

Chapter 20

What happened to Frank and Martin on their flight

Aboard the plane, they held forth on the subject of algorithms for some time, and then theorized about the influence of Artificial Intelligence upon flight schedules. Frank and Dr. King finally admitted to each other that neither held any true expertise on either subject. They agreed that Bordeaux was a fine destination, though utterly surprising.

In Shangri-La, Frank had learned to address each person exactly as they preferred in order to grow closer, and glean more wisdom from them. He had called his new friend “Dr. King” five times before he was interrupted with: “Call me Martin.” Frank nodded, acknowledging the honor and giving honor in return.

Frank told Martin the tale of the Uyghur man lying on the ground in the sun wearing heavy clothes, and of all the circumstances that person had suffered. Martin’s journalistic fervor was sparked when Frank mentioned that the Uyghur man had slaved in a sub-standard factory assembling the most expensive and popular American cells. Martin recalled that the parent company had declined to comment when challenged on the specific subject of whether Uyghur people were being used as slave labor in their Xinjiang factories.

Questions and answers and speculations and recollections abounded, and so passed the hours between Kashgar and Bordeaux. In the course of the conversation, Frank observed of himself: “I hope I never lose the deep connection to grace that I felt during my time at the lamasery in Shangri-La. Yet now that I have returned to the broader world, I find my thoughts ever turning to broader things, such as a reunion with Missile-Tits, if she would have it! My dearest hopes drive my thoughts back to Les’s Optimism. It’s a shambles as doctrine, and yet a constant temptation, for it’s the shortest route to my fondest wish!”

Martin looked at Frank with his eyebrows all the way up and his chin on the floor, and blinked one really big blink, and shook his head in dismay. “That must be exactly why this foolishness keeps reappearing!”

Frank put a hand on his knee and smiled and said, “Let’s get some rest.”

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Martin woke Frank some time later, agitated and pointing at his cell, which streamed a news broadcast less than one hour old. A great battle had taken place in the Black Sea; a Russian warship, whose name translated as, “No, YOU go fuck yourself”, had been sunk by Ukraine’s navy. Choppy, distant footage showed a blob of red in the water, moving slowly from the wreckage toward a Ukrainian gunboat.

Amid considerable shouting and pointing, a red-wooled sheep was pulled from the water, towed off, and fed hunks of fishing bait. Selfies of Ukrainian sailors being licked by the sheep abounded. A biopsy was taken, and a great international contest was announced. The first lab to sequence the sheep’s genome, identify the gene or genes for its soft, red wool, and formulate a hypothesis as to the fuzzy creature’s place of origin would receive a sizable grant from The International Wool Textile Organisation.

“Oh, no shit!” said Frank.

“So there really is a Shangri-La?” asked Martin, awe-struck.

Frank looked around at the other passengers. “We’ll talk about it later.” He looked at a selfie of the sheep accepting a hunk of bread from a grinning sailor. “If you can make it back to safety from the wild lands of Xinjiang,” Frank told the picture of the sheep, “I’m sure I can find Missile-Tits again.”