

The King of Pain King of Pain and the Grasshopper

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Translated by Stanley S. Bill

(excerpt)

*++ KING_OF_PAIN
connection established
194533 CET / 154533 GMT-3
IP: <anonymized>
system: MS Puppeteer 7.10
crypto: Absolute Asymmetry 03EE13K98R3MD9394
master: KING_OF_PAIN
slave: LOCA_LOCA#7599
body provider: IF Proxy do Brasil Empresas*

He gets out of the bed and waves his arms. No pain. Lags imperceptible. Outside the wide open window of the stuffy hotel room the forest of Rio de Janeiro screams to the skies. Evening is approaching and a purple sun has spilt out over the horizon like a cracked egg on a frying pan.

The King of Pain glances at the transmission parameters and walks into the bathroom. He looks at his naked body in the full-length wall mirror: a mulatto, around thirty, not the smartest-looking mug, ape-like eyebrows, an IF PBE tattoo over the left one, shaved skull, massive neck, ape-like hands, fresh scar over the sternum. He bares his teeth. They're all there, even and white.

“Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle! The cat and the fi-i-idle!”

The voice is slightly hoarse. He closes his left eye, then the right. He lifts the eyelids with his fingers. He stands on the lavatory and pisses. Physiology okay. He steps under the show-

er. (The shower works!) His skin receives the hot water with a pleasant burning sensation. The King of Pain is almost euphoric.

It always starts like this.

The proxy has prepared his own clothes – not the ones he came here in, but still his clothes, sewn for him. He puts them on and knows he has worn them before. Knee-length boots, a white suit, a silkosilk shirt, a white hat. He doesn't put on the tie.

In the proxy's briefcase there are copies of various papers for the client – the Liberated Workshops of the United Church of Beach Volleyball – as well as a monozygotic telephone and a bird's feather.

The King of Pain switches on the phone.

"I'm here."

"Western loggia on the seventeenth."

"Okay."

They speak English. The mulatto wasn't lying; his neurolinks remember the sounds of the language, his accent is slight.

The King takes a sealed bottle of water from the bathroom and leaves the room.

The lifts aren't working, so he has to climb to the seventeenth floor by the emergency stairs. The proxy doesn't get tired. On the sixteenth floor he meets the hotel shaman and tips his hat. The shaman is smoking a fat cigar, feeding a little demon with his other hand. AG mosquitoes as big as dragonflies are circling around them. The demon catches them with his chameleon tongue and eats them, smacking his lips loudly. The shaman laughs through the smoke.

The King of Pain emerges onto an open loggia on the next floor. Two balloon ships are moored there. The one on the right has been decorated with garish graffiti depicting dark-skinned girls playing volleyball on a beach against the background of a setting sun. The sun setting in the background behind the balloon burns through the polymer envelope and the graffiti, illuminating the erotic scenes as if through stained glass.

The King steps on board and the deck rocks gently under his feet. The mulatto has low inner-ear sensitivity: he wasn't lying about that either. He sits down under the baldachin on a wooden stool. A fat parrot is swaying somnolently on the hooped rim of the canopy.

Aquim de Neira yells out to the pilot, who gives the signal to cast off. The mooring lines have been cultivated on hard AG; they coil up synchronously with a drawn-out hiss, their skin gleaming with sticky sweat. The balloon ship sets sail, rocking violently from side to side. The King of Pain steadies himself against the baldachin.

The gray-haired Aquim de Neira pulls up a stool and hands the King a coffeepear.

“Thank you.”

“Second round, knives drawn. Have you got the photos from orbit? We paid a pretty penny for them.”

“I took a look at them back at my place. Do all the parties know already?”

“Definitely the people from Cthulhu; they’ve been flying over the Amazon for the UN.”

“We can always give Washington another scare.”

“Hyuk, hyuk, when was the last time something got through Panama?”

“They’re scared, I’m telling you. We’re all scared.”

The coffeepear doesn’t taste like coffee, or like pear either.

The King of Pain takes the papers out of the briefcase. They flutter in the wind and he presses them against the lid. The balloon ship soars up over the junked center of Rio de Janeiro. The sky over the anarklands remains cloudless. The circulation of air currents is the only thing here which isn’t the subject of negotiation, war, bargaining and blackmail. The sun glints off the diamond-moss covered Christ the Redeemer on Corcovado. Squinting in the glare, the King tosses the core over the side and wipes his hands on a tissue.

Mounting waves of greenery shift and flow under the latticework balloon ship of the Liberated Workshops, together with waves of more predatory colors: red, venomous yellow, dark blue. The junkle has absorbed the anarklands, reaching as far as the Atlantic. If they descended to below ten meters the stench from that organic trash heap would become unbearable to the King of Pain. The proxy might have got used to it; the King of Pain never would. The junkle: a moldy splotch of AG on the face of the continent, extending from the Pacific to the Atlantic, from Tierra del Fuego to the Panama Front. The junkle has engulfed and digested over two hundred million people, more voracious than several world wars put together.

The balloon ship swings into the shadow of a skyscraper. A hundred-meter-high Tree of

the Knowledge of Good and Evil appears in the vista of the Rio Branco. A second one grows on the bank of the Rodrigo de Freitas, not visible from here.

Aquim curses the Tree in Portuguese.

“You’ll never convince me! It’s the Saulists! They’re planting them on purpose!”

The trees are genetic computers, megadionysids. They program cancers and retroviruses targeted at *Homo sapiens*.

The Saulists - Catholic terrorists of Saint Paul - regard bioterror as a necessary “sin to purify man of sin”: a phase through which civilization must pass in order to return to the ideal of a society made up of small Christian communities, devoid of any higher structures of power, which are evil and breed evil by their very nature. So the Saulists attack larger population centers on principle - above all, the cities. And congregations like the one to which the King of Pain is headed now are like red rags to a bull.

In every South American city at least one Tree grows. They have been burnt down to their roots in manifold ways; they always grow back. Half the anarkies in the junkle claim credit for them. But the King of Pain doesn’t trust the declarations of any anarky – and least of all the bragging of the Saulists. If they really had AG artists like that in their ranks they wouldn’t be limiting themselves to poisoning former metropolises.

In the crown of the Tree on the Rio Branco flocks of harpies and other winged megadionysid spawn wheel around in black spirals, their shadows flitting across the riddled walls of the tower blocks.

The King of Pain leafs through the reports from the orbital scans.

“Here, here and here. Take a look. Changes in the proportions of atmospheric gases – but it’s too subtle. Here. That’s it! Patterns in infrared, repeating anomalies, every night. I even managed to get hold of some official analyses from a couple of universities – they always make the right impression. If you count by the number of fires then it’s, oh, a few dozen families, no more than that. Further up the Amazon it’s not so dense.”

“Are you sure?”

The King of Pain snorts.

“Of course not! I don’t believe in this stuff at all! Let Vija explain himself!”

“Maybe it’s some kind of primitive anarky that nobody’s ever heard of. . .”

"It all comes down to the same thing." The King of Pain shrugs his shoulders. "How many chromosomes did you have last time you checked?"

"Hyuk, hyuk, chromosomes, you say? And what are they supposed to be? Hyuk, hyuk."

A sudden din explodes over their heads – the parrot is hopping about and flapping its wings.

"Him again, fiddlesticks!" it screeches in Polish. "No, no, no! Out – of – the – question!"

Aquim scratches his beard.

"What's the problem?"

"Who is it?" the King of Pain asks him.

"How should I know who's riding. Ivan and Co."

The bird is a proxy for the Marxist-Creationists.

"Of course they jumped straight in with us at the first mention of it," Aquim continues. "They gave hostages to speed things up. It's their Gospel, after all. Guillo sealed the deal in blood. They're paying half for you."

"They didn't know it was for me."

"Apparently you just gave yourself away," grins the old man. "They'd have found out sooner or later. They've got the transmission verification codes."

The parrot is still raging.

"It's all smoke and mirrors! Nothing ever comes of your advice! Money down the drain! Fiddlesticks and flapdoodle!"

A descendant of the Gombrowiczean emigration, thinks the King of Pain.

"But you know everybody hires plasties," he says calmly.

"Everybody! So what? Poppycock – that's what!"

"And what happens to people who try to manage without them?"

"It's a corporate conspiracy of capitalist swindlers! You all play along so that you can milk your clients for all they're worth! The same bleeding pestilence as the bleeding lawyers! Nobody has any use for them but all it takes is for one blockhead to hire one lawyer and then suddenly everybody has to hire one to defend against everybody else's! Conternation and botheration!"

"Skulls to the hull! Monkey business!" the pilot calls out from the stern.

The King of Pain and Aquim de Neira crouch down, ducking their heads below the railing.

The balloon ship glides between buildings filled to their roofs with the junkle, which bursts out through every natural and unnatural opening in the walls. Out of windows, doors, balconies, ventilators, cracks, breaches and collapses pour garlands of carnivorous flowers, plaits of poisonous lianas, tufts of methanous grass, cascades of woody tissue, of green and brown and black, tumbling down to the ground, down to the street in carpets of tangled roots, branches, leaves, inflorescences, from the twentieth, the fortieth, the sixtieth floor. And in the wake of the flora came the AG fauna: including diverse chimerizations of bizarromonkeys, hordes of descendants of spider monkeys, barrigudos, tamarins and uakaris, all reprogrammed along the way by various types of wild genetics. Some of the animals are able to imitate human speech and human gestures. The bizarromonkeys of Rio de Janeiro have adopted the custom of wearing caps, hats and yarmulkes. Some of them don stolen sunglasses, spectacles and frames with the lenses smashed out – it's all the same to them. But all of them shriek, jump, spit and piss at the first sight of a human being, hurling in his direction whatever they can lay their paws on. Recently they've mastered the art of constructing and employing David slingshots. A hail of stones, rotten fruit, broken chips of glass, plastic and concrete pelts against the envelope and the side of the Liberated Workshops balloon ship.

It seems to the King of Pain that he can make out Portuguese curse words in the baying of the furious monkeys.

The parrot has swooped down onto the deck of the balloon ship in fear for its life.

“So what’s your advice then?” it squawks at the crouching King. “Maestro!”

“First I have to figure out the other parties’ positions,” mutters the King, gathering up papers into his briefcase.

“And their plasties are probably telling them exactly the same thing! Aren’t they? Aren’t they?”

“Probably.”

“Pestilence! Pestilence! Pes – ti - lence!”

“Are you gonna shut the hell up?”

The King of Pain loses his cool and launches his briefcase at the parrot. The case turns

out not to be properly closed and the papers spill out and scatter once again. The King of Pain hurls his water bottle at the bird. The bird dodges and the bottle plummets over the side. The King takes off his hat and makes to catch the crooked-beaked proxy in it. Instead he cops a coconut shell in the back of the head from the monkeys and, vanquished, slumps down onto the stool with his hands lowered.

The parrot hops up and down on the spot, beating its wings in triumph.

“Cockhead! Cowbrain! Castrate! Crowcaw! Catdick! Cosmonaut! Cannibal! Kakeater! Cockroach! Conker! Cretinlicker! Choleritic! Caterpillar! Camelfucker!”

De Neira raises his eyes to the sky.

“Not just a Marxist, but a parrot as well – you won’t outchatter him, forget about it. Why do they hate you so much anyway?”

“I may have made a few, shall we say, overly frank remarks on certain political subjects.”

“Man is not the refuse of evolution!” bawls the bird. “Proletarians of all genes, unite! To the testtubes with the bourgeoisie! Down with DNA!”

Aquim wags a finger at him.

“I’ll disconnect you, I’m warning you! Who’s breaking in who here? Get a hold of yourself.”

“We’re all out of luck, so I don’t give a fuck!” croaks the parrot gloomily and then falls silent.

The balloon ship gives a jolt and raises its prow.

“We’re arriving!”

The one hundred and seventy-eighth round of negotiations under the auspices of the Bishop of Rio de Janeiro and the local Marxist-Creationist anarky is taking place in a pent-house in one of the high-rise buildings of a former business center. Depending on the ebbs and flows of media trends, certain stages of the negotiations have been framed in sumptuous PR, finding their way into millions of households via live telecast across thousands of TV channels. Other stages have unfolded more like bloody brawls in the smoky dens of thieves and murderers. The King of Pain has participated in four of them. On the last occasion a drunken Ivanist chopped off his head with a machete. (Proxy insurance is covered by the client). If it weren’t for the lucrative contract he wouldn’t have agreed to waste his time here

again. Of all the doomed negotiations in which he has taken part, the talks conducted by the South American anarkies of the Open Sky seem to the King to be the only truly hopeless ones.

No sooner has the balloon ship of the Liberated Workshops of the United Church of Beach Volleyball docked than the passengers begin to cross over onto the roof of the tower block and a dozen proxies, human and non-human, descend upon them. Some of them are ridden by media types; others by agitators and blackmailers from various factions and anarkies. All of them are trying to shout one another down. The King of Pain and Aquim de Neira stride towards the penthouse, fighting off importunate advances as they go. The Marxist-Creationist parrot flaps overhead. It too is accosted by an agitator – a winged demon.

The content of the shrieked slogans is less important than what the proxies actually spit out and exhale. For years the anarklands of the Open Sky have been a training ground for idealists of every stripe, hooding in here from all over the world. The King of Pain shields his head with his briefcase in an unconscious reflex. The air is fogging up with droplet-borne indoctrinators, the circulating microbes of Marx's *Das Kapital*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and John Paul II's *Centesimus annus*, the coughed-up and sneezed-out germs of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy* and Kurzajewski's *Un-nation*. Right by the entrance to the glassed-off patio three mestizo witches are burning corporate communist incense. The orange smoke stings the eyes.

The patio and penthouse are entered through an airlock. Once the doors have snapped shut, the King and de Neira suck in some deep breaths and brush down their clothing. Outside, behind the glass, the crowd seethes. In the corner of the roof top, under a makeshift tent, two teenagers are selling water and fruitofruit – they're probably the only people here piloted by their own brains. While the anarkic negotiations are in progress prices for proxy services localized in the Rio de Janeiro genosphere always rise by several times. (The proxy fee is covered by the rider's client).

“How many of them are here already?”

“Most of them. I mean, they probably won't actually hood in until the last moment. That's how it was the first time round.”

“Two thousand says by tomorrow evening they haven't even managed to sit down at

one table together."

"You're on. Everything's decided in the corridors and at the bar anyway. I hope you're well rested."

"Back home it's the middle of the night already."

"Bloody sybarites!" screeches the parrot. "Slaves to pleasure!"

The King of Pain has no desire to let even a single word to the bird pass his lips. He kicks the creature with the tip of his shoe. The internal door of the airlock rises and the ornitho-proxy flutters into the penthouse, shrieking curses in Polish, Portuguese, English and Spanish.

The penthouse looks as if it were from a completely different world: plush, crystal, live wood paneling, live rugs, live furniture, everything gleaming with cleanliness, the whole color spectrum shifting towards the red in the muted light of the setting sun, with the gleam throwing a veil of pink over even the steel jewellery and white cotton dresses of the hostess approaching the newly arrived guests and directing them to their assigned quarters.

The local Marxist-Creationist anarky of Rio de Janeiro has prepared the top four floors and the penthouse. The hermetically sealed off remainder of the building has probably been filled to bursting with the junkle by now. The Liberated Workshops have rooms on the second subfloor at their disposal. The King of Pain doesn't expect to spend much time there. The contract binds him for forty-eight hours, then he'll probably hood out right away. Or perhaps even earlier: if the anarkies manage to come to an understanding before then (which he doesn't believe) or if they turn against each other completely and break off the talks (which is much more likely).

After leaving his briefcase and hat in the room, he walks back to the penthouse. Of course the bar is open (a barman speaking with a Cockney accent in an Indian boy proxy is serving). The King of Pain orders a vodka with ice. A green-eyed demon sitting on the stool beside him whips out a business card. The King of Pain is just turning round to make a formal introduction when, at the back of the bar, behind an abstract sculpture and the telewall, a fight breaks out. A shaggy bizarromonkey is dragging a beautiful mulatta along by the hair, while she clubs him over the head with a hefty book. Two Ivanists appear (black suits, arm-bands with the red star inside the radiant triangle of Providence) and forcibly hood both rid-

ers out of their proxies. The bodies of the bizarromonkey and the mulatta lie stretched out under the telewall, one on top of the other, with isolation charshafs locked under their chins. A replay of a match between Manchester United and Juventus is playing with the sound off on the telewall. Juventus leads 2:0. When they score a third goal, somebody at the back stands up and starts to sing with heartrending, drunken yearning:

“Ó pátria amada, idolatrada! Salve! Salve!”

“Forty years since Brazil scored their last goal,” says the demon. “Since they played the last match here.”

The King of Pain sips his vodka. It always goes like this.

The demon turns out to be the proxy of a plasty from a Caribbean island anarky. On hearing the King of Pain’s name he insists they’ve met before and reels off the date and place. The King of Pain nods politely. It’s quite possible – there aren’t so many plasties around after all. How long has he been hired for? A week. That long? Did his employers really expect things to get as far as the negotiation of detailed agreements?”

“You can’t blackmail the junkle!” laughs the demon.

Four children of around six or seven years old enter the bar. Under the Open Sky there’s no law but the law of custom and the law of fear. Here you can ride anyone who gives consent or anyone whose owner does. The King of Pain isn’t sure which of these categories his own proxy belongs to. He has even seen babies being ridden under the Open Sky. Admittedly most of the traditional anarkies frown upon such practices. So this must be some kind of political demonstration. The King would bet that supremacists from the Northern post-partisan anarkies were riding these kids. After their arrival several people ostentatiously make their exits.

The children order opium vodka from the barman and sit down by the window. The night outside is slowly quenching the red reflections on the junkled Rio de Janeiro, as the balloons sway in the air in a row of bulbous stains of shadow. One can count the artificial lights on the roofs and in the high windows of the buildings on the fingers of one hand. A warm darkness is descending upon the city and pouring into the penthouse. The barman is lighting candles. The drunkard is sobbing over an empty bottle: *“Dos filhos deste solo és mãe gentil, pátria amada, Brasil!”*

The King of Pain orders another vodka. He thinks about who he should join for a nighttime chat - who might cough up the most useful information. This isn't Manhattan. Here people sometimes tell the truth for no apparent reason: perhaps the only virtue in this land of the damned (that is, if one considers such things to be virtues).

One of the supremacists drags the charshaffed mulatta onto a table top, rolls her over onto her stomach and yanks down her pants. The King of Pain hurls his glass at him. The other kids look up from their opium vodka.

"What?! What?!" the young hothead snaps insolently. "Who's gonna stop me? You? You?"

The King of Pain points a finger at the papal insignia hanging over the door.

"Why did you go to all this trouble since you're not even going to make it to the table for the talks? The bishop will politely show you the door."

The adolescent rapist shifts his eyes from the exposed buttocks of the woman to the Vatican coat of arms and back again. Two enormous chimerics leave their table and walk over to the supremacists, subduing the kiddies for a moment. The bald chimeric takes out his telephone and calls the Ivanists. A patrol of suits appears a moment later and a long argument commences between the supremacists, the Ivanists, the other chimeric, a newly arrived associate of the charshaffed bizarromonkey, along with various other guests who have involved themselves in the dispute. The barman lights more candles. In the end Juventus have drawn with Manchester United. The bald chimeric sits down on the other side of the King of Pain. He tosses a few ice cubes into his mouth and crushes them with his teeth.

"So the evening gets under way with a rape. By the time the sun comes up we'll be snacking on haunches of child flesh and sipping the blood of virgins."

The demon reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket and hands the chimeric his business card.

"John," the giant introduces himself in reply. Names and surnames are obviously meaningless. So the King of Pain gives his real name.

The chimeric examines the King.

"Workshops of Volleyball? The bodybleeder?"

"There's no bodybleeder," mutters the King.

"Well that's a new one. You intimidate, while denying your own threats?"

"Who's afraid? Nobody. Everybody." The King of Pain shrugs his shoulders. "Europeans and Yankees hood in here for a weekend of extreme tourism, then go right back to their Disney stases with illegal memories and collections of petit bourgeois pornography. The South of the Open Sky, hardcore land, God's not looking, the Raskolnikov Show. But those guys," the King of Pain points at the quarelling supremacists, "They were born here, they live here. Second, third generation. Threats? Politics? Agreements? Word of honor? Profit, loss? Nothing has any effect on them. If they're gonna kill each other, then they're gonna kill each other. If not, then not. But these negotiations – they're just social parties."

"You're drunk."

"Hardy har har."

The chemicals absorbed by the proxy's body obviously don't have any effect on the King of Pain (unless he wants them to) – though the atmosphere of the place and the moment do. The night over the deserted Rio de Janeiro, the shadows from the flickering flames of the candles, the melodious murmur of the languages of the South and the organic smell of the junkle: a person can just as easily get drunk that way. The vodka is just a taste prop. (It doesn't hurt).

"For instance, these ones here," the King raises his glass, "They're the grandchildren of leftist narcotics partisans from Colombia and around there. Under normal circumstances they'd have become a bit more civilized - even them - but since everybody's got his finger on the Holocaust button any political pressure is out of the question. It's a real blast from the past around here. So you've gotta read the history textbooks. How many books have been written about the Hundred Days of Valdez? And what do they always say? Nobody was expecting it! No worst-case scenarios! No plan! Like little children hiding their heads under a blanket: I can't see it so it's not there. 'The triumph of terrorism is unthinkable.' Well, it sure wasn't thinkable: since nobody was thinking it."

"And what would you have done in Valdez's place?"

The King of Pain shrugs his shoulders.

"Probably shot myself in the head. He really didn't have a choice. But the ones who abandoned the preparations and protections years before did."

"Somebody had to be first," says John. "Otherwise Europe would have fallen. Or the States. South America was sacrificed to warn the North."

"You're a Casaldáigan then, are you?" the demon asks with a grimace. "Conspiracy theories put me to sleep."

"On me they have a hypnotic effect," murmurs the King of Pain. "Like Möbius strips or Escher geometry."

John stands up energetically and raises a toast:

"To Valdez!"

"To Valdez!"

"And all the other poor sons of bitches screwed by history."

"Fuck history in the ass!"

"Fuck history!"

They drink.

Ricardo Jose Martin Samoza Valdez: last president of Chile, the Neville Chamberlain of the twenty-first century. Somebody had to be the first; it fell to him. As long as the terrorist arsenal was filled only with explosive materials (even with nuclear loads) and chemical weapons, the threat could be counteracted or uncovered, weapons seized, civilians evacuated from the field of fire. The field of fire itself might still remain restricted. But once biotechnology had become advanced enough and cheap enough that any genetics graduate could set up an AG lab in his garage, where he could cook up viruses for fatal diseases the world had never even heard of capable of spreading from the remotest backwater shithole across the whole globe, mowing down 99% of the *Homo sapiens* population - and there were thousands, tens of thousands of these crazy motherfuckers, some of them dreaming their dark dreams in countries where the security apparatus practically didn't exist). . . On the first time, the second time, the authorities managed to react before it was too late. But on the third time, the fourth time, the terrorists carried out their threats: then White Ebola massacred half the population of the Middle East and LK4 poisoned the genomes of Europeans. How can you stop a fanatic on the other side of the planet from releasing a virus when all you know about him is a pseudonym, a list of demands and that he really does possess the virus since he's already sent you a sample along with the obituaries of the victims? There

are millions of suspects, a few hours to decide, while the biological survival of the whole nation for which you're responsible hangs in the balance: how to stop a fanatic? It's impossible, unless pure chance or the blackmailer's own stupidity come to your aid. Sooner or later somebody had to fold. Everybody had Israel's fate fresh in their memories: the cities of corpses, the deserts of mass graves. Valdez was no different from the ranks of all the other dictators, populists and oligarchs who'd been handing down power from one to another for centuries in South America – neither *in plus* nor *in minus*. It was simply that it fell to him to govern in such times and in such a country. Perhaps if he'd showed the kind of contempt for the lives of subordinates typical of tsars and general secretaries. . . But he didn't want the blood of his countrymen on his hands, so he folded – he was the first. And then it crashed like a wave of falling dominoes, since every successful blackmail spurred on hundreds of other terrorists. The choice was paralyzingly clear: either meeting their demands or total extermination. No negotiations, no sieges of fortified hideouts, no chance of defense or counter-attack. *Terrorismo o muerte*. Of course there were still a few steadfast presidents and prime ministers – which is why the jungle of wild AG covers the majority of the continent today. One way or another, not a single pre-terrorist structure of power has remained.

For what does "submitting to terrorist demands" mean? Since you've submitted once, you'll submit again – the threat is the same. But the moment it's clear that the official government has become the mere transmitter of the terrorists' will, while the true center of power has been transferred to a partisan shack in the middle of the jungle or a basement laboratory under the trash heaps of the favela, the state as such ceases to exist. Democratic mandate? Law? Loyalty? Oaths? The guarantee of employment? Nothing is certain any more. Nothing binds people to carry out the commands of a government which isn't a government, of courts which aren't courts, of a parliament which isn't a parliament. After a few weeks the last bonds break. (Valdez held out for three months). The army and other hierarchical structures hold out the longest. But once the soldiers actually *know* that they're just carrying out the orders of terrorists. . . In the end the commanders themselves encourage desertion. The blackmailers can't come out into the open to take direct power themselves either. First of all, since the old structure doesn't exist, there's nobody physically to blackmail: you can threaten an individual person or a decision-making body, but not the nation,

not the masses. Then only one reaction will ensue with absolute certainty: hysteria and chaos. The triumph of terror – the destruction of the state – is simultaneously the end of terror as a method: it becomes useless. Secondly, even if the terrorists were to come out of the forest, come down from the mountains or crawl out of the slums with full shadow cabinets and thousand-strong teams of professionals ready to be installed in the positions vacated by the *ancien régime*, even with the support of a significant part of society, even if – then on the very day they began to set up their own structures and to assume responsibility for the state they would become equally exposed to blackmail from *all the other terrorists*. The scenario is identical, only the actors exchange places. Can the new rulers react in any other way? Do they have some option unavailable to their predecessors? No. In fact, they find themselves in an even worse situation: the new structures will crumble immediately. After all, a large part of the nation does not acknowledge them from the very beginning.

And so, in a finite number of revolutions of the wheel of terror, fortune and extermination, the state degenerates into the only stable system for such conditions: a motley collection of anarchic mini-societies with no overarching structures of power, united only by the law of the fist and fear. Any organization which blooms out over the anarkies is cut back at the root: since it is susceptible to terror. The problem here is not the method of deadly blackmail itself. After all, inter-state politics have been based on this method for a long time: in the twentieth century, for example, when a nascent atomic power launched its first rocket with a nuclear warhead it was the “subtle” equivalent of a letter sent to the neighbors with a ransom demand. The problem is the lack of equilibrium: you can’t blackmail the terrorist in return. It’s impossible, as long as he doesn’t show himself and as long as he doesn’t show attachment to anything of which he might be deprived or which might be destroyed: life, family, possessions. (Whereas words, ideas and religion will survive anything). Only the suicidal fanatic is truly safe from terror. So the ideal society of the Open Sky became a random ensemble of lone kamikazes: a non-society. Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – man is a social animal, a garrulous *zoon politikon*. The surviving inhabitants of South America have halted at the stage of multi-family anarkies. Larger groups have too much to lose; smaller groups struggle with physical survival, with defending themselves against the junkle and AG. There are also thousands of several-person or several-dozen-person “tribes” vegetating in

the junkle, groups of natives who have degenerated almost to the level of animals. But they, for obvious reasons, take no part in any of the inter-anarky negotiations – probably they've never even heard of them, cut off from the web as they are. And even if. . . they don't have access to the technology required to hood into proxies. Whereas fear is inspired by those who could take part but don't want to – the ones who remain in hiding, the real lunatic kamikazes. Every unnatural source of radiation detected from orbit, every movement that isn't the movement of the junkle, every AG epidemic not predicted in advance or too specialized to be the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge or the blind seed of any other dionysids is the subject of endless discussions and arguments at the meetings in Rio. Only fear unites them. Such are the laws of the Open Sky.

"Not long ago the volleyballers were boasting that their bodybleeder would bring down all the DNA mammals this side of the Atlantic," says the chimeric, once they have seated themselves in the darkest corner of the bar, some distance from the rising tumult of the supremacist row. "Are they through with that now?"

The King of Pain shrugs his shoulders.

"They've got something better," smiles the demon. "A new anarky a thousand miles into the junkle."

"Yeah, right! Who's gonna believe that? Even the American military mission didn't get further than forty miles before they had chromosomes fizzing out of their ears."

"Exactly." The King nods his head. "Ninety percent live on the coastal strip, in the mountains, in the cities and the ruins of cities not swallowed up by the junkle. They think the junkle is divine retribution, a force of nature powered by the dozens of dirty genetic codes released from all those backyard laboratories, essentially meaningless in itself – we just have to keep our distance and suffer in silence." The King pours out more vodka. "But what if it's not?"

The demon bares his fangs in a grin.

"You can't blackmail the junkle!"

The giant chimeric scratches his head.

"Is this the next part of that fairy tale about AG monsters?"

The demon is still grinning.

“It’s more than that.” He slaps the King of Pain on the back, while the King restrains a strong urge to dodge the blow. “If I understand his plan right. . . it would finally be a chance to unite these goddamn anarkies!”

John raises his eyebrows.

“I know, I know,” mutters the King. “They’ll never unite of their own accord. Previously we disseminated memes of pure fear, so did the Ivanists: a dark horde will come out of the junkle at night and devour the lot of you. Washington ended up increasing their humanitarian aid budget, remember.”

“And the Andean anarkies got their hands on it,” frowned John. “The Cthulhu Haciendas sell most of the aid that comes in here straight back to the North. I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

“That’s no surprise,” snorts the King. “In fact, it might turn out the same way here if the media gang gatecrashes us in the middle of the talks.”

“Will they fall for the same trick twice?”

“Ha! This time we’ve got proof!”

The demon leans over on his high stool.

“You mean, first you made up a fairy tale as a negotiating tool, and now it turns out - God have mercy on us - that the fairy tale is true. . .?”

The King of Pain modestly lowers his eyes.

“What can I say? . . . I’m good.”

The demon cackles and slaps his hand against his thigh until the barman approaches in alarm. The King snaps his fingers and orders a refill.

John the chimeric sidles up closer to the King.

“This proof of yours – will it hold up on the outside? Before the Closed Sky media? How good is it?” His gaze is clear and sure, his face professionally frank.

Only now does the suspicion arise in the King of Pain: maybe an even better hustler has sat down next to him and now is fishing out valuable information from a bar-room chit-chat.

Over the King’s other shoulder bitter curses ring out.

“What?”

The green-eyed demon gets up in disgust.

“It appears the little shits have got their way.”

He puts down his glass, straightens his suit and marches into the crowd. The row begins anew.

The King of Pain follows the demon with his eyes and watches the escalating brawl with a smile of bitter irony. Under the Open Sky the boundaries of good and evil are usually determined by the stronger genetics. But in this moment and in this place even that foundation is lacking. It all depends on who can outtalk whom. The little proxies have healthy larynxes: they holler out their right to recreational rape. In the end nobody's riding his own body here anyway.

The muscular chimeric delicately touches the King of Pain's hand.

“I'm sorry. That's not what I'm after. I won't tell anybody, really.”

The King tastes the touch like a wine taster savoring the first drop of liquor from a new strain of grape. There is nothing sexual in it; sex is only one of many different kinds of intimacy. The King of Pain is a connoisseur of intimacy, sensitive to all its manifestations – just as a man who spends his whole life teetering on the brink of starvation salivates at the slightest aroma from the most unappealing dish.

“Are you from the bishop's entourage?” he asks, cool and calm in his proxy body, with neither his pulse quickening nor his pupils twitching.

“No, no. Could you. . .” The giant takes a deep breath. “Okay. Let me put it this way. Have you thought about what will happen next if they actually unite?”

The King of Pain shrugs his shoulders.

“These kinds of alliances of fear only last as long as the threat lasts. And we have no idea what's been born out there in the junkle. Maybe just some slightly smarter monkeys who've learnt to kindle a fire. Or maybe genuine Artificial Genetics intelligence: aliens more alien than any television monsters, self-conscious life on a genetic code with no DNA, with no ribonucleic acids. Either way, some day the threat will pass.”

“How can you be so sure? In any case, it'll be enough if it just lasts long enough to. . .”

“To what?”

“Then things will keep going by sheer force of momentum. They'll get used to working together, they'll get used to talking. Let an external threat just force them into it. And you've

given it to them: a mysterious tribe from the junkle. After all, there's already been a period in Earth's history when more than one species of hominid was developing at the same time. Whole nations have come into being from lesser fears. The United States were born of an alliance against the British."

The King of Pain holds his eyes on the impassioned chimeric.

"An optimist." He stares searchingly at him for a lengthy moment. "You're really very young, aren't you?"

The giant, confused and embarrassed, lowers his eyes, curls up his powerful fists on his lap and clenches his knees together.

The King suppresses a scornful laugh. This naivety and sincerity - even if they're fake - are simply too rare for him to shatter them needlessly.

So how to react? As always in situations of intimacy, the King of Pain resorts to cold analysis and voyeuristic recollections of other people's reactions.

He leans towards the chimeric; now they can speak in whispers. This is why such places exist: cramped space, semi-darkness and noise, all bringing people closer together, imposing conventions of joviality and familiarity, heads drawing closer to heads, lips to lips, eyes to eyes, thoughts to thoughts - now I can tell you what I couldn't tell you before, ask what I shouldn't be asking.

"You don't have a pass from the bishop, or from the Ivanists either, do you?" the King asks calmly. "You're from the North, that's for sure. Young. An idealist. Greenwar? RSC? The Dubliners? You've hacked into these proxies or something, right?"

"Hope gives you a headache, eh?"

"Hope means a lack of experience. Sure, they might unite. But all it takes is one idiot, one argument, one blackmail, one stupid coincidence – and everything will fall apart again."

He doesn't have to paint any fictitious examples for John; they can see it right in front of them - anarkical politics in practice. By now they're already slugging away at each other's mugs.

Associates of the hooded-out bizarromonkey and mulatta have appeared in significant force, more supremacists have appeared, this time on proxies of impressive dimensions, Ivanist reinforcements have arrived, a priest and two nuns have arrived, as well as a band of

bizarromonkeys ridden by the Cthulhists. In the end even Aquim de Neira minced into the room, tearing out his gray beard, while the Marxist-Creationist parrot flapped in with a shriek. Now they're all weltering about in the middle of the bar under the telewall, amid curses and cries of outrage in multiple languages: from time to time somebody falls, they trample over him, he gets up and knocks somebody else down, they smash chairs and tables, glass crunches under their feet. The rest of the guests have fled to the walls and into the corridor; from there they watch, cheering and commentating, taking bets on the outcome of the fight. The crowd of onlookers is growing. Every now and then one or another of them breaks away and with a word or a fist joins the fray, which sucks in ever more participants, like a swelling tornado. And at its center, in the eye of the cyclone, is a single motionless figure: the mulatta stretched out on the table with her butt bared. Anarky diplomacy in living color.

“So what then? It’s just the curse of history?” By now bitterness is pouring out of John with every word; he must realize how ridiculous his arguments sound at this moment. And against ridiculousness even the most ironclad logic is helpless. “That here, and in Africa, and in Lower Asia, sooner or later everything will collapse into chaos anyway. Whereas we’ve been blessed! The empire of the white man grows in power!”

“Of the white man?” The King laughs derisively. He is perfectly familiar with all the conspiracy theories. Genetic assimilation has replaced cultural assimilation: the stases are reprogramming the genomes of immigrant descendants in the image and likeness of whites. Some opinion writers and politicians have gone even further, claiming that this is in fact the fundamental reason for the biostases to exist – the rest is just fabricated pretext and smoke screen. But the King has become too well acquainted with how politics are actually conducted to take seriously any conspiracies more complicated than a campaign of malicious media attacks. In books and films it works, but not in real life – entropy rules here. Entropy: Something Always Fucks Up.

“You really believe that?”

“How can you sit there with your arms folded! Doesn’t the Koran command us to help the weak, to feel compassion for their suffering, to share our riches?”

The King of Pain stiffens.

“And if you could change things?” The chimeric has clasped the King’s arm in an iron grip. “If reversing the course of history and the establishment of justice depended on your decision alone? If you could feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, clothe the naked, heal the sick, put a roof over the homeless? What? Don’t look at me like I’m just another fanatic, I can – ”

“Do you have my dossier?”

“What?”

“Can’t you see that I’m drinking alcohol here?”

John lets the air explode out of his lungs. He straightens and slowly spreads his lips into a mirthless smile. He has pulled his hand away from the King, he stands up. The King of Pain cranes his neck.

“I’ve never seen you pray, uncle,” the giant chimeric murmurs in a bass tone, shifting into Polish, “But that never stopped you spouting the wisdom of the suras at every opportunity. So now – ”

A shot rings out, then a second and a third. Inertia has carried the brawl past the point of no return and now firearms have been drawn. They blast away at each other from close range with fragmenting ammunition.

The external windows of the bar shatter. The sharp scent of the junkle goes straight to the King’s head like the bouquet of an old wine.

A six-year-old supremacist proxy leaps up onto the counter and kills the barman, a bizarromonkey and the chimeric with a long burst of fire from a submachine gun.

Meanwhile Aquim de Neira is dragging himself out from under the bodies of the Ivanists and brandishing a grenade with the pin pulled out over his head. He screams a warning. Nobody pays any attention to him.

The King of Pain drinks his vodka and puts down the glass. The kid shoots him in the head, in the chest, in the stomach.

The Marxist-Creationist parrot circles over the rampaging crowd of brawlers, like a gaudy AG Holy Spirit, flapping its wings hysterically so that the colored feathers scatter through the air, shrieking and squawking:

“Boors! Braggarts! Barbarians! Bandits! Buffoons! Bastards! Bedbugs! Beetrots! Brawl-

ers! Blockheads! Bumpkins! Beasts! Beezlebubs! Bumbrains! Baboons!"

The King of Pain is dragging himself across the floor, drowning in pain and in blood. He would smile sarcastically, but his facial muscles have been severed. And so the one hundred and seventy-eighth round of negotiations between the anarkies of the Open Sky of South America comes to an end before it has really begun.

He recalls de Neira's bet, then suddenly Aquim's scream breaks off and -

-- *KING_OF_PAIN*

connection aborted

Translated by Stanley S. Bill