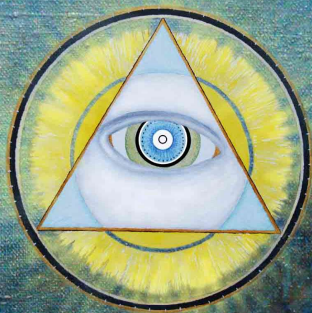


The Navigator



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Amid this life based on coercion, one and the same thought constantly emerged among different nations, namely, that in every individual a spiritual element is manifested that gives life to all that exists, and that this spiritual element strives to unite with everything of a like nature to itself, and attains this aim through love – Leo Tolstoy

PART ONE – The Navigator

'International relationships are on the brink, the failure of high-level talks exacerbating the 'O problem', a deeply entrenched issue in the Middle East. This problem, entangled with territorial disputes and resource control, has plunged Europe into an energy crisis. The E-Alliance has already deployed troops to maintain stability. Units of the European Army, backed by auxiliary American and Australian forces, have been stationed in the area for years. However, the recent failed talks threaten to shatter the already precarious peace of the region. Countries involved are ramping up their efforts, deploying more troops and initiating internal recruitment processes.

We finish our news bulletin with weather news - Another early heat wave affected parts of the Indian peninsula, compromising tea crops.

The last inhabitants of the Fiji Islands were evacuated yesterday due to the rising sea level.

Heavy storms affected the central United States. Summer arrived very early this year in the Scandinavian Peninsula, too. We are already enjoying high temperatures...'

Karl scoffed, disgusted.

'Alright! How are we going to sleep?' he demanded, switching off the hand-held and surveying the cramped interior of the boat.

Instead of answering, Romeo comfortably installed himself in the starboard berth, leaving his legs to hang on the floor. He looked towards the companionway and flashed his forever-happy grin. In the interior's semi-darkness, only his pearl-white teeth were visible, making him look like the Cheshire cat.

Hector released the tiller, letting ZooZ-K take care of her own. He came forward and stuck his head through the opening, scrutinizing the interior.

'You know that's my favorite berth,' Karl heard him saying. He sighed, expecting the quarrel to begin, but Romeo obediently rolled on the floor and climbed into the port berth, the one closer to the boat's left side. His smile persisted while his legs were still on the floor.

'Guess this leaves me and Zoey the V, right?'

ZooZ-K, the boat they were on, had one more sleeping space in the back, under the cockpit, but Karl knew he couldn't use it. There was no space. Carefully camouflaged under spare sails, there were many paper cans and packs of dehydrated food. All that weight made the stern sink slightly, but Karl preferred lightly loading the bow anyway. The V-berth was larger but uncomfortable under sail, especially in a rough sea. Zoey

knew it too, so she asked – 'Sweetie? Why the V? You know Mama doesn't like the V.'

'There's more space in there,' Karl assured her. 'We'll sleep only at anchor, don't worry.'

'Oh,' Zoey exclaimed. 'Tata wants us to have a lavish trip. Alright, alright! I'll go put our stuff in the V.'

There was little to be arranged on the boat as they had departed hastily. Still, everything was scattered haphazardly around, many items on the deck and in the cockpit. Karl had left with only the clothes on his back. He had told them it was a weekend trip and they would not need much stuff. He acted accordingly, playing his role perfectly. He was good at it. In reality, he had secretly stocked the boat with supplies for weeks. He had carried them aboard in small quantities to avoid raising suspicions. He refrained from buying everything in one go. His family knew nothing.

Karl was content with his plan. He beamed, full of himself, when a cry came from under the deck - 'Karl! What's with all this stuff in here?'

His smile evaporated.

'What stuff?' He pretended not to know. He had hoped Zoey wouldn't stumble upon his carefully stacked supplies, which included food, water, and other essentials for their trip. Not so fast.

'All this food under the sails,' he heard Zoey's muffled voice from below.

Skit¹, Karl thought.

'Errr, it's for us. So we can cook, right?'

'I can't hear you! Can you come here please?'

Karl gently pushed Hector back to the helm and meekly descended inside the boat.

'Why do we need all this?' Zoey asked again, studying the heap of cans. She had removed the carefully arranged sails on top of them and crammed them in a corner.

'Why did you have to stick your nose in here, Zoey?' Karl snapped, his voice tinged with nervousness. 'I arranged those sails so well, and you made a mess.'

Zoey studied him with her blue, beautiful eyes. They were both standing at the cabin's door, close to each other, touching each other. Before Karl could concoct a story, Zoey wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

'Oh,' she meowed. 'Tata wanted to make us a surprise and Mama spoiled it as always. You prepared the boat for a longer trip, did you? And I thought we'll go only for the weekend!'

Karl swallowed a hard knot, smiling like a man who swallowed a fly. He knew that his wife Zoey was always the one who would uncover his secrets. But he also knew

she loved him, so she always forgave him. 'And where does Tata want to take us?' Zoey smiled at him.

Karl smiled back.

'You'll see. You said it's a surprise. Let it be a surprise!'

Zoey hugged and kissed him more.

'What do you need from here, anyway? Why did you dig under the sails?'

'I needed the beddings, right? I need to prepare our bed.'

Karl cursed his lack of foresight. He should have already prepared the bed. He sighed and stealthily made his way toward the locker that contained the bedding. He had to carefully navigate a pile of cans, his heart pounding with each step.

'I hope you took into account my EA festivity,' he heard Hector saying from the helm.

'That's the next month,' he growled. 'There's plenty of time till then.' In reality, he was torn. Was it right to try and control Hector's future, even if it was out of love and concern? He didn't want his son to be sent to a war zone just to safeguard the commercial interest of a corporation or a bank. And there were so many war zones in the world....

He found the locker and was ready to open it when he stopped. Something popped up in his mind.

'I'll bring them forward, sweetie, don't worry,' he told Zoey. She was still waiting at the door. 'I need to extract them from the cabinet.'

'Oki,' Zoey replied. She turned around and left him alone on the pile of food.

Karl ensured she had truly left, then carefully opened the sliding door. He fetched the sheets one by one, his fingers trembling slightly. There it was. His hand closed around a hard, heavy object, which was hidden in there. He threw another look towards the door and removed the item from under the sheets. It was a gold bullion. Only one. Karl had it from his father from immemorial times. Apart from its financial value, it also had a secret significance for Karl. In fact, he valued it mostly from this aspect, as he had never thought about how much it was worth on the market.

With a sense of relief, Karl carefully hid the bullion back into the locker and left with the bedding. If Zoey had found the gold, he knew she would have asked questions, as the bullion never left its safe place in their house.

Karl turned the beddings into a giant ball of canvas and proceeded towards the front of the boat, slipping past Romeo, who was still in his berth.

'Here you are, sweetie.'

'Tack so micket'²! Just drop them there. I'll take care of the rest.'

Karl did as told but didn't leave. He stayed there, looking at Zoey. She lay on her stomach, arranging the big bed. Karl eyed her silhouette, evidenced by her tight clothes, and couldn't resist. She was too tempting. He laid himself on top of her while his hands slowly sneaked under her body. He squeezed her in his arms while kissing the back of her neck.

'Gotcha!'

Romeo looked at them, smiled, rolled over to the floor, and went for the companionway. Before reaching the stairs, he deftly fetched two beers from the rear cabin. He had eyed them while Karl was busy with the sails and the beddings. He went up and sat next to Hector.

'Here,' he gave him one of the beers.

Hector smiled and took it. They both pulled with their teeth on the paper cover of the recipients, opening them. They gulped the beer thirstily.

'What's going on down there?' Hector asked.

Romeo stretched his legs across the cockpit and grinned.

'You know! Mama and Tata have their smootchie - smootchie moment. I didn't want to disturb.'

Hector grinned, too, sipping the beer.

'You wanna bet he'll show up here grumpy and unhappy in less than a minute?'

Both heard muffled words coming from below like an answer to the question.

'Get off me, Karl, this is not a good moment!'

'You always behave like a one hundred years old woman. Where is your adventure spirit?'

Hector winked at Romeo.

'Skål!'

'Skål!'

A second later, Karl's ruffled hair appeared in the companionway. He didn't look too happy. As predicted!

'You bloody bastards,' he told them, looking at their drinks. Despite the expression on his face, they both felt the admiration in his voice. 'You already found the beer! You could have brought one extra!'

His head disappeared.

'You do your best to make them happy, and you can't even have a beer with them,' they heard him mumbling from under the deck. At length, he showed up with his own drink and joined them. All three guys stretched their legs across the tiny cockpit. At the same time, Zoey nested below, preparing the cabins for a longer journey.

They knew she would not accept any help, so they didn't bother.

Karl looked at his sons, admiring them. He wondered when they had grown up so beautifully. Hector, at the helm, resembled him a lot. He had the same serious attitude, and Karl knew how deep the kid was.

On the other hand, Romeo had a dude-like personality. He was always smiling and easy-going, and it was difficult to upset him. He agreed with everybody.

Hector was more difficult. He was rational but emotional at the same time - deeply emotional and hidden. Zoey always had difficulties understanding him, but not Karl.

Karl recalled the moment when he had become a father. Zoey groaned and moaned like a hurt animal while a white-dressed midwife whispered words of encouragement. Karl had been mesmerized about how life was brought to the world. Simple, brutal, blind, and beautiful. Then Hector landed in his arms, and Karl looked at the small, pink, squirming meatball. He stayed there speechless, looking at the baby he was holding. A new start. A new life. Hopes, dreams, talent, thoughts, a whole new universe encompassed in the warm, pink being he held. His eyes locked with the small blue eyes of the baby, and the promise was given. Karl promised Hector that he would take good care of him. He would

ensure the boy followed his dreams and became what he was meant to be. The eyes stayed blue, like Zoey's.

With Romeo, it was a different story. It happened two years after Hector was born. Karl had been late for the delivery. When he arrived at the hospital, Romeo was already breathing the air of this world. A nurse put him in his arms, and Karl's first reaction was - this is one ugly son of a bitch! He felt tempted to ask Zoey if that was his son. They suspiciously looked at Romeo for a few days and cracked jokes about his appearance, but Romeo didn't care. He followed his brother's footsteps and grew into a nice, beautiful lad.

Karl remembered when his sons used to sleep with their heads on his chest. He used to show them a video on his lith⁴, usually an aircraft or a boat. They watched, and they watched, and they asked questions. After a little while, they breathed deeply, and Karl knew they had fallen asleep. He kissed their heads and sneaked out of bed, covering them with the blanket.

Both Zoey and Karl burst with pride, looking at them.

Zoey wanted a third child, but the System never gave them permission to have a third.

At length, she finished preparing the berths below and showed up in the cockpit, tramping on the steps. She scrutinized the guys and how they stretched their limbs across the tiny cockpit as only men could. Tall and strong,

Hector held the tiller with one hand and had the beer in the other. His long, lightly colored hair waved in the wind while his blue eyes confronted the strong sunlight. Romeo, next to him, smiling contently and glancing at her. Seated opposite them, Karl held the gunwale with a hand and had the beer in the other. She melted. Her men! Her family. She couldn't be more happy.

She sneaked under Karl's arm and curled beside him, purring like a kitty and sipping his beer.

A puff of wind heeled ZooZ-K a tad more, but nobody jumped to release the main. It was a good sailing day, and the Baltic was quiet. Nothing that ZooZ-K couldn't handle. She was an old boat. As old as Karl. She had been built in the '20s when he was born. Sixty years later, she was still afloat.

She was an old-fashioned vessel built of reinforced Elium. She had a wooden mast, grown from a genetically enhanced Douglas fir, and a classical Bermuda rig. She had no rigid sails, no rigid-inflatable sails, no telescopic mast, no sail-by-light system, not even a sail-by-wire one, no automatic sail control, no automatically controlled rigging, and she had no AI pilot to govern her. She had only a modest nav station with a VHF, high-speed satellite internet, and a GPS module as a backup. They had never used any of that, as they had always sailed close to the shore in areas they knew well. The Swedish coast was full of beautiful places.

Karl was very proud of the boat.

Lifelines surrounded the deck like a web. Karl had installed them because he had always been scared that one of the children might fall overboard. The children were big enough to care for themselves now, but the lines stayed.

ZooZ-K had a small electric engine under the deck. It didn't provide much power for her weight. An internal combustion engine would have been better, and *ZooZ-K* had one in the past. The regulations changed, and fossil fuel-powered engines had been banned in Europe since the '60s. Even the farm-produced wood had been banned, but the law didn't apply retroactively. *ZooZ-K* had has been built before the new regulations took effect.

The boat had a full keel. She was slow and maneuvered poorly in tight places, but it was rock solid, and Zoey liked that.

'Spacetime,' Karl thought aloud, sipping the beer. 'Just look at her going. Feel her. Is it not great? Can you imagine the water as the spacetime and the boat as a ship carrying us all across it?'

'Here we go again,' Romeo smiled.

'I'm serious,' Karl replied. 'Is it not similar? Can you picture the universe and the spacetime? The way it is curved by

mass and energy? The way planets press on it? Same as *ZooZ-K* displaces the water?’

‘So, we’re on a spaceship?’ Zoey giggled, hugging him tighter.

‘No, we’re on a boat. A nice boat. I’m only talking about the way she splits the water. Every particle in this universe does the same - splits the spacetime.’

‘Some of them have no mass,’ Hector replied, looking at the horizon. ‘They can’t split the spacetime. So, not *every* particle,’ he emphasized.

‘What about subs?’ Romeo questioned. ‘When they dive they surf wormholes?’

‘Yup,’ Karl beamed.

‘And if we sink?’

‘Then we’re screwed in a blackhole.’

The boys roared with laughter, choking on the beer.

‘You’re horrible,’ Zoey feigned upset, pushing herself away from his embrace with a playful pout.

Karl's gaze lingered on Zoey, her lithe figure and almost blonde hair a testament to her youth. She was more than exceptional, she was his everything. He had been in love with her, head over heels, for over two decades.

'You never agreed with my philosophical ideas,' Karl sighed.

'Most of them are only dreams, Karl.'

'Here we go again,' Romeo groaned. 'Can we discuss something other than your philosophical musings during this trip? Something that deviates from our usual topics?'

'Like what?' Karl snarled.

'Dunno. A film?'

'They're all AI made. Nothing interesting to watch,' Zoey said.

'How about *The Masters*?'

'The series? Old story, new film,' Karl noted.

'You don't have to show yourself so superior, you know. At least it is a real film with real actors. You could say the same about the musical notes, or the letters. Look how many songs or words you can create with them, despite always using the same ones.'

Karl watched her, smiling. She liked to paint the real stuff with a brush on a canvas, a skill as old as the world. She had always liked classic art, including old films.

'Hey, where are we going, by the way,' Hector asked, yawning. 'Is it going to be long? You know I have to go to work on Sunday. Not that I care....'

Zoey noticed Karl's grimace. She remembered she also had to work on Sunday, and also Karl. They shared the same workplace, the Tower Farm No.12, in Umeå. Agricultural workers were in high demand during those days. Despite automation, people were cheaper and needed jobs. The universal income had yet to be implemented.

Zoey knew Karl hated his position. He was OK with the job itself, but he hated his supervisor. She was much younger than him, a teenager almost. Still, she was quite bossy. 'A spoiled, rich child,' Karl used to say. 'She knows nothing about the job, let alone about life. She should pay more respect to her colleagues, and they would respect her more.' She was doing fine with the younger ones, as she was an attractive chick, and they didn't mind her extravagances much, but Karl couldn't stand her. Each time he tried to teach her something or complained about something that didn't work, everything turned against him. *He* was the one who did something wrong. Knowing Karl better, Zoey believed the truth was somewhere in between, but Karl never admitted it.

She pictured themselves commuting to work, to the huge tower housing the farm. After all, that's why it was called a Tower Farm. It was a former glass office building, circular in shape. Its windows allowed the light in from all angles, and its state-of-the-art climate control made it ideal for growing crops inside. They would arrive

by *komuter*. The stop was exactly in front of the entry. Karl would see *her tiny* car parked in front and scoff. Few people afforded to own cars. From there on, everything was downhill. At the end of the work shift, when they met to catch the *komuter* again, Zoey met a different Karl - a bear suffering from stomach cramps.

'Karmela?' she usually asked.

He used to throw her *that* look, mumble something unintelligible, and silently wait for the public transport. Till home, he calmed down, and Karmela was a thing of the past. Sometimes, he walked to the marina to work on the boat. He always complained about how, during *his* days, everybody had a car and how today, everybody had a boat. Honestly speaking, their sixty-year-old boat had been dust cheap to purchase, and Karl had worked wonders to make it seaworthy. They didn't have to pay taxes to own her, as her carbon footprint was zero.

'With this wind, I guess we'll anchor in Husum, on the island, if this answers your question,' Karl told Hector. He saw Zoey's face instantly contort with displeasure, her brows furrowing and her lips pursing. He knew what she would say. She always had a first-shoot-then-ask-questions reaction when something was inconvenient for her. Husum was close to Tower Farm No.5, but the island was charming. Even so, the farm was in plain view, and Zoey hated it. It reminded her too much of work. But Karl knew he didn't have much choice due to the weather. *He*

should have been the one to complain about looking at tower farms. But Zoey had always been like that. The less she knew about something, the more stubbornly she stuck to her variant. On most occasions, Karl possessed superior knowledge, especially in technical domains. But she had feminine intuition and distrusted Karl's vision of life. As usual, he wondered how she was already against his plan when she was clueless about what he had planned?

'Noooo,' she whined, her voice filled with frustration. 'Not Husum. Can't we anchor someplace else? Let's sleep in *Örnsköldsvik, Karl*. It's much nicer in there.'

Karl rolled his eyes.

'No, Zoey,' Karl's voice took on a firm, authoritative tone. 'I don't want to negotiate that fjord at night. And with this wind, we'll arrive there at night. We've had these discussions before. Please, let me do my job as a skipper!'

'And earlier? If we'll sail less and land earlier?'

'No, it doesn't work. We'll have to cover more distance tomorrow, and this is not convenient. We'll be behind schedule. The forecast says there'll not be much wind even tomorrow,' Karl explained.

'We can start earlier.'

He threw her *that* glance.

'Zoey, please! I know better where we're going.'

'But where are we going, dad?' Romeo asked.

'It's a surprise, right?' Karl snarled. 'What's so difficult to understand?'

Hector scoffed but said nothing.

They all turned grumpy, their faces mirroring their frustration. Only Romeo, with his youthful optimism, managed to maintain his serendipity.

'Alright,' he said. 'This requires another beer.'

He went below and returned with three more paper cans. Karl fetched one and studied it.

'They used to make them from aluminum back then.'

'Where they not toxic?' Hector asked.

'No. It was a special type of aluminum. And had a special lacquer on the inside.'

Hector grimaced, and Romeo showed his tongue – 'Phew!'

They opened them and drank while *ZooZ-K* followed a southeast heading along the coast of Sweden. They kept her far enough from the shore to prevent potential trouble but close enough to distinguish landscape details. The dense forest, stretching as far as the eye could see, was a stark contrast to the endless blue waters. Here and

there, among the trees, clusters of cottages faced the sea. On the port side was only the sea, its vastness and tranquility a stark contrast to the bustling forest. Karl looked in that direction, his face reflecting a mix of nostalgia and anticipation. A glimpse from the past, a time when he had sailed with his father on a different boat, crossed his mind. He had been around the world with that boat, a testament to his love for sailing and adventurous spirit.

The wind, a mere whisper, barely disturbed the calm sea, which cradled ZooZ-K in its gentle embrace. A few nautical miles away, a brilliant light, as powerful as a lighthouse in full operation, caught their attention. Romeo, with a dramatic flair, pointed towards it. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, behold Tower Farm number five,' he declared, as if unveiling a masterpiece to an eager audience at a gallery.

Zoey, her skepticism evident in her scoff, found comfort in Karl's reassuring arm around her shoulders. 'It will be alright,' he whispered, his voice a soothing balm. 'It's only for one night.'

ZooZ-K slowly closed the distance in the dying wind, giving everybody the sensation that it would take forever to reach the anchorage. The tower became brighter and brighter, and then it took nuances of orange and red, reflecting the sinking sun and announcing the arrival of the night. The waves became ripples, and the water

became violet, capturing the colors of the sunset. The beauty of the scene was breathtaking, a serene moment amid their sailing adventure.

Right on time, Karl thought. He ordered them to circle the island towards the anchor place like a real captain. He had educated his boys to be disciplined at sea. He knew that he could trust them with the boat. Hector stood at the helm the whole day, and Romeo trimmed the sails; only a little trimming had to be done in such a wind. Karl liked it when everybody knew what they had to do. They still had to work with their decision-making process, but Karl knew that would come with experience. He went forward, preparing the anchor, while Zoey was ready with the fenders, just in case they were needed. Her work was the easiest, as she virtually had nothing to do. It was a wild anchorage place. No pier, no slip, no other boats around.

'Bring her around,' Karl barked from his post while Hector, his hands steady on the tiller, turned the boat into the narrow gap that cut the island almost in half. The boat, its sleek white hull cutting through the water with a quiet determination, responded to Hector's command with a slight shift in its course.

Romeo skillfully maneuvered the main and gib, allowing them to pass from one gunwale to the other and adjusting their new position. Zoey, perched atop the cabin, her legs crossed under her, observed Hector's

steady hand at the tiller with a sense of pride. Romeo, his movements leisurely, worked the winches, capturing the last whispers of the wind. He took pride in his ability to anchor without using the engine. The family's teamwork was evident, each member playing their part in this sailing adventure.

The inlet swallowed the boat, and the family watched the forest bordering it like two green walls, one on each side.

'Looks like we're alone in here,' Karl announced from the bow, his voice echoing in the stillness of the inlet.

Nobody answered.

The boat crawled closer to the end of the inlet, and Karl ordered - 'Enough, guys. Lower the sails.'

He dropped the big anchor and ensured the rope uncoiled steadily. *ZooZ-K* came to a gentle halt when the anchor caught.

They all looked around despite knowing the place well. It always felt good to encounter a known site. Like meeting an old friend! The island wasn't big. It had been larger, but the rising sea waters flooded its low-laying parts and created the inlet, which used to be a dry valley in the past. The same flood affected other coastal places of Sweden, but luckily, most of its shoreline was tall. In other parts of the world, the sea had swallowed entire cities.

The horrific climate change of the 21st century took its toll.

The boys furled the sails, and after ensuring the boat was safe, Karl went below to cook dinner. There was little he could cook. He warmed the content of some veggie cans, rehydrated others, seasoned everything with herbs, and the dinner was ready.

They ate in the cockpit, watching the setting sun and Tower Farm No.5, which shone like a purple gem. After dinner, Zoey went below to ensure everything was prepared for the night. She entered the rear cabin, fumbling through the lockers, but Karl missed the moment. He was still mesmerized by the setting sun. At that latitude and time of the year, it took forever for the sun to sink behind the horizon. The bright, crimson sky was priceless. The guys watched the light fade away, then went below and closed the hatch to prevent the mosquitoes from getting in.

While Karl and Zoey nested in the V-berth, the boys turned the glass⁵ on, searching for a film. It wasn't the latest model, but they were happy with what they had. It looked like an ordinary rectangular piece of glass. Some producers called it a monolith, as it was manufactured in one piece and one go. Some people shortened the name, calling it a *lith*. Karl was always amused when they called it so. The name reminded him of a popular plastic chair in vogue when he was a child.

The device powered on and displayed a background picture of a breaking wave. Romeo browsed through the icons, selected one, and tapped on it.

'Let's check this out,' he told Hector.

The *lith* transformed into a miniature cinema screen, complete with a small menu in one corner. They had spent countless hours creating an interactive film, a project that allowed them to write their own script and direct the actors. It had been finished for some time, but they hadn't found a moment to watch the final product in its entirety.

Their *glass* was a transceiver, a device that communicated with their designated GAI account. Unlike the devices from the '20s, which had their own processors, storage capacity, and communication equipment, their *lith* model relied on the GAI account for these functions.

There were many providers of such accounts, which covered a large spectrum of wishes and budgets. The rich had unlimited possibilities. Their desires could theoretically be put into practice through their expensive account.

Other devices had their own built-in AI unit, which allowed them to work independently. When more processing power was required, they could also be connected to a GAI account, but many people could not

afford them. In some countries, they were illegal, as their governments didn't tolerate independent people.

Karl believed that people's brains worked on the same principle, that everybody was connected to the real GAI, the Great Intelligence of the Universe. Some brains were only connected and acted as a cheap *lith*. *The Universe did most of the thinking for them*. Others were connected *and* could think independently, like a more expensive *lith*. Some were not allowed to express themselves freely, like in the countries that censored independent *glasses*. The boys laughed at the idea, but Karl took it seriously. He jotted it down in his philosophical ideas notebook. He had such a notebook. The boys recalled spending an entire evening determining if GIU would fit as an abbreviation for the Great Intelligence of the Universe.

'Almost real,' Hector laughed. 'Did you see that glitch? A real man would never move like that.'

Romeo approved him. Maybe Tata is right, he thought. All this AI shit! Too much of it! A man needs a break from time to time just to feel real. How lucky we are to have this boat and explore uncontrolled spaces.

He replayed the sequence one more time, then they lost interest. The glitch was obvious. Their film was a failure. The script was fine, but the visuals were as good as the price they had paid, and they hadn't invested much in it.

They put the tablet aside and started their evening chat. Karl and Zoey could hear their muffled neighs from time to time. It was that period of their lives when they stayed awake chatting and laughing until late at night. Sometimes, they laughed so hard that they woke everybody up. When trying to be polite and quiet, the reverse happened, as they couldn't hold it. They inflated like bullfrogs on steroids, then burst. Their hysterical laugh was contagious.

The front berth was quieter. A foam door was dividing it from the main cabin, creating privacy.

Karl wished Zoey goodnight, then turned the small ceiling light off. He felt her sneaking under his arm and putting her head on his chest.

'Karl,' she whispered. 'Why did you take the gold bar with us?'

Karl felt a jolt of electricity going down his spine.

Oh, no, he thought. How come she always sticks her nose where she shouldn't?

'For safety,' he whispered back. 'We don't live in a paradise.'

Their home was in an apartment building in Umeå. The area was not famous for its safety, but they never complained. They were known as hard-working people who didn't own much stuff that would tempt a burglar.

They lived a modest life among their neighbors. Sweden was far from what it once used to be. The world was far from what it used to be!

There were better living places, but they couldn't afford them. The *glasses* were full of commercials, presenting clusters of high-tech dwellings scattered around Sweden. They looked like colonies on another planet. Their carbon footprint was zero, but they were not for everybody.

'You never took it with us before,' Zoey meowed. 'We've been on long trips during the whole summer.'

She had noticed Karl's suspicious behavior throughout the day, or rather felt it, as otherwise he was hard to read, just like Hector. Both resembled a nervous tomcat when tensed. They showed nothing on the surface, but their calmness was theatrical, like playing a role. They displayed discreet signals of nervousness, and Zoey knew them all.

She felt how he stiffened and suddenly realized he had been hiding things from her. She realized something more serious was happening by putting two and two together: the supplies, the bullion, and his attitude. She decided to ask directly.

'Where are you taking us, Karl? You wouldn't take the gold with us for nothing.'

If Karl had taken it on the boat, he must have had a serious reason. A vague idea crossed her mind, but she didn't want to express it. They had a talk in the past, but she wouldn't believe he would try it one day.

Karl noticed the serious tone, which required a serious answer. He couldn't invent any more. Avoiding a straight answer would have meant telling her a lie, and Karl had never lied to her. He drew air into his lungs and let it rip - 'To Poland,' he whispered. 'I want to move to Nova. Somewhere where the System is not so strict.' After he let it go, he was relieved and continued with more confidence - 'We talked about this at some point. I want a better future for us. I am through with this lack of basic freedom. You didn't live those days, but I remember them well. It was different. There was no AI or computer to tell people what to do or where to go. There were no controlled zones. No IDs squeezed in your ass. No mandatory military service. No System, no European Army, no E-Alliance, and no tower farms. Well, those are not too bad, apart from Karmela,' he smiled in the semi-darkness.

The System was the abbreviation of a more pompous title - the Integrated Governmental System, a hybrid form of government in which humans used a powerful AI to optimize and implement country-level decisions. The people in power allegedly made the decisions while the system optimized them, but Karl had the firm impression

that the AI made the decisions and the humans were mere incompetents like they had always been throughout history.

'We can start all over in Nova,' he passionately continued. 'We can stay there for a while. They did not implemented a System of their own yet. There is more freedom but they will soon catch up with the rest, and we'll be on the road again. I promised myself that our kids would become what they wanted and not somebody's slaves, especially a machine's. That's what they educate people for nowadays - to be the slaves of a machine or to guard a bank's interests. The best-paid jobs are AI mentor, AI relationship developer, and AI trainer. Oh, c'mon. The rest are ecologists of a murdered planet or agriculturists like us. I'm fed up with this! Sure, everything looks nice and taken care of. Everybody thinks we're free, but the sad truth is that we leave in a prison with nice walls, like a museum. There are paintings and stuff on the walls, but those are still walls!'

He drew air into his lungs, trying to control his excitement and keep his voice level down.

'You always wanted an adventure. Something that was not planned. Just to leave somewhere one day. A radical change. Well, we're in the middle of it.'

He exhaled loudly. His heart was thumping.

There was a very long moment of silence. Zoey seemed to be stunned by the idea. Karl expected an adverse reaction from her. Despite defining herself as a person who liked radical surprises, Karl knew it wasn't true. Zoey was more of a conservative character, or some parts of her were. Karl's problem was that he had never had the communication skills to slowly infiltrate ideas into her head, allowing the information to sink in bit by bit, like dripping hot water into a cup. Usually, he poured it all, scalding everything.

'What do you think?' He asked when he considered that too much time had passed without getting an answer.

She didn't disappoint. She wasn't thrilled about the plan.

'Are you serious?' She whispered in anger. 'Are we really going away, just like that?'

'Yes, that's the plan. Just like that,' he said, his tone slightly sarcastic, like a teacher explaining something to a hard-headed student. He knew it had to be just like that; otherwise, the System would do its best to prevent such a plan. There were many rules restricting people's freedom.

'But Karl,' he heard Zoey saying. 'What about the children's school? Our jobs? Hector's job? Our friends?'

Karl knew they had no friends in there - only acquaintances, people who only greeted and chatted

with, but no real friends. He also knew that she knew, as she complained often about it. But she dared ask about their friends? Herregud⁶, *here we go again*, he thought. He had poor communication skills, but she was good at finding excuses for things she didn't want or understand. Karl's blood pressure went up one notch.

'We'll have a new start, Zoey,' he continued in the same tone, the sarcasm in his voice more palpable. 'That's why I took the gold, so we can settle somewhere. It is the only currency that still has value in a world of digital coins.'

Karl knew it wasn't about what he had said but how he said it. The way he delivered the words triggered Zoey's ego.

'Everywhere is the same,' she hissed, adding venom to the words. 'I know you always wanted to unplug us, but these are only your fantasies. Where are we going to go Karl? Nova Siberia? You must be crazy.'

'Yes, Nova, why not?' he passionately replied. 'We're not the only ones.' He knew that Siberia was like a land of promise. Due to global warming, its climate was already milder. The place was mainly uninhabited, attracting colonists from around the world. Karl also knew that global warming would continue and increase despite the attempted mitigation. Most of the actions to stop it were done only on paper or in the media. He believed that human civilization would slowly migrate towards the

poles and areas like Siberia or Northern Scandinavia would become the civilization centers of the Earth. New cities would be built. Maybe even new countries would form. Another civilization hub would be born down south, in Antarctica. In the middle would be only a dry wasteland. Knowing people, he predicted many wars would be fought in the middle, in the desert. There were already. Yes, he continued thinking. *Our civilization will turn to dust, and a new one will emerge. It had always been like that.* He got out of his reverie when he heard Zoey's voice.

'We leave too much behind, Karl.'

He had noticed that each time she was against something, he was no longer a *sweetie pie* for her. He was just Karl.

'We leave only the unnecessary behind,' he silently growled.

And then, the tension erupted, and they quarreled viciously, as only an old couple would. Due to long years of practice, they whispered only. They had perfected the method to avoid arguing in front of the boys. Their talk looked like a fight between two angry snakes.

'Where is your sense of adventure? Where is the girl I used to know, ready to pick up a rucksack and get lost in the world exploring? This time is for good. And for a good

reason.' He always used this argument when things went south.

'How about them, Karl? Did you think about them?' She pointed towards the main cabin. 'You always think from the height of your sixty years old tower. You think you see everything from the top because it is so tall. You may have a good perspective, but you fail to see the details!'

'That's the point. When I took this decision, I thought exactly at them,' he hissed back. He felt tempted to yell at her as his blood boiled, but his discipline was stronger. They had always had difficulties making common decisions regarding practical matters, and he had always wondered if she did it on purpose or if this was how she was. Karl remembered when they tried to save some credits to buy a new *glass* for Hector. He needed it at school. He calculated that if they saved around one hundred monthly credits, they could buy the device in around three months. They only had to limit their grocery list to fifty credits per buying session. He shared the idea with Zoey, and she reluctantly agreed. The next day, the bill came - one hundred and twenty credits! Not sixty! Not seventy! One hundred and twenty! After establishing that they should save more! Karl wondered if she did it intentionally, just to make a point, or if she had forgotten about it. He was so upset that he didn't talk to her for two days. Her lack of practicality contrasted strongly with his logical thinking.

'Yes, now I can look down from my sixty-year-old tower and have a perspective view upon people,' he continued. 'I no longer face strong emotions, hormones, lust, and anything else that can alter my thinking. I see the world with different eyes. I understand it. I accept it. With my life experience and knowledge about people and how their minds work I could have become a successful businessman or a great manipulator.' He felt bad when saying it, as he knew that that was exactly what he was doing - manipulating her. But he also knew that sometimes, one had to do good by force. 'I chose to be an observer, to be left alone, to avoid being dragged into the intricate maze of the world. Life on this boat fits us perfectly for now. Until we'll see where the wind blows from. In here, there is just us. There are no other rules apart from our own and the sea's. We don't have to follow anyone. We don't have to obey anyone. We can cross seas in this boat and go wherever we want.'

'You could have told me, Karl. I had the right to know. *They* had the right to know.'

'They will find out soon enough.'

Karl was no beginner in such talks. He had long years of practice. The opening was the most emotional. Usually, he got in control later. He knew he would get the upper hand if he controlled his emotions. He threw in another argument, which he knew would work.

'Do you remember the days when you wanted to have three children?'

He immediately felt Zoey soften. Even though many years had passed, that wound remained open.

'Do you remember how much effort we invested in that? Do you remember the answer? Do you remember what they told us if refusing to follow the rules? As soon as you get pregnant, the System would instantly know. We would receive an invitation to go for an abortion. If not complying, the huge fines would start. Every month for nine months. Then, after being born, the child would be taken away and raised in a governmental foster house. Most of them are specialized. Some create soldiers. Others create cheap labor. We were allowed to legally have Romeo, because he is a boy and boys are in high demand nowadays, right? They need to send somebody as cannon fodder to the Middle East to fight for the resources of the Alliance, right? Resources used by the privileged, right? If he would have been a girl, then the abortion invitation would have followed, right?' He felt how she put her guard down entirely. She came back under his arm, listening.

'We talked about all this some time ago, do you remember?' He asked in a sweet tone, like talking to a child. 'Do you want Hector to end up who knows where? I know it is his dream to join the EA, but he is too young. And young people make many mistakes. He has other

talents. He is needed someplace else. This army thing is just a hobby, a boyish thing. He can't make a lifelong decision based on a hobby.'

He tightened his arm around her shoulders.

'I'm sorry,' she meowed apologetically. 'I know you want the best for us. You are right about it all. I am also fed up with this stupid System. I don't want our boys to be raised to go into the army. They deserve better. They deserve a life. Hector wanted to be an ornithologist since he was small. Do you remember, how he digested all the books about birds we bought him?'

Karl acknowledged, holding her even tighter.

'What a pity it is so hard to disconnect from the System and from society,' she continued. 'Everything is made just to keep you in.'

'That's because we want to be kept in,' Karl replied melancholically. 'Do you remember your reaction, a few minutes ago? After all, that's the base of society - connectivity. It is an ancient bio-cultural trait we all inherited. Basic anthropology stuff. But the thing is....' He turned towards her and raised his body on an elbow. 'The thing is we can still choose our society. We came to Sweden twenty years ago and nothing keeps us here. We can unplug for a while. Go to Nova and sniff a bit around, just to see how it feels. If it is bad we can go someplace else.'

'But, sweetie pie,' she asked gingerly. 'How about the carbon passports? And the permit to travel?'

'I have a plan,' he said, smiling in the dark. 'And we have the gold. And that gold can buy many passports.'

He laid back in bed, and she put her head on his chest again.

'And we have something else,' he continued. 'This boat. She can take us anywhere.'

Zoey felt affection in his voice. She knew how much he loved the boat. Her arm went across his chest.

He sighed, put his arms under his head, and allowed his thoughts to drift. Zoey breathed deeply, keeping her head on his chest, reminding him of the boys when they were small.

Karl was a philosophical being. Once started, his thoughts would go on for a while. The talk he just had was the right stuff to start the process.

'We have something else, too,' Zoe whispered, fumbling with his hair.

'What's that?' he curiously asked.

'Our love. Our thoughts. These alone can take us anywhere.'

By God, a school of thought I would create! My old dream,
he thought.

He had a dream, indeed. Or at least he had it when he was younger. He hoped to create a new school of thought. The school was supposed to perpetuate humanism and peace. He would not have been the first to try or who dreamed about creating such a school. He would not have been the first one to fail, either. He believed a school of thought was important for human civilization but difficult to create. He had a bad opinion about the schools of thought that got lost in commercial interests. He argued that human society evolved into a race for profit only during the 21st century. If anyone asked, he gave the second Space Race as an example, saying that without money, the political and leading classes would simply not sponsor such a race, no matter how many engineers and scientists would work on the subject, even for free. In fact, some groups did work for free, but nobody noticed them. He also considered, or rather hoped, that the schools of thought are only infancy problems of superior beings that will break the barrier of primitivism one day. He thought creating a school of thought was the only way to change the world. You needed no money to develop a school of thought. It required no financing. Only adepts. Like a religion.

It was quiet in the main cabin. The boys were asleep. He felt the boat gently rocking at anchor. He could feel her movements even when he slept.

And then he felt Zoey tightening her grasp on him. He felt her lust. He felt her breath increasing. He felt her desire.

She wore only a T-shirt under the blanket. She had no underwear. He coiled his arms around her and gently penetrated her. She was ready and waiting. She suppressed her passionate moan to avoid waking the boys up.

And then they made love in silence.

The next day, *ZooZ-K* made her way southeast, following the coast. The wind was still weak. Romeo had checked the forecast, and there was nothing to be concerned about. The good weather would hold for a few more days, and Karl was particularly happy about it.

They were all happy, but some tension was obvious.

Karl smiled at Zoey, and she smiled back. Something was quite noticeable between the two of them. Romeo, who was an emotions sniffer, could feel it. When his parents went below, he discreetly approached Hector, who held the helm like his hand was glued to it.

'You can release that thing a bit, you know. The boat can take care of her own. You look like masturbating the tiller.'

Hector scoffed. He felt the need to be in charge. Having the helm gave him this feeling, and the tiller reminded him of the control stick of a plane. He liked how the boat obeyed the movements of his hand. He wanted to feel the water's pressure against the rudder.

'What do you think those two are hatching?' Romeo whispered, hardly moving his lips.

'Go ahead and ask them,' Hector replied grumpily.

'Whoaa! What's wrong with you? Are you at your period?'

Hector threw him a hard glance and said nothing. He had also noticed something strange about his parents. Hector didn't like changes or surprises, and it looked like Karl and Zoey hatched a big surprise. He could feel it. He expected a blow from somewhere but didn't know where it would come from. This made him nervous, and his usual lighting rod was his brother. That's how he discharged unwanted tension. When they were younger, they had fought fiercely for toys, books, and whatever else interested them, Hector being the most possessive of the two. In general, Romeo gave up or shared whatever he had.

'Hope I'll not be late for work,' Hector mumbled. 'If we'll keep sailing like this, we'll be too far south to make it back on time. Give me that *lith*, I want to see the forecast.'

Hector had just started his new job at the Tower Farm. He was a junior and pretty much hated what he did. He studied to be an ornithologist. At the Farm, he had to plant and collect vegetables. He did not have much connection with the birds but needed the money to continue his studies. They would only allow him to join the EA as a pilot with studies. And he wanted to be a pilot.

'I checked already, don't bother,' Romeo told him. 'Force one to two, westerly.' He sat opposite Hector, wishing for a beer.

'And tomorrow?'

'Same.'

Hector frowned.

'And the day after?'

Romeo yawned, thinking how to fetch one of the beers. Karl had rationalized them as a precaution, but Romeo knew where they were hidden.

'Haaaame,' he replied, covering his mouth with his palm. Then he smiled contently. That was his style. As long as nobody urged him to do something, everything was fine. Being two years younger than Hector had some advantages. He didn't have to work yet. He also studied. He wanted to be a botanist.

Hector pushed the tiller, and ZooZ-K tacked slowly. The sails moved from one gunwale to the other. Romeo didn't have to trim them. He looked at his brother, raising an eyebrow. Before he could say something, Karl's head appeared in the open hatch.

'Why did we change our heading?'

'I want to go home.' Hector declared.

Karl stiffened on the stairs.

'What do you mean, home?'

'Home,' Hector stubbornly repeated.

'What's going on?' Zoey's voice came from below.

'Hector wants to go home.' Karl replied surly.

'Why?' Another question arrived from below.

'Why?' Karl repeated, looking at Hector.

'It's boring already. I have things to do. If we'll keep it like this, I will not make it to work.'

Karl thought a bit, then said - 'So what? Me neither! For sure I won't miss it!'

'Yeeey! Holiday!' Zoey cheered from below.

'You don't have to be so drastic about it,' Karl continued.

'They will not miss us.'

Hector shook his head.

'I want to go home!' he insisted.

Romeo chuckled, visibly amused.

'Will your milk get cold?' he asked.

Hector threw him *the look*. Before things got heated, Karl intervened.

'Don't worry about work. We'll call tomorrow and arrange everything.' He knew he wouldn't call, but it was the best plan that momentarily crossed his mind. 'We have some days off we didn't take yet. I'll include you, too. If you're worried about the money, I'll pay you.' He winked at him. 'Turn the boat around, please. The opposite heading is more interesting than Tower No.2.'

Reluctantly, Hector did as told. The mutiny was under control for the moment.

A few hours later, the wind fell entirely, and ZooZ-K stopped only half a mile away from a forest-covered island.

'We haven't been here before,' Romeo remarked, looking at the trees covering the island.

Hector peeped over the gunwale.

'Who cares! Just another island.'

'I'm eager to check it out,' Romeo declared, his voice brimming with anticipation. 'You wanna come? There's no wind anyway. I don't feel like baking in here.'

Hector hesitated, his gaze shifting between the island and his brother's inviting face. 'Alright. Let's unfold the canoe.'

The prospect of exploring a new place with his brother was too tempting to resist.

ZooZ-K didn't have a dinghy, but they had something to be used as a tender. Karl sustained that it was better than a classical dinghy. He had designed it himself. He first drew it on a *glass* and fumbled with the dimensions. He had decided upon the way it was to be folded. He had cut the folds to fit perfectly in one of ZooZ-K's lockers. He had printed it on a few sheets of Memplast⁷, and voila! He had created a foldable canoe!

The boat was like an origami model but at full scale. When folded, it occupied the locker.

The boys retrieved it from its place and unfolded it into a canoe. The flexible yet sturdy material could be bent thousands of times before losing its properties. Romeo shaped only half of the canoe, then critically inspected the oddity he created. Having a pointed bow at one end and a heap of material at the other, the canoe looked like a falus sketched by Picasso, all angles and splinters.

'Idiot!' Hector mumbled.

Romeo grinned.

A few minutes later, the boat was on the water. Karl handed them the PFDs and the paddles. After some thinking, he also gave them two beers.

'Enjoy!' he said.

'Don't get wet. Be careful!' Zoey warned them.

'Yes, mom,' Romeo said submissively. In reality, he didn't care. He only wanted to make his mother happy. He told her what she wanted to hear.

Hector scoffed.

They paddled towards the island, watched by Karl and Zoey.

The island, a mere speck in the vast sea, was a testament to the encroaching waters. Its lower parts had been swallowed by the rising sea years before, a fate shared by many low-lying areas around the Baltic. The remaining trees, their branches long gone, stood like sentinels above the water - stark reminders of a world lost to the waves. Romeo, perched in the bow, took in the scene.

They approached and looked for a landing place.

'There,' Romeo said. 'Where that pebble beach is.'

They guided the canoe towards the beach, the sound of scraping stones filling the air. The boat came to a halt, and Romeo, unable to contain his excitement, stood up. He tripped on the gunwale and tumbled into the shallow water, his laughter echoing.

'Idiot!' Hector muttered, a smile playing on his lips.

They climbed the steep shore and reached the trees. Before entering the forest, they looked at the tree stumps.

'Can you imagine how this place looked before?' Romeo asked his brother.

'Must have been larger.'

'Yes, I know. I was only wondering what's under the water. Not only here, in general, in the world. All those islands that got flooded.' Their curiosity about the past was insatiable, always yearning for more knowledge.

Hector didn't answer. That was a question for Karl. He had lived those days. Sometimes, the boys stayed up late with him, and they talked. They liked to know about the world and how it used to be. What did their daddy do when he was young? What games did he play? What things did he see? What smart bracelet did he have? They were always surprised to discover that some of the stuff they had known about during their lifetime didn't exist during Karl's youth.

'Life was simpler,' Karl used to say. 'AI was only at the beginning. There were no *liths*, no smart bracelets, less wars.... The world was more polluted, but not as warm. There were many cars. Too many. And they were big. Too big. Most of them had a combustion engine. They burned gasoline....'

'Tata, and how did you drive them?'

'Oh, you *had* to drive them! They didn't have any preprogramed routes. You were in charge.'

The boys had big eyes and listened with their mouths open.

'Even the buses had drivers,' Karl continued.

'Really?'

He nodded.

'There were no *komuters*. We called the *glasses* laptops. They had a display and a keypad. You know what they looked like; you have seen my old one.'

The boys already knew everything they heard from Karl. They could look it up on the internet. But what they wanted to know was *how* all that felt. How did he feel when the GAI, a revolutionary technology that had both positive and negative impacts on the world, was invented. How did he feel when the first driverless cars hit the roads? How ugly or beautiful he found this or that

thing to be? Karl had told them everything. He liked to talk. There were occasions when they stayed up all night just talking.

'Tata, how did the world become so warm? We only saw snow once. You said that during your days Sweden got a good share of it.'

'It did. That was forty years ago.'

'And the Baltic froze?'

'Half of it, yes.'

'How did the weather turn so hot?' the boys insisted.

Karl sighed.

'We were blind to the signs, too consumed by our own conflicts and indulgences,' Karl lamented, his voice heavy with remorse.' And now, you, the next generation, are left to bear the consequences.' His smile, tinged with sadness, was a poignant reminder of the world they had inherited.

The boys felt his words.

'You know, my times were good times, but useless.'

'What do you mean?' they asked.

'I mean, people lived better lives, but their lives were weightless. Today, it is different, but it came too little, too late. And it still is far from being perfect.'

They ventured through the dense forest, navigating a barely discernible footpath. Perhaps, it was a trail blazed by a previous group of intrepid explorers, much like themselves. Romeo's eyes were drawn to the towering trees, while Hector's ears were attuned to the melodic chirping of the birds, each step fueling their sense of adventure.

Their path led them to a clearing, where the elements had revealed a rocky outcrop on a raised piece of land. Intriguingly, it was adorned with markings, reminiscent of graffiti. They left their provisions at the base and ascended the small hill, their curiosity piqued, eager to decipher the mysterious message.

'Inshallah'⁸, Hector read.

Encountering Arabic graffiti was a common sight in these parts, the southern region heavily influenced by Arabic culture due to past mass immigration. Over half of the country's population had Arabic heritage, with the majority residing in the southern half.

They sat down, leaning their backs against the rock, having the inscription above their heads.

'Inshallah, brother!' Romeo said, looking at the trees.

An E-X⁹ buzzed away in the sky, and the boys looked up. They saw the delta-shaped silhouette disappearing. Hector got the thrills.

'A fighter pilot,' he said, addressing no one. 'They'll teach you to control one of those. Even fly in one if needed. Or fly in one and control the drones.'

'Or fly in a drone and control an accordion,' Romeo laughed, arranging his back better on the rock.

Hector had a serious face. He had never liked when somebody made fun of his dreams.

'Okay, okay, you can play the accordion on the ground, in the middle of a meadow. Pity we don't have one,' Romeo said, noticing Hector's serious face and trying to lighten the mood.

'I can make you sing without one,' Hector playfully retorted, his hand teasing his brother's ribs. 'Shtick!' he exclaimed, a familiar phrase from their childhood, cementing their bond and bringing a smile to Romeo's face.

Romeo chuckled, defending himself, and a few seconds later, they were both engaged in a friendly wrestling match, a physical expression of their bond and a way to release their pent-up energy. They tumbled down the slope, Romeo ending on top of Hector and pinning him down. He had always been the strongest despite Hector's aggressivity. When they were small, Hector started the fight and lost most of the time. Karl had a hard time pulling them apart. Then, lengthy diplomatic talks followed. They both nodded in approval while Karl spoke.

The next day, everything was forgotten, and the fight started again.

Romeo, lying on the grassy slope, rolled over and found the bag with the goodies. He pulled out the cold beers and offered one to Hector. Thirstily, they drank, enjoying the warm afternoon sun and the peaceful sounds of nature.

'You put on your VR¹⁰ helmet and gloves, connect to your neural link, and voila! You're a pilot. You can allow the AI to fly the thing or take the controls yourself.'

And smile watching how your score increases, like in a video game, Romeo wanted to say, but he remembered two things: one - that Hector hated those comparisons, and two, that military jets didn't have a classical cockpit. Everything was virtual. The pilot controlled the machine via neural connection and virtual gloves. The cockpit was just the place he sat in. The military machines had taken the D2D¹¹ concept to a different level.

'I don't think you can fly anything today without the help of the AI,' Hector continued. 'It's not safe. We live fascinating times, bro!'

Romeo contradicted him in his mind again. They had once visited an aerodrome, where they experienced the thrill of flying gliders. Knowing his son's fascination with flying, Karl had bought a voucher for Hector's birthday. Hector soared in a high-tech glider. More precisely, the glider

carried him, while Karl conversed with an elderly flight instructor. And they conversed, and they conversed, and out of the blue, they saw Karl strapping into an unusual machine. It was a carbon-built replica of a very old design, something people had used almost two hundred years earlier. It had no cockpit, no instruments, no helmet, no nothing. To their astonishment, Karl flew it manually without difficulty, demonstrating to them the thrill and value of traditional skills in a world dominated by technology! In fact, their own boat was a floating testament to that. Of course, it had a state-of-the-art nav station, but she was entirely sailed by hand.

'Are you sure, you're focused on this EA thing? For sure they'll send you to fight somewhere.' Romeo said after a while.

'Neah,' Hector said, his voice tinged with a palpable uncertainty. 'But who knows?'

'I don't know, dude. Looks like the war is about to start. We still need oil for the plastics and to fuel whatever old powerplants are left. And since when did you become a believer, by the way? Trusting the System and all that? A few years ago you hated it to bits, when you were not selected for an ecological job. Don't know, dude. To me you don't look like the fighting type,' he laughed, a shared understanding in his voice.

'Still better than being a romantic stuntman like you!'

'If Tata would tell us today that we would go someplace away from Sweden, or the System, well, I'm all in. I'm fed up of all this.'

Hector was pensive.

'These mil conflicts will come to an end soon. That's what the System says.'

Romeo scoffed.

'Why not joining a space program instead? Plenty to choose from. You can go to Mars for example, to the PMRS - Permanent Mars Research Station and experiment on your birds.'

'Who will sponsor my trip there? You can't even get in touch with anybody human to talk to. If you fail the online AI interview, they will never accept you,' Hector lamented.

'Yeah, that's tough. You can't really get in touch with anyone, even in a shop! You put your stuff in the bin, it goes through the tunnel, arrives readily packed on the other side, you pay and you go. If you need something, you spend hours browsing FAQ or trying to explain a machine what you want. Do you remember that joke tata told us?'

'What joke?'

'The ChatGPT one.'

'No. I didn't hear it.'

'Well, this ChatGPT was an early GAI form from his days. It could write stuff like a human. He imagined a guy who received birthday wishes from people who were not very close to him. In fact, they hardly knew he exists. This fellow reads the messages, his eyes in tears and all, believing he had misjudged those people. He reads gorgeous texts, metaphors, parables, all the figures of speech imaginable. His feeling go wild. At the end of the text, he scrolls down and reads - generated by ChatGPT.'

Hector smiled. It was a sad joke. He couldn't laugh at it. But then, realizing how ridiculous everything was, his smile widened. A roar of laughter convulsed him from head to toe. His laugh was contagious. It caught Romeo, too. They laughed like idiots in the middle of the forest, a place they often sought solace and adventure in.

After a while, they stopped to catch their breath and noticed the rustle of the leaves.

Hector sniffed the air like a hound and said - 'The wind is back. It's time to return to the boat.'

They descended the slope, their hearts pounding, and reached the beach. With a swift motion, they hopped into the canoe, ready to conquer the sea once again. The paddle cut through the water, propelling them back towards the sailboat. Hector's face was still lit up with the thrill of the adventure.

'Generated by ChatGPT,' he muttered, smiling. 'Imagine sending this to your girlfriend!'

Meanwhile, at the boat, Karl checked the rigging one more time. He did it as a ritual or as if he had a fixation. Zoey mentioned it to him.

'Oh, Tata's fixation again. Check it well, make sure nothing is scratched.'

Karl paid no heed to her comment. He continued his inspection of the standing rigging, his brow furrowed with concern. The stays were carbon-made, with a limitless lifespan. They were stronger than any steel. In fact, they were much stronger than anything the mast and the hull could take. Karl was worried they would pull the chainplates out of the hull instead of breaking. The Elium was not a very strong resin, and that was a potential problem.

'This calmness reminds me of the great stagnation,' Karl started after he finished his ritual.

'Yeah, those hot summers. I have never seen the Baltic freezing,' Zoey said.

'I did,' Karl smiled.

'What's with the great stagnation?' Zoey asked, realizing that Karl was not talking about the weather. 'What happened?'

She expected Karl to begin one of his interminable speeches about economics. She didn't feel like debating such a boring topic during such boring weather. To her surprise, it wasn't about economics.

'You were a newborn when it happened,' he continued.
'A baby Zoey.'

She smiled when hearing how he called her. 'And what did baby Zoey miss?'

'Not much. Only a few years of technological stagnation. That's why that period is called like that. Nothing happened in the IT domain. No breakthroughs. They only changed the colors of the computer cases and advertised them as new products.'

'Did it work?'

'Of course. People needed computers, even if their old ones were as actual as the new ones. The marketing departments did their best to sell as much as possible, to keep the economy going. The key to success for most people is to deceive others. The ones who make it in life are the greatest deceivers. Corporates, governments, CEOs, well, they are the best. We talked about this one day,' Karl explained, his voice tinged with a hint of cynicism.

'You should write a book about all this.'

'No. That will make *me*, a deceiver. I will impose my ideas, or the impression that they really matter, and people will pay for the book, just to be deceived.'

'How come?'

She came closer to him.

'Because we like to trick ourselves. To trick our mind into believing something. We can't explain life or its purpose, if there is any, so we have to invent one. It makes time pass faster. We like films, books, the theater....It tricks the mind into feelings. Nothing real but it works. The time passes. If we like to trick ourselves, of course we easily accept to be tricked by others.'

'Then make it free.'

She chuckled, coming even closer.

'Nobody will read a free book. It will look suspicious. Try to give something for free nowadays.'

'But how come you like books?' she asked, raising her eyebrows.

'I see books to be treasures, because I can read somebody else's mind in them.'

There was a pause. Zoey was crazy about Karl when he explained something he believed in. He was serious and animated.

'And then?'

'Then what?'

'You didn't finish your story about the great stagnation.'

'Oh! That! And then....,' he shrugged. 'After a few years, they discovered the GAI and the GAI started to invent things. The break was over.'

He noticed she wasn't paying any more attention to what he was saying. She was only scanning the sea around the boat.

'Sweety pie? Do you know we are alone in the middle of the sea?' She used her kitty voice.

It sounded tempting.

She descended into the cabin, her laughter echoing in the air. Karl, captivated by her playful spirit, watched as her t-shirt flew out of the hatch. It missed the deck and landed in the water. Knowing she wore nothing under, he couldn't resist. He stood up, a smile playing on his lips, and followed her.

The small canoe quietly rounded the island and approached the motionless sailboat. The boys were quiet and hungry as the beers dug into their stomachs. They saw something brightly colored floating on the water. They came closer, and Romeo fished the floating T-shirt.

'Errr,' he embarrassedly told Hector, showing him the shirt. 'Should we knock?'

Some time later, ZooZ-K, her sails taut with the wind, sailed on a starboard tack, her bow slicing through the water. The wind, a steady twelve knots, was a sailor's dream, propelling her forward with ease. Mile after mile, the water churned in her wake, a symphony of sound echoing her progress. Hector, Romeo, and Zoey were captivated by how the boat harnessed the raw power of the wind and the water. Her bow cleaved through the seas like a shark's head, each wave a testament to her strength and grace.

Only Karl had different thoughts. His mind was a universe of its own, always exploring, always plotting. His thoughts were not confined to the present but stretched to the far reaches of spacetime, a realm only he could fathom.

There are many kinds of sailors. Some sail because they sail. They discover themselves when sailing. They connect to their inner core, and they relate to the sea. They spend days just looking and listening, without noticing the time, but living every second. Their bodies are part of their boat. They no longer notice her movements because *they* are the movements. They dance with the sea, and they harness the wind. The boat only keeps the balance.

Karl was one of these sailors. Compared to others, who only crunch numbers and see nothing but the miles clicking on the nav station, their passage itself being nothing but a number in the logbook, Karl sailed because he sailed, not only on the sea. Life was the other sea he sailed on, a place where, as a captain, he did his best for his family.

Two days later, ZooZ-K was abeam of Stockholm.

'Look at this!'

They stood in awe, their eyes fixed on the city. It was a sight to behold, a vibrant green landscape that seemed to have sprung from a fantastical dream. Skyscrapers had morphed into lush farms, and trees adorned every terrace. The streets, hidden from view, were said to resemble park alleys, a sea of green. And when the time was right, the city burst into a riot of colors, a living urban fairytale.

The family watched the big city in awe. By comparison to Umeå, it looked like an alien world.

Only Karl didn't like it. He knew it was expensive as hell to live there.

'When do you plan to cross to Poland?' Zoey reminded him.

'After we'll double Gotland,' he whispered back.

The wind picked up, propelling ZooZ-K forward at a rapid pace, leaving Stockholm behind. Karl, deciding to take advantage of the favorable conditions, chose to sail through the night without anchoring. He assigned crew watches, pairing Zoey with Hector and sharing his shift with Romeo. It was a perfect balance of experience and enthusiasm, with each member contributing their unique skills to the journey.

Karl didn't want to pair the boys. He knew they usually got distracted by the *lith*, and apart from that, he liked to teach Romeo astronavigation during clear nights. The kid enjoyed it. There was nothing like looking at the sky above the sea. There were no sources of light out there. Karl switched the boat's positioning lights off to take a better look at the sky. At first, Romeo used the *glass* to recognize the constellations. He pointed it at the sky and uploaded a specific program. The *lith* became a miniaturized sky in his hands. Wherever he pointed it, it reproduced the real stars with a brief description under them. After a while, he didn't need the device any longer.

Gotland slowly emerged from the turquoise waters. There weren't any significant elevations on the island to make it more visible from the distance. It used to be larger, but many areas had been flooded, changing its geography. The sea had created a large, shallow bay on the west coast, almost splitting the island in half. On dry land, at the end of the bay, a new city had grown from

scratch. People called it Al Ghadab. The city's name had filled many news pages during its brief history.

Karl, always the practical one, wasn't too keen on the idea. But Zoey, with her insatiable thirst for adventure, was eager to explore the city.

'Sweety pie?' she asked in her kitty voice. 'Can we visit Al Gee? We've never been there.'

Karl was well aware of Zoey's fascination with Al Ghadab, a city shrouded in mystery and danger, much like the former area of Christiania in Denmark. It was a haven for artists, anarchists, misfits, and drug dealers, a place of pure freedom. The news often portrayed it as a smuggler's nest, the first stop for any merchandise crossing the sea to Sweden. The allure of the forbidden was strong, and even Karl couldn't help but feel a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

Zoey felt attracted to the artistic part, and sometimes, she confessed she wouldn't mind trying some of the soft stuff that was liberally sold in the city. She liked going on *trips*. When she was younger, she had enjoyed many such trips. For Karl, that was anathema.

The island slowly slid on the boat's starboard side while four pairs of eyes scanned its distant shores, and Karl considered the place and moment to be right. He could finally put his plan into action. He sneaked at the helm, strategically replacing Hector.

'Let me hold that stick for a while.'

Hector didn't protest.

Karl looked at the island, sniffed the wind, scratched his head, and, not knowing what the best words were for such a situation, he said, 'Are you ready to change your lives?' His tone was theatrical, like in a commercial. 'Are you ready to explore new horizons? Discover a new world?'

He stood at the helm, straight as a flagpole, with his ruffled hair in the wind. The guys knew he could be flamboyant when he wanted, so they didn't give him much credit. They only smiled, their eyes full of curiosity. Since he received no answer, Karl smiled back and ordered - 'Prepare to jibe!'

The boys went to the winches. They did it automatically, without asking questions.

Karl looked at them, looked at Zoey, and pushed the tiller.

ZooZ-K made a perfect jibe, heading southeast. The boys trimmed the sails for a run, and *ZooZ-K* slowed down. Like any other boat equipped with a Bermuda rig, she didn't cope well with her new point of sail. They had no spinnaker. 'I don't want to see any of those bloody parachutes flown on this boat,' Karl had declared.

He looked happy. He had the air that he was doing mischief. Zoey studied him with curiosity. She also had an

air of mischief. She started to smile at him, and their smiles met midway. They broaden, and they broaden, until reaching their ears. The weather and wind were perfect, and ZooZ-K cut their road to freedom with her bow. And then, Zoey saw Karl's smile vanishing, like when the shade created by a cloud enveloped a sunny meadow. His face lengthened, and she could sense his disappointment.

At first, only the message was displayed on the navigation console. Then came the audible warning - 'This trip is not authorized! You are approaching international waters! This trip is not authorized!'

Karl ignored the warning. Hector was alarmed. Romeo was only interested.

Karl knew the information was projected onto an ops controller's display somewhere in a control center. The AI would ask for permission to intercept the unlawful. Then, the controller would check with his supervisor or look into the regulatory paragraph displayed on his screen. Those things took time, and Karl hoped to be faster than any potential border dispatched to intercept them.

Just wishful thinking!

To his alarm, he spotted the telltale white foam trail of a *kontrol* drone far in their wake. What a darned coincidence to have one patrolling close to them!