinite arch above them. And he blew it up.

Andy Erbschloe is a native English-speaker living in Bulgaria. Primarily occupied as a homemaker, Andy pursues a variety of interests including sociolinguistics, labor socialism, comparative religion, mushroom picking, and sequential art. He prefers to earn knowledge in lump gold rather than any debased cultural coinage, with its idolatrous stamping and unfaithful measure. Actively translating Bulgarian texts from the public domain since 2019, the author is presently advocating for what he considers his greatest discovery: the science-fiction works of Lyuben Dilov, virtually unknown in English. Two Dilov novels, *The Missed Chance* and *Unfinished Novel of a Student*, are set for English debut in 2021.