

OMNILOGOS
EXTENDED EDITION

MICHELE AMITRANI

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The sneak peek of the Omnilogos sequel in the paperback version might differ from the one in the e-book version. Furthermore, some modifications in the final writing phase may occur and slightly change the content of that part of the book.

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This book is dedicated to those who dream in the day and build in the night.

To the adventurers who have lost their path, but always find a new home.

*And to those who believe that the impossible is only a possibility that has not yet
been discovered.*

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FIRST PART

WEI

PROLOGUE

“HAVE YOU HEARD? The Wangs moved to Florida.”

“Who?”

“The Wangs.”

“Yan Wang?”

“No, not Yan. William, William Wang. He took his wife and his son with him. The son ... you know, right?” He tapped his index finger over his temple.

“Oh! *That* Wang. Moved you say? Why?”

“It seems William has found a job in Orlando.”

“Remind me what the guy does for a living.”

“He’s a rope technician.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. He’s the Mr. Clean of the skyscrapers.”

They both laughed uproariously.

“It must’ve been a sudden departure. They left a lot of stuff behind.”

A long moment of silence followed.

“You think... Well, you think all of this has something to do with their little pest?”

“What do you think? After what he did to that poor bastard...”

More silence.

“Yes, an awful mess. Neighbours I will not miss.”

“Hmm,” agreed the other.

There was the tinkling of a spoon in a cup.

“You know what? It looks like my Jenny is the only one who

seems to care. She didn't want them to leave."

"Jenny? Jenny is your little girl, right?"

"No, no. She's my eldest. She's a couple of years away from college."

"That's right. Well? What's her problem?"

"It seems she got close to Wangs' little Satan. He often wandered into the library where she studies, you know."

"Who? The kid? At that age? Shouldn't he be spending his days drooling on a napkin, or something?"

The other shrugged.

"Well, looks like Jenny found him there often, staring at books."

"He was probably messing them up with his crayons."

There was a murmur of approval.

"I understand. Your daughter babysat him when he was there, right?"

"No, it's not that."

"Then, what is it? She helped him color Mickey Mouse?"

The other shook his head, chuckling.

"No, it's quite the contrary. If you listened to Jenny, it seems *he* helped her with her chemistry."

A long pause followed with no one breathing. Then both laughed heartily.

The Last Light

ATLANTIS

2011

THAT DAY THE roof of the world was covered by a thick blanket of clouds. The light, dimmed by the greyness dominating the sky, weakly illuminated earth, sand and ocean.

Wei quickened his pace while greedily biting into a hot dog. On the third bite, an abundant dose of ketchup slid down his arm.

“Wei! Look what you’ve done!” The man who was holding him by the hand suddenly stopped, pointing at the mess. He took a paper napkin from his pocket and hastily wiped the child’s arm. “Come on now, or we’ll lose the best spots.”

The child followed his father, still eating and splashing ketchup all over his clothes, as if nothing had happened. To their left, the cars kept coming. The long line of people who were walking on the side of the road trailed behind them chairs, umbrellas and boxes packed with food.

Wei finished his snack and licked his fingers while they were passing under the big billboard near the road where they had parked the car. *401 North Cape Canaveral A. F. Station* was written on it. A boy was pointing to the billboard as he asked a friend to take a picture.

They walked for a little while. Finally, his father decided to stop. He then looked at a distant point on the horizon, scratching his head thoughtfully.

“Yeah, should be fine here,” he finally said, hands resting on his hips. His son was not listening. He was busy taking the cookie and the can of Coke that a lady nearby was offering him. Wei loved sodas.

“Thank you.” The father smiled, nodding toward the woman as the child began to eat the edges of the cookie with methodical precision.

Both sat on the towels they had brought with them and waited.

Fifteen minutes passed. Just when Wei was starting to get bored, people around him began speaking louder, smiling at each other and pointing to a specific point in front of them. His father stood up and began to talk with the people nearby. Wei paid little attention to the growing frenzy and continued to focus on the stretch of water just a few dozen meters away, busy counting the waves.

“Come here.” Wei felt two strong arms around his waist. His father gently lifted the boy from the ground and put him on his shoulders. “Can you see?”

“No,” cried the child, complaining more than answering the question.

“Look over there, then. It’s good to go! Can you see?”

The child didn’t answer, he just folded his arms across his chest and snorted. Meanwhile, the line of people who besieged the edges of the road was growing.

“Twenty-five seconds,” a voice suddenly cried to their right. Another two or three voices echoed the first, as the excitement grew.

Wei put aside his grudge and started to pay attention to the excited murmurs that saturated the atmosphere. Ever more intrigued by what was happening, he finally turned to the horizon where everyone was focused. He narrowed his eyes, eager for details, but he couldn’t see anything.

An old man turned to him with a toothy smile and raised the volume of his radio to allow everybody around to hear.

“Go for main engine start. T minus 10, 9, 8, 7, 6 ... all three engines up and burning.” The crowd stopped talking, captured by the message on the radio.

Wei looked around him, puzzled. People were smiling with excitement. Many were nudging at friends or family members with their elbows. Wei saw a couple of kids jump like crazy rabbits. Somehow he felt part of that incredible family of strangers, bonded by an inexplicable sense of participation he couldn’t really explain. Time seemed to stop for everything except the voice on the radio that continued its countdown.

“... 2, 1, 0 ... and lift off! The final lift off of Atlantis! On the

shoulders of the Space Shuttle ...”

The voice got lost in the sea of cheers and celebrations as a powerful spark ignited on the horizon. The little boy, completely taken aback, stared breathlessly at the light lifting from the ground like a powerful firework that quickly became lost in the cloudy sky.

The crowd continued to cheer at the light for a few seconds.

When it was clear that the show was over, people started to gather their things and leave.

“Come on, Wei. Pick up your things and thank the lady here,” said his father, nodding to the woman who had offered the snack to the child.

Wei didn’t obey. He simply remained still, deep in his thoughts. It was as if he was trying to catch the last glimpse of the light, now completely gone from the world.

“Dad. Can we see it again?” he asked.

“Again?” repeated his father, confused.

“Yes, again. Can we see the light again?”

“This was the last time, Wei. I told you that. Don’t you remember? This was the Space Shuttle’s last departure.”

The little boy seemed disappointed, almost annoyed. He looked at his father with a puzzled expression. “The last departure,” he echoed his father’s last sentence. “Why is that?”

The man opened his mouth, but didn’t say anything. He had no real answer to the question.

“I want to see the light again!” The child’s eyes shone with a magical fire as he pointed to the sky with his hand. “It was beautiful ... No. It was awesome! Where will it go now? What was it made of? How come it was that fast? It’ll be back, right?”

His father smiled. It was the very first time he’d seen his son, usually quiet and introverted, so interested and passionate about something. He covered the distance between them in a few steps then he knelt in front of him.

“You really want to know all these things?”

“Yes,” the little boy immediately answered, “and I also want to see that light again.”

“You will then, I promise,” his father said with his hand over his heart. “Now let’s go.” He gently took his son’s hand and together they walked back to their car.

Wei obeyed, letting the man guide him, but continued to stare at

the legacy left by the tall column of smoke in the fading light.

Unknown Song

ANURADHA

2013

THE SOFT GLOW of the laptop faintly illuminated the room otherwise shrouded in darkness. Miss Gloria Powell settled back in her chair as she finished filling out a form full of graphics, letters and numbers.

After a few minutes, she snorted with disgust and pushed aside a stack of papers so huge it took up one third of the desk.

The woman absently moved her hand to grasp the cup on the table.

“Jesus Christ!” Miss Powell cursed after spitting out hot coffee. The brown liquid went all over the monitor. She cursed again and looked around in search of a paper napkin to sop up the spreading liquid. She found none.

After looking through her pockets, she decided to use one of the sheets on the table.

When she was done drying the last keyboard button, she threw the dirty paper in the trash bin. She then stood and turned to go to the restroom -- when the alarm she had set a few hours before began to ring.

“What time is it?” she asked, as if expecting an answer from someone. She scratched her frizzy hair, recovered the alarm clock shaped like a hamburger from the ocean of paper on her desk, and turned it off.

She moved the mouse and typed a password.

After a few moments, an icon on the desktop began to glow. Miss

Powell checked the time on her laptop. She shook her head, cursed once more, then clicked the left mouse button with a sigh.

The face of a woman with dark skin, grey eyes and an aquiline nose appeared on the monitor. She had long, dark hair tied back in an incredibly long braid that stretched beyond the borders of the screen. Her skin was rough, porous and hazel brown, as if she had worked for years under the hot midday sun.

“Miss Powell, can you hear me?” the newcomer asked as she adjusted her webcam.

“Y-yes, I hear you loud and clear,” Miss Powell confirmed while clearing her throat.

“I’m Dr. Anuradha Galacta, from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory,” the woman continued. “Thank you for your time, I really appreciate it.”

“Of course. No problem,” Miss Powell said as she fidgeted in her chair to find a more comfortable position. “I read your e-mail last night and I must say I didn’t expect to see you personally, today. I mean, after checking your profile, I was expecting a call from your secretary or something like that.”

“A secretary?” Anuradha repeated, grinning. “Well, I can’t say it wouldn’t be nice to have one, but I assure you that NASA’s funds don’t justify such a luxury.” She waited a few seconds and then added, indicating the stack of papers, “Judging from what I see there, though, it seems you could definitely use one. Did I catch you at a bad moment?”

“Not at all.” Miss Powell shook her head while awkwardly moving a stack of papers. “So,” she continued once she had created enough space to rest her elbows on the desk, “to what do we owe the honour? Your e-mail mentioned my kids’ letters, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Exactly,” Anuradha confirmed while fiddling with a pencil, moving it back and forth from one finger to another.

Miss Powell absently scratched her cheek as she stared blankly at the screen. “I remember when I was ten, I sent you guys a letter with my ideas on how to colonize Venus: get to the planet’s surface with a huge umbrella made of diamonds to protect us from the acid rain.”

“It looks like a promising start to me,” Anuradha said, nodding briskly. “Your suggestion has been noted. If you come up with similar solutions to overcome the lack of oxygen, the atmospheric pressure and the impossibly high temperature, I see no reason why you

should not send us your résumé. We are in constant need of original ideas here.”

Miss Powell laughed heartily as she got rid of another stack of papers, pushing them into a drawer. “So they say,” she answered showing a white, toothy grin. “I never knew who he or she was, but a few days after sending the letter I received a huge picture book with a description of all the planets of the Solar System. I think I still have it tucked away somewhere in my basement. That book literally blew me away. I believe I’ve never written back to you guys to thank you for the gift.”

“Don’t mention it.” Anuradha leaned forward on her chair. “What an interesting story. I guess that’s why you ask your kids to send us their ideas.”

“Exactly, and some of your colleagues always send us something. You know - stickers, calendars, star charts, pamphlets, magazines - that sort of thing. It’s nice to have that kind of attention, especially in places like this, if you get what I mean.” Miss Powell looked around her, as if that gesture explained what she meant better than any words.

“However, this is the very first time we’ve received a call from a PhD at MIT.”

Anuradha absently rubbed her eyebrow. “Actually this call is the result of a ... well, I guess ‘misplacement’ is the correct word,” she said as she kept her pencil moving between her fingers. “You see, the package with your letters arrived on my desk due to a misplacement. Imagine my surprise when I found what was inside: a dozen proposals suggesting how to boldly go where no man has gone before.”

“Are you serious? By chance?” asked Miss Powell surprised. “Well, maybe at the JPL someone *really* thought that you needed new perspectives, ‘original ideas’ as you said. Don’t you think?”

Both of them laughed, but Anuradha’s face seemed to tense. Her smile was the first to fade.

“It may well be, yes,” she said drumming her nails on the arm of the chair, “and honestly I’ve called you because of one of these ideas. I hope ... well, I hope you can help me figure this ... issue out. To tell you the truth, this thing is giving me a headache.”

“You’re still talking about the kids’ letters?” Ms. Powell looked nonplussed.

“Absolutely.”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to, but if I can be of any help—”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it,” Anuradha cut her off, suddenly becoming serious. “Well, to start off, I seem to understand that your institution sends the letters without the supervision of an adult. I mean, none of your staff usually puts his or her ideas in one of the kids’ letters, right?”

“Dr. Galacta, my ‘staff’ is composed of my sisters and I. And we’re not included in the senders list in any way whatsoever.”

“No one else corrects or checks their work?”

“Well, no. The letter is an assignment the kids complete in class in a couple of hours. When they are done, we collect the letters and send them to you guys.”

“I understand,” said Anuradha, suddenly thoughtful. “If what you say is true, you’ve just made this conversation a lot more interesting.”

“What do you mean?” Miss Powell asked while pulling her chair toward the desk in order to look more closely at the caller on her terminal.

“You see, most of the letters you sent us were ... well, normal. One portrayed a banana-shaped spacecraft powered by flatulence, while another mentioned a bunch of astronauts riding comets. The bolder among them suggested hitting a spaceship with a giant baseball bat to allow them to exceed the speed of light. All stuff that one expects to hear from kids, nothing strange in this, and yet ... there is one letter I just can’t explain.”

“Which letter is that?”

Anuradha Galacta took a sheet near her and read, “It’s signed Wei.”

“Wei?” Miss Powell repeated thoughtfully, then she suddenly said, “Oh, yes! Wei Wang. He arrived a few weeks ago here at the Institute. What’s so interesting about his letter?”

“First, let me ask you a question,” Anuradha said, raising her hand. “The kids were supposed to send their proposals on how to travel among the stars. Is that right?”

“Well ... Yes, that was the point.”

“I understand. You see, this Wei sent us ten reasons why we *can’t* do it.”

Miss Powell looked puzzled for a moment then she said, “Let me get this straight. You called because an eight-year-old boy didn’t do

his homework properly?”

Anuradha shook her head. “Of course not. That’s not the point. What I wanted ... Wait a second! You said eight-year-old?”

“Yes, eight-year-old.”

“I thought your institute takes care of only ten-year-old boys or older.”

“That is correct, but we are temporarily entrusted with some younger cases if the circumstances require it.”

“I understand,” whispered Anuradha as she kept her pencil moving from one finger to another. Miss Powell realized that was her habit when she was thinking of something.

“But I don’t,” said Miss Powell, folding her arms across her chest and studying the now silent woman, “I don’t understand what is—”

“Is it possible to see this boy, Wei?” Anuradha interrupted her.

“To see Wei?” slowly repeated the other woman, perplexed by the question. “I don’t understand ...”

“I’d like to see him. Can you arrange a meeting with the child, tomorrow, maybe?”

“What? I ... no, I’m afraid it’s not possible. Wei will leave the Institute tomorrow morning. I’ve already said that his staying here was temporary. But why do you ...”

“Excuse me, do you know where he’ll be transferred?”

“Well ... yes, actually.” She paused. Anuradha’s questions and pushy tone were starting to make her uncomfortable. “The procedure in these cases is clear,” continued Miss Powell, massaging her elbow. “Wei will be transferred to an institution equipped to meet his special needs.”

“What special needs?”

“Dr. Galacta, with all due respect, I think I’ve already said more than enough. Excuse me, but we are dealing with confidential information here.” Powell’s face was irritated.

“My apologies. I’ve been too pushy,” Anuradha said, looking a bit embarrassed. “This situation has sparked my curiosity and annoyed me at the same time.”

“Never mind,” said Miss Powell with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Just tell me why you’re so interested in this damned letter.”

Anuradha nodded. “I’ll show you why. Open the file I’ve just sent you. It’s Wei’s letter.”

Miss Powell did as she was told and started reading. After thirty

seconds of silence, she said, “I don’t understand.”

“That makes two of us,” said the other, spreading her arms.

Another minute passed. Anuradha waited.

Miss Powell continued to read the document without saying anything. When she emerged from reading, her expression was somewhere between surprise and disappointment.

“So, what do you think?” asked Anuradha. Her pencil was now dancing between her fingers.

“I think the kid’s spelling is a disaster.”

Anuradha’s eyes widened. “That’s it? What about the content?”

“I’d say that today’s kids can give a whole new dimension to the term ‘plagiarism’. Isn’t it obvious? He clearly copied sentences here and there and tried to make some sense out of them.”

Anuradha shook her head vigorously.

“No, that’s not it. This is an original piece of work, with an introduction, a development and a conclusion that complete each part of the paper. Despite the text’s appearance, whoever wrote it shows remarkable knowledge and impressive analytic capabilities.”

“What? Are you kidding me?” Miss Powell laughed uproariously as she nervously scratched her elbow. “I mean, are you suggesting that the child actually knows what he’s talking about? Don’t you think you’re exaggerating this whole thing? Here, I read terms like ‘muscle atrophy’, ‘microgravity’, ‘ion thruster’, and ‘nuclear fission.’ Do you realize that? Eight-year-old children have difficulty understanding the concept of a hot air balloon, for God’s sake.”

“Fine. Then tell me what to make of it.”

“I don’t know! Maybe ... maybe he was helped by one of the older boys.”

“Have some of them taken courses in astrophysics or nuclear engineering recently?”

Miss Powell snorted. “And I thought I was the funny one.”

“Are you beginning to understand my dilemma? I’m reading an essay of six pages filled with specialist terminology. This is clearly an unfamiliar subject for the average adult and still, at the end is the signature of an eight-year-old kid. Try to put yourself in my shoes. What would you do?”

“Look,” said Miss Powell, shifting uncomfortably on her chair. “I understand the situation you’ve found yourself in, but I assure you that Wei simply couldn’t have written that stuff. I have repeatedly

tried to talk to him since he arrived, but he has been as talkative as a fish. Not a single word. He isolates himself from the others, looking for solitary and quiet spots. He doesn't want to stick with the other boys and ... well, we had a couple of incidents a few days ago involving him and two other kids ...” Miss Powell closed her eyes for a second and massaged her temples. She waved her hand, as if dismissing a disturbing thought. Then she added, “Plus ... to say it all, he didn't seem to me to be particularly clever, either.”

“Don't you understand that this makes the whole thing even more fascinating? Just think. What if Wei really wrote that letter?”

Miss Powell remained silent for a few seconds while checking the file sent by Anuradha again, then nodded.

“Well, if nothing else, I now understand why you're so interested in seeing the boy. There is obviously something weird in this whole thing. If I were in your place I can't deny that I would like an answer; a damn good answer.”

Anuradha sensed the hesitation in her voice. She stopped playing with her pencil and took a closer look at the screen.

“Look, I know I'm definitely not in a position to make such a request. I know that you have your rules to follow and I realize I'm only acting out of curiosity here, but please try to look at the bigger picture, try to do the right thing. Miss Powell ... Gloria ... I really just need to talk with Wei for a few minutes and—”

“I'm sorry, I can't,” Miss Powell cut her off, standing up from her chair with a strange expression on her face.

Anuradha clenched her fists, unsure of what to say.

“I can't just ignore the Institute's rules,” Miss Powell continued as she grabbed the cup of cold coffee and walked away from her desk toward the exit of the room.

Anuradha started to say something but the other interrupted her suddenly. “What I *can* do is get another cup of coffee from the kitchen downstairs and leave the door open to get some fresh air in the room. We will continue this conversation in exactly ten minutes.” She blinked. “See you in ten, Doctor.”

Amazed, Anuradha stared at the open door for half a minute. When she roused herself from her surprise, she couldn't suppress a grin. “Good,” she muttered triumphantly while unconsciously continuing to fiddle with her pencil.

A minute passed that seemed like an eternity. Then she heard

footsteps approaching hesitantly, followed by silence.

A figure appeared in the doorway, impossible to identify due to the dim light.

“Come on in.” Anuradha’s heart was slamming against her sternum and sweat was gathering on her palms.

The figure crossed the threshold of the room with a small jump, as if to avoid something on the floor. Anuradha leaned forward, almost touching the screen with her nose, then smiled a wide grin.

“Hello. You’re Wei, right?”

The little boy signified assent with a single long vertical movement of his head.

“It’s nice to meet you. I am Anu.” She waved both hands and greeted the boy in front of her. “How about you sit down here and have a little chat with me?”

Wei didn’t answer. He simply walked gingerly toward the laptop that was displaying Anuradha’s smiling face. He stared for a few seconds at the woman’s face with his small amber eyes, then tilted his head to the right, until it rested nearly on his shoulder.

“I’m Miss Powell’s friend,” she said, deliberately stressing each word. “I have read your letter, the one you sent to JPL a few days ago and I wanted to let you ...”

The child looked away from the monitor and started staring curiously at the sheets spread all over the desk. He picked up a couple of them and began to read, apparently no longer interested in the speaking laptop.

“Wei? Can you hear me?”

The boy put the papers down, looked around, took the burger-shaped alarm clock from the table and put it in his pocket. Anuradha started to speak, but the kid had noticed something on the other side of the room that attracted his attention.

“Wei, where are you going? Wei?”

The boy disappeared from the screen, heedless of the woman’s calls. She tried to lean forward to follow his movements but without success. The boy had vanished.

For a few seconds she heard noises coming from an unknown corner of the room. Then something fell on the floor followed by a sharp noise.

“Wei!” called Anuradha, unsure of what to do. The child, on the other hand, continued rummaging through Miss Powell’s things, deaf

to the increasingly desperate voice that kept calling him.

Suddenly the woman's cell phone came to life, filling the air with the bright notes of 'La donna è mobile'. Anuradha jumped off her chair, taken aback, and began to look around for the source of the sound. When she found the cell phone, she turned it off, annoyed. She then looked back at the screen. Surprisingly, Wei was returning her gaze. The boy cocked his head and stared at the woman, as if he was seeing her for the very first time. He sat down on the chair left by Miss Powell and started typing on the keyboard.

Anuradha read the message but it took her several seconds to understand it. In a small window the sentence *I love Verdi* appeared.

The woman repeated the three words to herself several times.

Finally a spark lit up in her mind. Eventually she was able to connect it with the ringing of her cell phone.

"You love Verdi?" she asked, hesitantly.

The child nodded briskly.

Anuradha read the message again but her thoughts were suddenly interrupted. Another message appeared.

Do you like him?

From her laptop a powerful, magnificent, vibrant and completely unexpected music broke out. Without even thinking Anuradha whispered incredulously, "Richard Wagner?"

The child clapped his hands, visibly pleased. A new message said: *Your turn.*

The woman was speechless. Willy-nilly she found herself in the midst of a musical competition against an eight-year-old child. If nothing else had done so before, she was convinced that Wei was nothing like the average eight-year-old boy. She decided to treat him as the special person he had proved to be. From that moment on, she put aside his physical appearance and focused on his uniqueness.

"OK, listen up. If you can't guess the next tune I'll win and you'll answer all my questions. What do you say?"

The boy covered his ears with both hands, closed his mouth and eyes and stood for a few moments without moving. A smirk appeared on his face then he typed on the keyboard: *OK.*

Anuradha fumbled for a moment with the mouse and keyboard. After a few seconds, she finally found what she was looking for.

Wei waited anxiously, as if someone was about to serve him a giant piece of chocolate cake.

Sweet, relaxed and poetic notes flooded the room like a slow but inevitable magma of gentle sounds intertwining with each other. Wei held his breath. He was concentrating now, two deep vertical lines grooving his forehead just above his eyes. The child was soon captured by the unique melody, devoid of logic, mathematics, foreign to anything he had ever heard.

After two and a half intense minutes, the melody uttered its last note and Wei found himself wiping his eyes with his sleeve. He didn't know who had composed the music but he felt his heart pounding in his chest. It was so beautiful, he thought.

You won. Who made it? the boy wrote.

"Ennio Morricone, an Italian composer. The melody has appeared in my favorite movie: *The Legend of 1900*."

The child nodded with a serious look on his face, as if he was storing a fundamental notion. He settled back in his chair and waited.

Anuradha knew that it was now her turn. "You know, you really have quite specific interests for a boy your age. Music seems to be only one of these. I imagine that on the list of things that you like there's also a place for astronomy, isn't there?"

Wei placed his forefinger on his right cheek then nodded.

"Did you write that letter yourself?" Anuradha noticed that her hands were shaking.

The boy nodded again.

"Well, if that's so, I'm really curious to know why you seem to believe that we can't travel to the stars."

Wei cocked his head to one side then slowly tapped on the keyboard: *We can, but we don't want to*.

Anuradha seemed puzzled. "I don't understand. Why are you saying that? I work with thousands of people who devote their lives to this purpose. You should know this, everyone knows it. You know what NASA is? The people who work for it? What they've done? Miss Powell didn't explain all of this to you?"

The child looked at her straight in the eye. The woman looked back at him without blinking. The only sound now was Anuradha's pencil, passing from one finger to the other at an ever increasing speed.

After a few moments the child leaned toward the keyboard and started typing.

The woman watched the words forming quickly one after the oth-

er. Without realizing it, she began holding her breath. Once she finished reading the answer, the pencil fell from her hand with a clatter. She didn't bother to pick it up.

"Well, well, well. Look who we have here!"

Anuradha shook herself out of her trance as she watched Miss Powell darting into the room, speaking to Wei.

"You should not be here, you rascal!" she said, shaking her head and smiling. "Come on, let's go back to your room."

Anuradha watched Miss Powell trying to hold Wei's hand, but the child pulled away, screaming.

"All right, all right." Miss Powell held up her hands. "Walk by yourself, then. Come on."

Wei walked toward the door, as silent as a tomb. Miss Powell sighed and followed him at a distance.

When she came back, she closed the door behind her. "So, what happened? Did you do it? Did he talk? That alone would be a miracle."

"Not a word," said Anuradha absently as she kept staring at the last message written by Wei.

Miss Powell crossed her arms and shook her head. "Come on, don't be too hard on yourself," she said, misunderstanding Anuradha's expression. "It was predictable. I told you that the child clearly has issues. So I guess that the mystery surrounding the letter has been solved."

"I guess so," whispered Anuradha.

"So ... he didn't write it, right?"

Anuradha looked at the other woman. Then she swallowed and shook her head to clear it. "On the contrary," she said, her eyes now bright with excitement. "Now I'm sure it *was* him who wrote it."

Miss Powell listened in round-eyed silence. "What?" she finally burst, clearly taken aback. "And how do you know that? You just said he didn't speak at all!"

"You're right. Wei doesn't seem very inclined to talk. But I assure you that I managed to establish some sort of contact. I'm not sure I can explain it, but believe it or not, there's no doubt: the kid is special, though I don't believe he needs the kind of attention you spoke of. He's extremely knowledgeable and incredibly smart."

Miss Powell put both hands behind her neck, shaking her head repeatedly. "All right, all right... Let's say you've established a contact.

What are you saying, that the kid's good with equations?"

Dr. Anuradha Galacta bent down and picked her pencil up from the floor, again moving it from one finger to another, an enigmatic smile on her face.

"No, Miss Powell. What I'm saying is that with all probability, I've just met the Einstein of the twenty-first century."

The Tree and the Cap

EVANGELINE

2015

WEI WAS SIPPING his hot chocolate while his fingers moved at the speed of light over his tablet.

After he finished drinking, he took a pen from the backpack at his right, then a flashlight and a handful of white sheets. Although the restaurant was very well lit, Wei turned the flashlight on, pointed it at one of the sheets and began to write.

After about half an hour, he put his pen and the flashlight down and rummaged once more in his backpack.

Eventually he found what he was looking for: a vanilla-colored cap. He quickly put it on.

Around him the few customers inside the restaurant were busy talking about the weather, the government and everything that the big TV over the bar showed on its flat screen.

The TV was now broadcasting a documentary that attracted his attention. The boy put down the tablet, moved the sheets aside and folded his arms across his chest, his head resting nearly on one shoulder and his almond-shaped eyes wide open with sharp curiosity.

“... created with the intent of warning the public about the harmful impact that space exploration has had on human civilization. LAND is a fierce organization backed by politicians, journalists, scientists and simple volunteers scattered throughout the territory.”

Wei’s attention was captured by the symbol of the organization that the reporter was speaking about: a man and a woman kneeling on opposite sides of a sphere enclosing the symbols of the four ele-

ments. The boy pulled a sheet toward him and began to write something as he continued to follow the news.

“When Spine Woodside founded LAND in the financial district of Pasadena, he felt as though he was called to fulfill a mission. Born in Dallas Texas in November 1979, Woodside has spent much of his youth volunteering for the elderly and caring for disabled people. After completing his Masters in Public Relations and a PhD in Advanced Strategies of Communication, he decided to dedicate his time to those whom he called ‘the forgotten’. He has since been involved in numerous projects around the world supported by FAO, Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders. After living for some time on the five continents, comparing poverty and hardship in the most diverse peoples and cultures, Woodside began to develop the idea that humanity was at a crossroads, a moment in which our civilization as a whole must decide what is really important for its survival and what needs to be abandoned.”

The face of a handsome man with big green eyes, high cheekbones, dark hair and an intriguing smile appeared on the screen. Spine Woodside seemed comfortable under the light of the studio that made him shine like the most prestigious piece of a diamond collection.

“Mr. Woodside, your organization -- which some refer to as a movement -- has lately grown larger and more powerful,” a beautiful journalist sitting in front of him was saying, “...and your message seems to gather more and more supporters and sympathizers every day. On the other hand, you have also made many enemies. Many of them call LAND the ‘anti-NASA’. These people find your message, the message of LAND, limited and wrong, or simply not making any sense at all. A few days ago, the astrophysicist Neil Tyson called you, and I quote: ‘a well-dressed snake oil salesman’, end quote. How do you feel about that?”

Spine Woodside crossed his arms and put on a condescending smile. “Wendy, I think the contempt these people show toward me and my organization is reassuring. It means that my message has reached their homes, their families, and that it has become part of their lives. The first step in solving any problem is awareness. The second step is admission.”

“I guess the problem you’re referring to Mr. Woodside, and the main reason why LAND exists, is space exploration?”

“What I’m referring to, Wendy,” Woodside answered with a smile so wide that Wei could see the back row of his teeth, “is a dream that became a nightmare. A toxic fantasy that has clouded the intentions of some of our best minds and that has required the diversion of billions of dollars that could have been used for more constructive purposes. Things we really need.”

“Such as?” Wendy pressed him.

Woodside licked his dried lips. He then breathed in and looked at the journalist right in her eye. “What about homes, tractors, water wells, hospitals, a school in the Congo, a research center to cure cancer in California, a highway in Bangladesh, a pair of jeans that don’t fade, automatic hair clips or a longer and more resistant toilet roll?” Woodside looked up pleadingly. “For God’s sake,” he went on, spreading his arms, “any of these things is more valuable than giving a blank check to an imbecile with a white coat and asking him to build a twelve million dollar spacesuit for another imbecile who’ll be satisfied when he looks like a giant snowman.”

The reporter nodded. “So, what you’re basically saying is that if we had not gone to the moon, we could have solved world poverty.”

“It’s never that simple,” Woodside replied calmly, with a wave of his hand. “The money invested for the Apollo program wouldn’t have met the food needs of Zimbabwe, let alone those of the hundreds of millions of people who still eat only once a day and will continue to do so for the rest of their lives.”

Woodside paused for a few seconds. Then he looked straight at the camera lens that had a flashing red light, as though that object was his last friend left on earth. “And yet, try to think of the energy, the tenacity and the resources of the thousands of people that have made this project, an undeniably massive undertaking, albeit completely useless and expensive. Try to re-invest these resources in everyday problems, problems that we face here on earth, and I’m sure that today we would have a lot more than a handful of useless lunar rocks.”

Wendy, the journalist, took her glasses off and looked directly at Woodside. “Is it possible that for you there’s nothing to be salvaged from what many believe to be mankind’s greatest achievement?”

“My grandma used to say that the meat that fell on the floor should not be trashed, but given to the dog. I think it was her way of saying that we can see the bright side in every situation, if one tries to

look carefully enough,” Woodside said, smiling seductively into the camera. “Let me think. You first mentioned NASA. Well, I feel compelled to admit that if, up to this point, we hadn’t spent around six hundred billion dollars to finance it -- that is, more or less Saudi Arabia’s annual GDP -- surely we would not have microwave ovens.”

Those who were following the interview burst out laughing. Wei, on the other hand, was frowning. While listening to the television, he took an object that looked like a large walnut out of his backpack. He turned it in his hands for a while and then put it back with a strange grimace on his face. When he turned to continue watching the interview, his view was obstructed by a tall woman with broad shoulders, massive cheeks and eyes as big as ripe cherries.

“Would you like another glass of chocolate, honey?”

A waitress had appeared at his right. She had a wide and bright smile on her face, the dull expression that people use with small, helpless and cute creatures in the zoo; the ones that win more applause and sighs from the public.

The boy touched his tablet a few times and showed the stranger the screen without making a sound.

“No,” she read loudly, frowning.

The waitress shook her head slightly, then placed the coffee pot she was carrying on the table and looked closely at Wei, further widening her already generous smile. “Are you sure, honey?” she asked, in a shrilly voice. “The next one is on the house.”

Wei gave up trying to follow the interview. He glanced at the big woman with annoyance and then turned his attention back to the tablet, touching it occasionally.

“Are you all alone?” the woman asked suddenly, not noticing Wei’s attempt to completely ignore her. She looked around warily, her expression a mix between concern and curiosity.

Wei did not answer. He just continued what he was doing while hoping the waitress would eventually leave him alone.

“Where is your mother, honey?” In an unexpectedly bold act, the woman moved with the clear intention of sitting down in front of him. It was in that very moment that the boy couldn’t take anymore. He quickly wrote something on his tablet and showed it to the woman before she could sit down.

“She’s six feet underground ...” she murmured. She didn’t immediately grasp the meaning of the sentence. Then she gaped at him.

The waitress stood for a moment in a strange position, her bottom almost on the seat with her knees already bent but her back still straight. She seemed bewildered by the boy's answer, too surprised to be able to decide what to do next.

Wei was staring at her with a severe, almost disgusted expression, as though she were the biggest cockroach on the planet. He waved his hand, pointing insistently at another table.

After seconds of complete silence, the waitress finally grabbed the coffee pot and began moving away from the seat with a dazed expression, like someone looking for a quick way to get out of an embarrassing situation.

Wei was happy to help her out. He pulled a ten dollar bill from his pocket and quickly put it in her apron. She watched without saying a word as the boy nodded and gave her a pat on the butt that made her squeak.

Keep the change, honey, read the speechless waitress before quickly leaving his table, looking around embarrassed and confused.

Wei smiled a wicked smile. He turned to watch the TV but disappointedly noted that the interview was over. The screen was now showing what seemed like a huge construction yard, with countless cranes that crowded the horizon and an army of hardhats swarming around everywhere.

"... and the Korean government decided earlier this year to speed up the construction plan. We spoke with several engineers here and most of them are confident that Saemangeum City will welcome its first family long before ..."

Suddenly, the restaurant's door slammed open and a slender teenage girl with long, straw-colored hair appeared in the doorway, panting heavily and trying to catch her breath. Heads turned to watch the newcomer. She looked around with urgency, pointed to a guy sitting at a nearby table and darted toward him.

Wei, distracted by the frenzy, saw her speaking to first one customer and then another. But none of them seemed interested in what she was saying.

After a few minutes, the boy lost interest in the strange girl and turned to the tablet screen. The report about the city in construction was over, replaced by news describing a new foundation that was acquiring legions of teenage members in Japan. Wei shook his head, closed his eyes and returned to his reading, deaf to everything that

surrounded him.

Meanwhile, the girl kept walking around, her face tense and impatient. Whatever she was trying to do, she didn't seem to have any luck. After speaking with half a dozen people, she finally found someone who nodded with a smile, and pointed to Wei.

The girl thanked the costumer and quickly headed toward the table where the boy was reading. Wei was so concentrated that he didn't even notice her sit down with a sigh in front of him.

"Hey. What's up? You're the climber guy, right?"

Wei nearly jumped out of his skin. It took him a couple of seconds to control his accelerated breathing. Then their eyes met.

She was looking at him with two giant, shiny, light blue eyes.

Wei's throat felt swollen. He swallowed hard. He opened and closed his eyes, his mouth half open. He found himself carefully studying the girl's freckles, a constellation of small brownish spots gracing her nose and cheeks. Her hair was a shiny waterfall of pale yellow lines flowing over her shoulders.

Wei swallowed again. His ears were red and itchy as though an invisible needle was piercing them repeatedly. Without really understanding why, his stomach felt weird -- somehow heavy -- and his mouth was dry. He cleared his throat and scratched his ears, looking away from the stranger.

"Look, I really need your help!" the girl quickly went on, gesturing with her hands and looking at him with a pleading expression.

"I'm Evangeline. Kruscha was following that stupid bird and ... Oh, I'm sorry! Kruscha is my chinchilla, you know, a very stupid chinchilla, but still ... Well, that moron followed the damned bird up a tree. I don't even know how the hell he got there on his own, short and fat as he is ... Anyway, as I said, now he's over there on that branch. He can't get off on his own and he's scared to death. I'm afraid he'll fall if we don't do something quickly! Nobody wants to help me! Please, please, you're my only hope!"

Wei realized that the buzz coming from Evangeline's mouth was probably some sort of a request for help, but other than that, he didn't understand a single word of what she had said. And he didn't care at all.

After pulling himself together from the initial surprise, his brain worked hard and fast to get rid of what he believed to be some kind of nutcase.

He touched his tablet and showed it to the girl without a word, waiting for a response.

“I’m deaf and dumb... What does that mean?” Evangeline asked, puzzled and pointing to the screen.

Wei shrugged and went back to his reading.

The girl didn’t move.

“Look, he told me you’d listen to me! Aren’t you Wei?”

The boy stopped reading, his eyes wide open.

Who told you my name? immediately appeared on his tablet.

“I thought you were deaf. I hate liars!” Evangeline angrily exclaimed, pointing at him with both forefingers. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll forgive you if you get up on that branch and save Kruscha. That’s all I want.”

Wei bit the inside of his cheek, then took a deep breath, picked up his pen and began to write fast, his forehead almost touching the paper.

“Well?” Evangeline said, impatient. “At least say something!”

I’m busy, typed Wei waving the tablet under her nose.

“It’s a matter of five minutes. Kruscha is right outside ...”

Get lost!

“He needs you, don’t you understand?”

Not listening.

Evangeline shouted his name in frustration. She jumped up, took off one of her shoes and began to beat it on the table.

Wei and everyone around turned to look at her.

STOP IT! The boy gestured harshly to his tablet, his face both angry and embarrassed.

Evangeline stopped, took off the other shoe and slammed both of them on the table.

“Hey, what the hell is going on over there?” asked the waitress who was serving a nearby table.

“It’s a matter between me and my boyfriend. Stay out of it!” Evangeline shouted in reply, indicating Wei with a shoe.

Wei’s face and neck went completely red, his jaw wide open. He couldn’t believe what the crazy girl had just said.

However, it seemed to the costumers a normal enough reason. They turned away and went on with their own conversations.

“I can go on forever, you know?” Evangeline said with a triumphant smile.

Wei could have just picked up his things and left the place, but he didn't want to be forced out by the girl's nonsense. It would have been like giving up. He decided to cover his ears, close his eyes and wait for the girl to go away to bother someone else.

He remained still for a minute and a half. After a while, he no longer felt the girl's presence.

He waited a couple more minutes and then slowly opened his eyes.

Wei smiled, satisfied. There was no one in front of him. He was finally alone.

The boy breathed a sigh of relief and settled back in his chair to go back to his reading, but then he suddenly realized that there was nothing on the table. His tablet had disappeared.

"The Pheno-phenomenology of Spirit? What the hell is this?"

Wei turned his head and saw Evangeline holding his tablet, absorbed in the reading.

"Hey!" shouted the boy angrily, without even realizing it.

"Mute, is it? You're the worst liar I've ever met!" Evangeline said looking at him with contempt.

Wei immediately stood up and tried to grab the tablet back, but he stumbled on something and fell hard to the ground.

Evangeline laughed. "If you want it back, you'll have to help me, asshole!" and she quickly left.

Wei, his cheek on the floor, realized that the strings of his shoes had been laced together. Evangeline had kept herself busy while his eyes were shut.

Creeping like a worm he slowly got back to his seat, grabbed his backpack and pulled out a pair of scissors that he used to quickly snip the knot.

Once he was on his feet, Wei collected his things and hastily rushed out of the restaurant, stumbling a couple of times on his way.

It was late afternoon outside and the streets were almost empty. Evangeline was waiting for him near one of the trees that lined the sidewalk.

"Hurry up! He's here!" said the girl, the stolen tablet clasped tightly in her arms.

Wei clenched his teeth and charged toward the thief, trying to grab his tablet, but Evangeline dodged him just in time, causing the boy to lose his balance. For the second time in five minutes, he

found himself with his face on the ground. He grunted and spat.

“Don’t get smart with me, moron!” the girl warned him, batting at his head. “Now come on and save Kruscha if you don’t want me to destroy this damn thing.”

Wei rubbed his aching head, wiped his mouth and sat up. The girl was too tall, too fast and too determined. He couldn’t hope to take the tablet away from her by using force. Frustrated and helpless, he pushed himself up to look where she was pointing.

On one of the branches of the tree, more than ten feet above the ground, a small rodent with long ears and thick greyish fur was watching them, immobile and scared.

“Looks like you need a ladder,” Wei said slowly, considering the distance that separated them from the frightened thing.

“Kruscha is dying of fear, can’t you see? I don’t have time to look for a ladder! Come on, climb up. And be quick about it!”

“Are you kidding me? How am I supposed to get up there? It must be more than twelve feet high! You think I’ve been bitten by a radioactive spider or something?”

“You’re just a liar. I know you can do it! Come on, now! Otherwise I’ll break your stuff!”

Wei stood up and dusted off his pants. Clearly the girl had issues. It was impossible to reason with her, he thought, looking at her intently. But he really wanted his tablet back in one piece.

For a few seconds he seemed to estimate the distance that separated them from the chinchilla. Then he licked his forefinger, exposing it to the wind.

“What’s its favorite food?” the boy suddenly asked.

Evangeline looked at him, confused. “Its favorite ...”

“What does the damn rat like to eat?”

“You mean, Kruscha?” Evangeline asked, taken aback by the question. “Well, raisins but—”

“Have you got any with you?” Wei cut her off.

“Well, s-sure, but what—?”

“Just shut up and give me some if you want my help!”

Evangeline considered the boy for a moment, his hand held out toward her. Eventually, she reached into her pocket and gave a little bag to Wei.

The boy turned it over in his hands, considering its weight. He tossed it in the air and caught it. He mumbled something that

Evangeline couldn't catch, then threw the bag up in the air again, this time higher. Wei knelt down, took off his cap and with the scissors from his backpack, made four holes equally spaced on each side of the hat. After that, he took a long string out of his pocket, made a couple of knots to secure it with the four holes in the cap and put the half-opened bag full of raisins in the middle of it.

"What are you doing?"

Wei didn't answer. He fumbled for a few more seconds with the string and made sure it was tied to the four sides of the cap.

Meanwhile, the chinchilla seemed to show signs of restlessness. Perhaps because it had noticed Evangeline, it began to turn on itself, almost falling half a dozen times.

"Kruscha! Stay still, you idiot!" Evangeline, her eyes bright and wide open, looked as though she was about to burst into tears.

"Go under that branch and be ready to catch your rat," Wei said, urging the girl to move.

Evangeline opened her mouth, but Wei stopped her by raising his hand.

"Get under that branch. *Now.*"

Evangeline did as she was told.

Wei stood motionless for a couple of seconds. Then he suddenly threw his cap toward the tree and over the branch with the chinchilla.

"What the hell are you doing? You almost hit him! Do you want to kill him?"

"Just look!" Wei silenced her while pointing to the branch.

Evangeline saw the boy's cap dangling in the air, held up by the twine that he firmly held from the other end.

The chinchilla stopped moving and sniffed the air, its head dodging back and forth, looking for something. Soon it noticed the cap a few inches away and in no time, the little thing dived in, lured by its content. The boy felt the weight of the rodent on the twine.

Slowly and steadily, the cap came closer and closer to the ground. When the rodent was finally within Evangeline's reach, Wei tied the string to a light pole nearby. While the girl was busy rescuing Kruscha, he was finally able to get his tablet back.

"Kruscha! Gosh, are you OK?" Evangeline was ecstatic, her eyes swollen with tears.

The rodent was happily eating one of the raisins scattered inside the hat. It raised its head for a second then went back to eating.

Wei snorted and quickly shoved the tablet inside his backpack. After closing it, he immediately put it on his shoulders. Then the boy started to untie the string, eager to put more distance between him and the crazy girl, but something grasped his shoulders, forcing him to turn around. Before he could realize what was happening, Evangeline pulled him toward her and kissed him on the lips. Wei was petrified, unable even to blink.

When she was done with him, she put her arms around his neck.

“You saved ... you saved Kruscha! Thank you!”

Wei started breathing again, his face as red as a tomato. He recoiled, spitting on the ground. “Disgusting!”

“Thanks, thanks, thanks,” Evangeline chanted happily, staying as close as she could to Wei and grasping his hands.

“I ...” Wei stopped, searching for something better to say that would shut her mouth and get rid of her. “My ... my plan was to hit that stupid thing with my cap on the first try... but I failed.”

Evangeline laughed out loud -- a laugh that seemed to Wei as fresh and crisp as a sweet melody. Again he felt that strange heaviness at the bottom of his stomach. All of a sudden, the psychopathic thief was surrounded by inexplicable charm.

“Come on, you moron, today’s dinner is on me. You’re officially my guest. I’ll show you my home after—”

“Your guest?” Wei looked around, bewildered. “Are you kidding me? You don’t even know who the hell I am!”

“Who cares?” the girl answered, humming happily while spinning into a strange dance. “You have green light.”

“I have green light?” the boy echoed genuinely confused. “Listen: you’re totally nuts! You hear me? I’m not going to—”

“Oh, shut up, brat, or we’ll start all over again. We have to celebrate Kruscha’s adventure!”

Wei found out soon enough that Evangeline was incredibly strong for a girl her age. His attempts to free himself were useless and painful. Tired, he finally gave up, letting the girl guide him.

The boy touched his head with a simple gesture that was evidently a habit, and suddenly realized that he had left his cap behind him, still hanging in mid-air.

“Wait, I’ve left ...”

“You’re a smart boy for your age, you know? Weird, but smart,” Evangeline said while patting Kruscha with one finger. “How on

earth did you come up with that idea? I mean, the elevator thing back there. It was brilliant!”

Wei remained silent for a few seconds, looking absently at his cap lolling lazily in the breeze that spoke of the quickly approaching sunset.

Wei looked at Evangeline, and then at the little thing she was holding in her hands.

Again he watched silently with a blank expression as his cap dangled lazily at the side of the tree, swinging in the warm wind.

“I ...” Wei said absently, while studying the chinchilla and the cap; first one then the other, over and over again.

Finally, before completely losing sight of it, he looked at the string that was holding his cap in the air for the last time. His eyes lit up for a moment, as if he had caught the last spark of a firework.

“Yes,” he whispered. “That really was a brilliant idea.”

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