

"My name is Kris, spelled with a capital 'K.' Over the past few days, I've experienced events that have profoundly affected me. I hope my excellent memory will allow me to recount them precisely, in the exact order they unfolded. This is crucial because I am the only participant who knows about them and remembers them. That is, of course, if it's possible to remember what will happen in the coming days. This sounds a bit convoluted, so it's best to start at the beginning—with a new assignment I received from my immediate superior, Otto Schneider.

A little about my job: I work at the Museum of Fine Arts, heading the "Department of Delivery and Evaluation of New Exhibits." Well, "department" is a bit of an exaggeration since I'm its only employee. However, thanks to my work under the direct supervision of Otto Schneider, our museum has, in just the past two years, become one of the world's leading institutions.

Otto Schneider was meticulous in selecting someone for the Delivery Department. Absolute confidentiality is the foundation of our firm's existence and success. Every employee signs a non-disclosure agreement—and it's not just a formality. Among Otto Schneider's staff are psychologists who immediately intervene at the first sign that an employee might divulge something or, worse, expose us to competitors. I was warned about this when signing my employment contract. There are temporary contracts, long-term contracts, and then there's ours—lifetime contracts. There are three causes for dismissal: indiscretion, disrupting the balance of events, or natural death.

In the first two cases, the dismissed employee's memory is entirely erased—or rather, only the part concerning our work at the museum. I break out in a cold sweat when I think about it. I never want to forget my past assignments, nor do I want to give up future ones. That's why I always strive to perform my tasks flawlessly. Besides, a job well done is the cornerstone of our enterprise's success.

We've managed to acquire rare artifacts representing all eras of human development, from the stone tools of early humans to contemporary works of art. We've especially excelled in acquiring historical artifacts, outpacing our competitors in every way. As the head of the Delivery Department, I simply need to show up at the right place at the right time—quite literally, because I am a time traveler. Several centuries ago, a Franciscan monk invented a time machine, the *tempus apparatus*. Driven by his religious zeal, he sought to witness the great prophets and hear their wise words firsthand. But the church fathers were so terrified by this idea that both the monk and his time machine plans simply vanished. No one even gossiped about what might have happened to them. That is, until Otto Schneider accidentally discovered the plans in an old box he'd purchased at a flea market in Florence. The pages with the time machine's designs were hidden among a stack of private letters stored in the box—or so Otto told me during one of our candid conversations about how he came to possess the time machine. Either way, he managed to rebuild it from the plans.

Its existence is a tightly guarded secret. Otto Schneider completely trusts me, and I deeply value my job, which allows me to embark on incredible “business trips,” leaving me with impressions that linger in my phenomenally accurate memory. I’m not prone to gossip and prefer the company of my most agreeable conversation partner—my cat Watson, whom I rescued from a dumpster several years ago. Together, my boss and I make an excellent team, satisfied with each other and the work we do.

One other aspect of my job worth mentioning: I always return to the exact moment I left for the past. This means no one uninitiated ever notices my absence.

As I mentioned earlier, the results of my “business trips” have made our museum one of the most visited in the world. Otto Schneider, always looking to expand our success, decided to open a new paleontology wing showcasing ancient fossilized animals. Naturally, he was eager to acquire previously unknown specimens. He tasked me with thoroughly studying all known species of dinosaurs, ancient reptiles, and other prehistoric creatures whose fossilized remains have been discovered worldwide. It probably goes without saying that I completed the assignment with distinction. Within two weeks, I could have been considered one of the leading experts in paleontology. But there’s no way I’d give up my time-traveling adventures for anything.

I’ll be honest, I was a bit nervous before carrying out my new assignment, as it involved a jump back in time to a hundred million years ago, to the Cretaceous period.

On the one hand, I couldn't wait to see the primitive landscapes, but on the other hand, I was afraid of meeting the voracious dinosaurs whose images I had seen in textbooks. I voiced my concerns to Otto Schneider, sitting in his cozy office, furnished with antique furniture.

"Don't worry about it, Kris," my boss reassured me confidently. "My specialists have developed an invisibility cloak that no dinosaur will see or smell you in. Just don't take it off."

Otto Schneider has many specialists who work independently of each other. I didn't ask him who these specialists were, knowing his preference to keep everything secret. Besides, I had long since convinced myself that they did their work conscientiously.

As for the rest, I was confident I could handle the new assignment. The main rule for behavior during my time travels is: never interfere with the course of events, avoid any emotional contact. I don't stand out in the crowd, and during my "business trips," I make sure to blend in, pretending to be a stranger killing time, strolling around local markets and shops. Or I simply try to disappear into the crowd, where I can, taking advantage of the moment and time, observe great people. I've watched Leonardo da Vinci, lost in thought, walking the streets of Florence. I once mingled with a crowd of ancient Romans, greeting Cleopatra's triumphant entry into Rome. I've watched Napoleon, morally shattered, after the Battle of Waterloo. And at all times, I've never violated our strict code—never spoke to anyone or interfered with anything, to avoid risking altering the course of events and thus disturbing the balance.

Only once did I let my curiosity get the best of me. I was sent to Vienna in July 1791 to acquire exclusive wall clocks made of wood and bronze. The piece was indeed excellent! Naturally, I bought it directly from the master who crafted it. I am always supplied with money that's in circulation during the era I'm visiting. Happy with the assignment well done, I decided to take a stroll through the evening streets of Vienna. I also thought I might walk by the house where Mozart lived, hoping to catch even a glimpse of him. I hid under the awning of a building across the street from Mozart's house. It was already dark, and I was hard to spot, especially since I was wearing a black cloak. One should always dress inconspicuously in a foreign time and place. I tried to peer through the lit window on the first floor, recalling some facts from the biography of this genius composer. I remembered an article about a dark-clad stranger who had ordered a requiem from him, during which Mozart fell seriously ill and died. He believed that the requiem was for him. My curiosity piqued—I wondered if I might spot this mysterious stranger and unravel the centuries-old mystery. But I didn't know exactly which day in July this event occurred.

I crossed the street and approached the well-lit entrance of the composer's house, hoping to at least touch the door of this genius. And, while I was at it, I counted the remaining money after buying the clock. Otto Schneider is frugal in all times. Suddenly, the door swung open, and I saw Mozart's worried face. Surprised, I blurted out:

“Has anyone already ordered a requiem from you?” I was holding a pouch with the remaining money in my left hand. His face immediately turned pale, and after a brief silence, he grabbed my pouch from my hands and slammed the door in my face. A chill ran down my spine, and a terrifying realization exploded in my mind: I had just learned who had ordered the requiem from Mozart!

My legs carried me away in a rush, my heart pounding wildly. Already some distance from the unfortunate composer’s house, terrified by the unexpected ominous order, I stopped to catch my breath. A storm raged in my mind. On the other hand, the story of the mysterious dark-clad stranger existed long before my birth, so the balance of time and events had not been disturbed.

Of course, I kept this secret to myself, sometimes marveling at the twists and turns of time and events.

Even now, my pulse quickens when I recall that day in July. In any case, with dinosaurs, I wouldn’t be tempted to get too close, and if the story with Mozart didn’t disturb the balance, then traveling to extinct animals surely wouldn’t pose any danger to it. So, I didn’t see any risk of altering the balance of events by interfering with those that took place hundreds of millions of years ago.

On the appointed day of my departure, Otto Schneider received me in his office. This was a tradition; after all, the door to the elevator that takes us to the “launch platform” is in his office, behind his desk. I had promised my boss to provide a

detailed account of my impressions of the Cretaceous period upon my return.

Finally, after a quick glance at his antique pocket watch, my boss opened one of the drawers of his desk and pressed a hidden button inside. The wall behind him slid open, revealing the entrance to an elevator. With my heart racing, I rose from my chair and followed Otto Schneider into the elevator, where he carried my miraculous invisibility cloak under his arm. We took the elevator up to the attic, which had been converted into our "launch platform."

The interior walls of the former attic were lined with soundproof material. The space was divided into two sections: a so-called antechamber and the "launch platform" itself. The antechamber contained a changing room and a special disinfecting shower, designed to prevent the inadvertent introduction of bacteria or microbes into the past.

After taking a shower and changing into the invisibility cloak, I entered the next section. At its center stood a medium-sized container on small wheels, resembling the ones used for family picnics. I peeked inside: bottles of water, provisions for a few days, and empty test tubes.

Otto Schneider, now dressed in a white lab coat, emerged from the shower. During both launch and return, it was my boss who operated the time machine. In principle, this task took him only a brief moment—in fact, no time at all. For him, I vanished for less than a split second. The technicians, whose identities I did not know, programmed the duration of my stay in the past,

typically three to four days. Mr. Schneider always informed me of the exact timeframe in advance.

What I appreciated most about these missions was that I wasn't tied to any specific location in the past. Each time, I was equipped with a special marker tuned to the temporal wave frequency of our time machine. All I had to do was swipe the marker over the antique item I retrieved, and our time machine would "pull" it into the present. The process was simple enough, provided I didn't lose the marker.

Otto Schneider's voice interrupted my thoughts:

"I can only see your head floating in midair. I wouldn't be surprised if dinosaurs started going extinct at the sight of this spectacle."

He burst into loud laughter, which I found somewhat inappropriate. But glancing down and realizing my lower body was entirely invisible, I understood the source of his amusement. After all, it's not every day you see a disembodied head moving through the air. One thing was certain—the invisibility cloak worked perfectly! I smiled and straightened up.

"I'll put up the hood to spare our planet's ancient inhabitants from unnecessary stress," I said.

Schneider nodded.

"Are you ready?" he asked. "You've got exactly ten seconds until launch. Good luck!"

His expression grew serious as he placed his hand on the time machine's control lever, which, in reality, was mostly redundant since the technicians had set the machine to

automatic. The lever was intended for unforeseen emergencies, which, thankfully, had never occurred.

I felt a surge of excitement as the countdown to my "jump" into the unknown began. This was no longer a project or an idea—it was happening. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath to steady myself. Excessive nerves could dull my attentiveness and reflexes, which would be dangerous in an unfamiliar environment.

My head spun, and I briefly lost consciousness, likely due to the immense distance of the "jump"—a full hundred million years back in time.

I came to, jolted by a sharp pain in my side, and looked around. I was surrounded by dense ferns, tall enough to conceal me entirely. I was half-lying on the container with my supplies, its sharp corner digging into my side.

I stood up and surveyed my surroundings. My head still felt a little light, but I was overcome by a strange sense of buoyancy. All I could see was a wall of ferns and an astonishingly blue sky above. Taking a deep breath, I caught a scent that was oddly reminiscent of freshly cut grass and cucumbers.

I stood there for a few moments, absorbing the unfamiliar smells and sounds. Somewhere to my left, I heard a faint rustling. Straining to identify the source of the sound, I noticed only a gently swaying fern frond.

I remembered that small but highly intelligent velociraptors hunted in packs, encircling their prey and cutting off any escape

routes. A faint panic seized me, and I pulled up the hood of my invisibility cloak, standing completely still to listen.

Hearing nothing further, I decided it was best to leave the fern grove. Then again, it might not have been a grove but an enormous forest stretching for miles. The prospect of spending a couple of days amidst these giant ferns didn't particularly appeal to me.

I realized I wouldn't accomplish anything by standing still, debating possibilities. Glancing around to choose a direction, I adjusted my hood, which had slipped over my eyes. At that moment, I heard another faint rustle.

I resolved not to panic and instead recalled what I'd read about the behavior of ancient animals. They had an acute sense of smell, and my cloak didn't cover me completely. My face and hands were exposed, making me detectable. Speaking of smells—large carnivorous dinosaurs were said to emit a strong, unpleasant odor. Sniffing the air, I detected nothing of the sort. The only scents were the grass and a faint, unfamiliar aroma that intrigued me.

I was struck by the realization that, according to many studies and theories, flowering plants hadn't yet evolved during this period. I knew I had to find the source of this mysterious fragrance!

The rustling in the ferns grew closer, only to be followed by silence once again. It seemed that something was approaching me in short, cautious bursts. Judging by the sounds, it was just one creature, likely small in size. I tensed slightly, realizing that

this animal was probably tracking me by scent. I would need to devise a way to cover my face and hands completely.

The rustling came even closer, and then I saw it: a small, charming snout poking out, sniffing in the direction of my food container. I watched the creature carefully, trying not to move. As it cautiously investigated the box, I studied it, attempting to identify its species. About the size of a cat, with dark longitudinal stripes along its back and a striped tail, it strongly resembled a *Sinosauroptryx*. However, its snout was shorter, and the stripes appeared black rather than gray. Its glossy dark eyes glistened like beads. Its body was covered in soft, downy feathers, and its small claws were tipped with fine black talons. I slowly leaned toward the container and lifted the lid. Startled, the creature leapt back and hid behind a nearby fern. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw its tail twitching from side to side behind a thick trunk.

After waiting for a while and seeing no further threats, the little animal peeked out from behind the tree. Crouching low, it crept back toward the container. Sitting on its sturdy hind legs, it rested its forepaws on the edge and stretched its neck to peer inside. It hadn't noticed me, which was a relief—it meant I was well-concealed under my invisibility cloak.

In a swift motion, the creature grabbed a packet of biscuits with its sharp little teeth, dropped to the ground, and darted off with quick, bounding movements. Deciding to follow it in hopes of finding a way out of the fern forest, where I felt trapped, I quickly closed the container lid. Grabbing its strap, I began rolling it after me, chasing the little thief.

The stiff leaves of the ferns scratched at my face and hands, catching on the cloak. Determined, I pressed on in the direction the creature had fled, hoping to escape the dense foliage. From what I recalled, Sinosauropteryx preferred open areas, only occasionally venturing into forests. This thought buoyed my spirits, and I quickened my pace.

After several dozen meters, the forest abruptly ended. Panting slightly from the effort, I stopped to take in my surroundings. The landscape oddly reminded me of a rocky desert, despite the patches of fern-like grass and a small cluster of deciduous trees growing some distance away. Recognizing them, I recalled their name: ginkgo trees. These remarkably resilient plants still had descendants in some provinces of China today.

Perhaps it was the reddish tint of the hard, pebble-strewn ground that evoked the image of a desert. However, my immediate concern was finding a safe shelter for the next couple of days. In principle, the forest of tree ferns could serve this purpose—their tough leaves were inedible to herbivorous dinosaurs, and their dense "foliage" would provide good cover in case of a hungry predator.

Making my decision, I dragged my container back a few meters into the forest. Removing my cloak, I was left in just my shorts. I sat down, leaning against the thick, stubby trunk of a tree fern, and turned the cloak inside out to inspect it for any potential damage.

A soft rustle nearby startled me, making me freeze. Scanning my surroundings without moving, I spotted a familiar

snout with bead-like eyes peeking out from behind the container. For several moments, we simply stared at each other in silence.

Gaining confidence and seemingly finding no threat in me, the little creature began scratching at the container lid, trying to open it. Evidently, it had developed a taste for the biscuits. Slowly, careful not to scare my newfound companion, I reached for the lid and opened it. The creature hopped into the container and began exploring its contents.

Worried about my glass vials, which were meant for collecting samples, I leaned over slightly and pulled out the pack of biscuits. Opening it, I took out a couple of pieces and extended them on my outstretched palm toward the visitor. The little animal froze, watching me intently. Then, cautiously, it stretched its snout forward and, in one swift motion, grabbed the biscuit from my hand with its teeth. It disappeared as quickly as it had come, leaving behind a damp spot from its cold, black nose on my palm.

I remembered the story of Robinson Crusoe, who, stranded on a deserted island, found a companion whom he named Friday after the day of their meeting. Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing the day of the week in the age of dinosaurs, or even the month. After some thought, I decided to name my guest **Pteryx curiosus** – "the curious pteryx." For simplicity, I decided to call him **Curious**.

Taking a test tube and cotton swabs from the container, I began collecting samples. I felt incredibly fortunate — within just a few hours of my arrival in this era, I had already been

able to gather biological material from a creature that was not only extinct in my time but also unknown to science. And such an adorable one at that! Dipping a swab into a vial of distilled water, I wiped it across my palm where Curious's nose had touched me. I sealed the swab in a test tube, labeled it "*Pteryx Curiosus*," and marked it with a temporal tag. The test tube immediately vanished, starting its journey millions of years into the future.

This was a significant achievement. The lab would extract DNA from Curious's sample, and this discovery would greatly benefit our project. I imagined my boss, Otto Schneider, beaming with satisfaction. I was already planning how to discuss a pay raise with him upon my return.

Feeling encouraged by my progress, I turned to collect other samples: soil, air, and even a couple of dried leaves from the tree ferns. I labeled and marked each specimen, sending them to Otto as well.

After drinking some water, I finally examined my invisibility cloak. Thankfully, there wasn't a scratch on it. Mentally, I thanked its developers for their meticulous craftsmanship. The cloak also had roomy inner pockets — another reason to admire Otto's talent for assembling a skilled team.

I decided to leave my shelter and explore the surroundings. Packing a few water bottles, some rations, and my marker into the cloak's pockets, I put it on and carefully stepped out of the forest.

I left the equipment container safely hidden under the protection of the tree ferns. Its casing housed a built-in sensor that allowed the time machine to locate and retrieve it later. As I emerged into open terrain, I glanced up at the sky. Overhead, a pair of pterodactyls glided gracefully. Somewhere in the distance, I heard sounds resembling the clucking of giant chickens, which soon faded into silence. It seemed that larger animals had sought shelter from the searing heat. My cloak shielded me from the scorching sun, with the hood providing extra protection.

While walking, I was drawn to a strong scent I had first noticed back in the forest. It seemed to come from a mysterious plant. After taking a few steps, I spotted large green bushes. As I approached, my suspicions were confirmed. Above vibrant blue flowers surrounded by spiny leaves, giant insects swarmed. The aroma was so intense that I felt slightly dizzy. I observed the plant closely. The flowers resembled enormous blue mouths lined with small spikes. To my surprise, a large dragonfly with translucent wings flew into one of the blossoms, which immediately snapped shut, swallowing the curious insect whole. I even recoiled in shock.

Surrounded by the powerful scent of this carnivorous flower, I tried to place what it reminded me of. Oregano! Yes, oregano, but much stronger, spicier, with a hint of decay.

I bent down and picked up a couple of fallen petals, carefully sealing them in a test tube. After some thought, I decided to name this plant *Origanum Giganticus Carnivorus* – “Giant Carnivorous Oregano.” Labeling the test tube, I marked it with

the temporal tag, and it disappeared, heading to the distant future.

I was pleased with my progress. In a relatively short time in the Cretaceous period of the Mesozoic era, I had already sent my boss remarkable specimens. And all without exposing myself to danger.

I decided to celebrate my success with a brief rest. After all, when else would I have the chance to enjoy a picnic amidst a landscape that existed a hundred million years before I was born? Looking around, I headed toward a cluster of ginkgo trees whose inviting shade seemed perfect. Approaching one, I removed my cloak and settled into the cool shade, sitting on the ground and leaning against its trunk. Taking a sip of water, I placed the bottle beside me and pulled out a packet of dried meat. However, I hesitated to eat it, worried that its scent might attract predators. For now, I decided to stick to biscuits.

Sitting beneath the ancient tree and marveling at the prehistoric scenery, I reflected on the unique privileges of my work, which allowed me to embark on such extraordinary journeys through time. Never could I have dreamed of this back when I first got the job of a tour guide at the "Museum of Ancient Art."

Excursions near and far... And amphibians too... My thoughts tangled, and before I knew it, I had dozed off.

Through my sleep, I felt something brushing against me — a hand, it seemed, reaching down and fumbling beside me. I stirred uneasily, and just as I woke, I caught a glimpse of a dark hand clutching my water bottle before disappearing into the foliage above.

I barely had time to feel surprised or alarmed when the air was suddenly pierced by loud, terrifying cries, and a massive shadow swept over the ground between the ginkgo tree and the tree-fern forest. I looked up and saw several enormous birds flying low and shrieking noisily. Their immense black wings blocked half the sky, and their cries sent chills down my spine. I recognized them from descriptions: **Harpactognathus** — carnivorous birds that wouldn't shy away from scavenging. They had likely caught the scent of a meal and were heading there to feast. Instinctively, I pressed myself flat against the ground, throwing my protective cloak over myself to blend into the landscape.

Lying there, I listened as the birds' raspy, menacing cries gradually faded into the distance. After a few more cautious minutes, I peeked out from under the cloak and scanned my surroundings. Seeing no immediate danger, I exhaled in relief and resumed my seat against the tree.

After some thought, I decided to follow in the direction the Harpactognathus birds had flown, hoping to find the remains of their prey — something I could send to my boss.

Double-checking the contents of my inner pockets, I ensured that my labeled test tubes were intact. Satisfied, I fastened my cloak tightly. "In this invisibility cloak, nothing can see or smell you," Otto Schneider had assured me before my departure. Well, it was time to put that claim to the test. Pulling the hood over my face, I began heading toward where the birds had disappeared.

I skirted the enormous *Origanum Giganticus*, around which countless giant insects still buzzed, lured by its overpowering scent. As I continued, I noticed the smell of decay growing stronger, confirming that I was on the right path.

A low-flying predatory bird passed above me, casting a massive shadow and letting out a grating, guttural cry. Instinctively, I ducked and froze in place. My heart raced as I crouched there, listening.

Taking a deep breath, I exhaled slowly, calming my nerves. Of course, I could wait a few hours until the hungry birds had had their fill, but I feared the onset of nightfall. Who knew what monstrous creatures might emerge to hunt under cover of darkness? At least in daylight, I could spot potential dangers and find a place to hide.

Relying solely on my invisibility cloak felt reckless. Convincing myself of this with measured reasoning, I moved forward. The stench grew stronger, clinging to me like an unwelcome shroud. Ahead, about fifty meters away, I glimpsed a cluster of fern bushes. Above them, enormous black birds jostled and shrieked, their harsh cries echoing in the air. A grim smile crossed my face as I thought of how long these creatures had been extinct in my time. It's not that I disliked animals, but I could certainly do without meeting airborne man-eaters. Just to be safe, I decided to crawl the rest of the way. The cloak might hide me, but an extra dose of caution wouldn't hurt. Moving slowly along the ground, I pinched my nose to escape the overpowering stench. However, crawling while holding my

nose proved awkward, so I abandoned the attempt and focused on breathing shallowly through my mouth.

I stopped a few meters short of the fern thicket. A massive, toothy beak was tearing a chunk of flesh from the carcass of a fallen dinosaur. My gaze locked on the yellow eye with its crimson pupil of one of the monstrous predatory birds. The ferns concealed its legs, but its long, muscular tail, covered in sparse, stiff feathers, was unmistakable.

I began to doubt the wisdom of my plan. Any sound, any rustle of the ferns, could give me away. One strike from that powerful beak, and my skull would be reduced to shards. I pressed myself against the ground, weighing my options. To be honest, spending the night here no longer seemed appealing—no matter how exotic the experience might be. Being so close to the inhabitants of this distant past filled me with a deep sense of vulnerability, as if I were a mere pawn in the grand scheme of fate. Even the idea of retreating to the forest of tree ferns felt fraught with peril. Darkness was approaching, and I had no idea what nocturnal predators might emerge once night fell.

Summing up my thoughts, I resolved to take the risk of retrieving at least one bone from under the claws of these birds, but not without a fallback plan. My time-marker, linked to the machine, would be my safety net. If things took a turn for the worse, I'd swipe it across my arm and escape.

Lying flat on the ground, I carefully unfastened my cloak. Slowly, so as not to make a sound, I reached into the inner pocket to retrieve the marker with my right hand. Moving with

the utmost caution, I transferred it to my left hand, keeping my right free for the task ahead: quickly pulling a piece of the carcass toward me before using the marker to make my escape.

I knew I couldn't risk bringing one of the Harpactognathus birds back to the future. Otto Schneider wouldn't even have time to be surprised before the consequences unfolded. Besides, the rules were clear: no living organisms could be brought forward, lest the course of history be disrupted. I identified a partially exposed leg bone protruding from the ferns and began to reach for it. My fingers were mere inches from their target when a piercing scream erupted beside me, sharp enough to rattle my senses.

I turned my head just in time to see a Pteryx, much like my acquaintance Curious—or perhaps it was Curious himself. Caught in the talons of a monstrous bird, the creature flailed desperately, fighting for its life. It must have been drawn by the scent of carrion, hoping to snatch a morsel, only to fall victim to one of the larger predators.

The scene unfolded in a heartbeat. Without thinking, I grabbed a large, half-gnawed bone from the thicket and swung it at the Harpactognathus holding its new prey. Simultaneously, I swiped the marker across my arm.

The fern thicket vanished, replaced by the dense woods of my time. My temporal journey had begun, but as I hurtled through the currents of time, one thought haunted me: What had become of Curious? Would I ever know his fate?

For reasons I couldn't explain, tears welled up in my eyes. Perhaps it was the weight of stress and the whirlwind of emotions I'd just endured.

Relief washed over me as I found myself back in the attic of the Museum—the familiar launch platform beneath my feet. My silent thanks went to the technicians who had brought me home from such a far-flung adventure. Turning, I spotted Otto Schneider, standing with his back to me, dressed in his signature white lab coat, his hand still gripping the lever of the time machine. Through blurred eyes, he seemed taller and thinner than usual.

"We brought you back, Kris. Good boy," he said, his voice unusually high-pitched as he turned toward me.

His smile froze as our eyes met, and I caught my breath. Fine silvery feathers covered his face, and his round black eyes widened in fear. He was staring not at me but at the bone I still held in my hand.

"Kris was eaten, and this is all that's left of him," he murmured, his voice trembling with profound sorrow.

He reached for the bone, but I instinctively pulled it away. Panic erupted as he let out a cry. The thought hammered in my mind: "Curious survived. The Pteryxes have multiplied." "A few more 'pteryxes' dressed in white coats ran into the room, all clad in white coats, their dark, elongated fingers reaching for the bone. Frozen in place, I struggled to make sense of the scene.

Sweat beaded on my brow. With my free hand, I unfastened the invisibility cloak and threw back the hood.

A heavy silence descended upon the room, followed by a cacophony of voices. I felt a sharp prick at the base of my neck and lost consciousness.

I awoke in a stark white room. I tried to move, but my body was restrained—strapped to a bed by wide belts. I was clad only in shorts, uncovered by any blanket. My hands, thankfully, were free.

Touching the back of my neck, I felt a small lump, likely from a needle. Clearly, they'd sedated me.

I needed to collect my thoughts. Alone in this surreal, unfamiliar world, I refused to succumb to panic. Time was precious, and I intended to use it to piece together what had happened and what to do next.

To begin with, this entire situation arose because of my own actions. So, what exactly happened? On assignment from my boss, Otto Schneider, I embarked on a journey to the distant past—a hundred million years ago. I was entrusted with this "trip" as an experienced time traveler, well-versed in adhering to the rules. The most important rule is clear: do not interfere with the course of events. And what did I do? I saved a prehistoric creature from certain death, a creature I named "Curious." In doing so, I broke not one, but two rules. First, I established emotional contact with an inhabitant of the past. Second, I interfered with the natural course of events.

I was honest with myself—I knew I couldn't have acted differently. And now, here we are. And where are we? Facing a group of highly intelligent and deeply frightened Pteryxes. I decided to put myself in their place. To understand what they

saw and why they were so terrified. Let's begin with the facts: they—whom I've started calling Pteryxes in my head—have a time machine. They were expecting someone named Kris to return from the past. If I heard correctly, the Pteryx I initially mistook for Otto Schneider literally said: "*Calm down, Kris. Good boy.*" I have an excellent memory, nearly photographic when it comes to facts, so I'm certain I didn't mishear.

Then "Otto" the Pteryx saw the bone. But he didn't see me—naturally, because I was wearing my invisibility cloak. My sudden appearance on the launch platform without the cloak must have deeply shocked them. This means they don't have invisibility cloaks and weren't expecting me.

At this point, my thoughts stumbled. I realized how exhausted I was, and before I knew it, I had drifted off to sleep.

I woke suddenly, sensing another presence in the room. A Pteryx in a white coat was sitting on a tall stool beside my bed. His long, fluffy tail, peeking out from beneath the stool, was nervously tapping the floor. Seeing that I'd opened my eyes, he leaned forward and, carefully enunciating each word, almost syllable by syllable, said:

"Good day. Who are you?"

At the same time, he gestured with his hands, waving them in front of my face as if reinforcing his words.

I wanted to reply, but my throat was parched. Instead, I repeated the gesture he had used to indicate "Good day." The Pteryx gave me a hesitant smile and asked again, this time both aloud and in sign language:

"Are you Kris?"

I simply nodded. By an extraordinary coincidence, my name also happened to be Kris—the same name as the one they had been expecting.

“I am Doctor Kurio. Do you recognize me?”

I licked my dry lips. He noticed this and got up from the stool. Walking over to a sink in the corner of the room, he filled a glass with water. Returning to me, he carefully brought the glass to my lips. I clasped it with both hands and drank greedily. Looking at Kurio’s friendly yet cautious face, covered in soft, light feathers, I quietly said:

“Thank you.”

For some reason, this simple word had the effect of a bomb going off. He suddenly jumped back, his tail flailing wildly. His round, black eyes were wide with amazement. It was as if he were staring at an alien that had appeared out of nowhere. He stretched out a thin, dark hand with long fingers toward me, then quickly pulled it back and left the room in a hurry.

Once again, I was alone. It seemed I had frightened Doctor Kurio by speaking. He accepted sign language as natural, but not speech. Was the other Kris—the one they had expected—deaf? Or could he communicate only through gestures?

I had no idea what to do next. Memories of my previous returns flooded my mind—cozy evenings at home, sitting with my Watson. The thought of my cat filled me with indescribable longing. For the first time, I fully realized how alone I was in this altered world.

My sorrowful thoughts were interrupted by the return of Doctor Kurio, now accompanied by two other Pteryxes, also

dressed in white coats. I could now distinguish Kurio by the neat part in the feathers on his head and his slightly pinkish nose. For some reason, I trusted him.

Unexpectedly, I said to him:

“I miss my cat. His name is Watson. He’s my friend.”

Immediately, I felt embarrassed for revealing such a personal vulnerability. On the other hand, what did I have to lose? Afraid of provoking another strong reaction to my words, I turned my head away.

To my surprise, I felt Kurio’s hand on my shoulder. His voice, suddenly filled with excitement, declared:

“It’s Kris! Hairless and with speech, but it’s Kris!”

Then, in a calming tone, he added, “I’ll take you home soon, don’t worry.” Almost out of habit, he also used sign language. “Your cat is fine. I’ll take care of him while you’re here.”

“And how long will I have to stay here?” I asked timidly.

Another Pteryx stepped forward, shorter than Doctor Kurio but broader in the shoulders.

“We need to take some samples for analysis and conduct a few medical examinations, if you understand what I mean.”

He studied me with excessive curiosity before slapping his forehead as if something had just occurred to him.

“Now that you’re without fur, you must be cold. I’ll arrange for a blanket to be brought to you.” After a brief hesitation, he added, “And perhaps something to eat as well.”

During this conversation, curious faces kept peeking into the room where I lay, some with feathers on their heads sticking

up in disarray. I could hear them whispering, “It’s Kris. Fur-less Kris.”

I also frequently heard the sound of many tails tapping against the floor, which I gathered was how Pteryxes expressed their emotions.

Doctor Kurio asked everyone to leave the room, gently nudging some of them in the back.

“He’s tired—can’t you see?” he chided.

Finally, after closing the door behind the last onlooker, the first thing he did was unfasten the straps that had secured me to the bed.

“We didn’t know what we were dealing with, so we decided to err on the side of caution,” he explained apologetically.

“But you left my hands free. I could have attacked you,” I pointed out.

Doctor Kurio straightened up, folding his arms across his chest.

“That was my idea. So I could talk to you. And now I’m trying not to rely on sign language,” he said, lowering his gaze to his crossed arms.

“Very strange sensations,” he added quietly, as if speaking to himself.

I sat up on the bed, letting my feet dangle to the floor. My head buzzed with questions, but my intuition told me it was better to listen rather than ask for now. Besides, I didn’t want to accidentally alarm Doctor Kurio again—he was starting to earn my sympathy.

“If you want, you can stand up and stretch your muscles,” the doctor interrupted my thoughts. “Your medical examination will begin any minute now.”

He sat on a stool beside me and took my hand.

“Whatever happened to you back there in the past, you’re still my Kris, my little primate. Don’t forget that,” he said. He squeezed my hand and quickly left the room.

I suddenly felt like an imposter, occupying someone else’s place.

Б. Luckily, I didn’t have long to dwell on my guilt. The door swung open again, and a stocky Pteryx entered, carrying a blanket under his arm. Smiling encouragingly, he draped the blanket over me and checked my pulse.

“Your meal will be brought shortly,” he said matter-of-factly. I wasn’t hungry, which I told him. For some reason, he nodded in apparent satisfaction.

There’s no point in describing what happened next in detail. Let’s just say they took every possible sample from me, passing me through a massive scanner along the way. After all the procedures, I wanted only one thing: to sleep—and then, as soon as possible, to see Watson again. The thought of him was the only thread connecting me to my home, to my world. Reason told me that because of my actions, the world as I knew it had changed, but an inner voice urged me to withhold judgment. Or perhaps it was just my optimism. I didn’t dwell on it further—I fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke, Doctor Kurio was sitting on the stool beside me. Noticing that I'd opened my eyes, he smiled warmly, revealing small white teeth.

"How are you feeling, Kris?" he asked, instinctively repeating the question in sign language. At the same time, he observed me intently.

I asked him when I would be allowed to leave the hospital.

"Now," he replied simply. "As the Director of the Institute of Time, I have the authority to make decisions that no one here would dare challenge."

"The Institute of Time," I whispered. A whole scientific organization. That explained the numerous staff members in white coats and the fully equipped medical center. These thoughts flashed through my mind in quick succession. Doctor Kurio carefully watched my reaction. He seemed more pensive, even somber, than during our previous encounters. I noticed that his tail hung limply over the edge of the stool, motionless and forlorn.

"I brought you some clothes, Kris," he said, emphasizing my name. "And we still need to settle some formalities," he added, running his long, dark fingers with curved nails through the grayish feathers on his head.

It was only then that I noticed the bundle of clothing lying at the foot of the bed.

"I'll wait for you outside," he added and left the room, gently closing the door behind him.

I donned the long toga, contemplating his reserved demeanor. He had probably started to suspect the truth of the

situation, which made my task of confessing it easier—a task I had already resolved to undertake.

The light green toga, with its golden clasp at the shoulder, was too large for me, so I tightened the belt with its matching golden fringe as much as I could. Next to the bed, I found a pair of sandals that fit me perfectly. I wished there were a mirror in the room—it would have been fascinating to see myself dressed in what resembled ancient Roman attire.

Dr. Kurio was waiting for me, as promised, in the corridor outside. When he saw me, he placed his hands on my shoulders, gently pushed me back to get a better look, and studied me with curiosity. The fine, fluffy feathers beneath his slightly elongated, faintly pink nose twitched, and the corners of his thin black lips curled upward. Suppressing a smile, he said: “Come, Kris, I’ll show you my office.”

We walked down long, wide corridors with high ceilings. Some of the many doors lining both sides of the hallway were ajar, and I tried to peek inside. But it was impossible to see much, as Dr. Kurio moved briskly—almost hopping—and I had to hurry to keep up with him.

Along the way, we passed several employees of the ‘Institute of Time. Whenever they saw me, they smiled for some reason and looked at me with a kind of endearing fondness. I couldn’t help thinking that this was how people might gaze at an adorable animal dressed in human clothing. I overheard someone whisper, “Kris in clothes—how cute!”

Finally, we reached a set of large double doors, which slid open to admit us into a room with enormous panoramic windows. I

entered hesitantly, still catching my breath from our fast-paced walk through the corridors.

Slowly, I approached the windows, which were lined with massive potted plants. The flowers on them were about five times the size of any I had seen before. Inhaling their fragrance, I felt a sense of awe.

Walking across the plush carpet that covered the entire floor of the spacious office, I approached the windows. My heart raced—perhaps still from the recent dash—as I prepared to glimpse a world I couldn't have imagined until recently. Closing my eyes for a moment, I then opened them to take in the view. The sky outside was overcast, with a light drizzle falling. Below me, I saw the tops of green trees, suggesting we were in a multi-story building—perhaps even a skyscraper. The roads below intersected at various angles, forming intricate patterns. I saw colorful buildings with rounded domes for roofs and a great abundance of trees.

I stood at the window for a long time, trying to imprint the scenery into my memory. I liked what I saw.

Finally, I remembered I wasn't alone. Reluctantly tearing my gaze from the window, I looked around.

To my left, Dr. Kurio sat at a large round table, watching me with a smile. A stack of papers lay in front of him. For a moment, he reminded me of my boss, Otto Schneider.

"I like the view from the window, too," he said.

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I simply smiled faintly in response.

“Take a seat next to me,” Dr. Kurio said, indicating a stool to his right.

After I sat down at the round table, Dr. Curio slid a steaming cup of some beverage toward me.

“This is sakita, infused with herbs. My wife, Lada, prepares a thermos of it for me every morning. Sakita boosts energy and improves circulation.”

He fell silent, watching as I cautiously sipped the dark green liquid. It had a pleasant, tangy taste, faintly reminiscent of mint. I took several sips, feeling a comforting warmth spread through my stomach.

“The sakita is delicious—thank you,” I said sincerely. Dr. Kurio nodded in satisfaction but immediately grew serious, clasping his thin hands together on the table. I realized the serious part of our conversation was about to begin and prepared to listen attentively.

“Kris, as you understand, we’re in a situation that requires immediate resolution,” he began.

“Dr. Kurio, I need to explain...,” I started, but he raised a hand, signaling me to stop.

“You are a sentient being, aware of your needs and actions. To clarify the situation, we must become true partners. From today, you are part of our team.”

He looked at me intently with his large, round black eyes. I felt it was better not to explain anything just yet. He pushed the stack of papers toward me, turning them so I could read. It was an employment contract, issued in the name of Kris Sapiens Rationalis. I couldn’t help but smile.

“By becoming our employee, you will take part in our discussions on a basis of mutual honesty. We need each other, Kris.”

He was absolutely right—we did need each other. I signed the contract, carefully writing out my new name: Sapiens Rationalis. I liked the way it sounded. Dr. Kurio sighed with relief.

“That’s all for now. Your invisibility cloak is with our specialists—it’s a good idea, by the way. We’ll try to replicate it.”

He rose from his stool and, with a tired smile, said:

“Let’s save the rest of the conversation for later. For now, let’s go home. Come, Kris.”

He picked up a small black plastic box with a button on it from the table. Pressing the button, he revealed a sliding wall behind him, which opened to reveal a spacious elevator. Within seconds, it carried us down to a large garage with a domed roof. Even the car parked there had rounded shapes. I mused philosophically that the pteryxes seemed to avoid sharp corners in everything.

The seats in this vehicle had backrests, which surprised me a little. But then I noticed circular openings in them, presumably for the convenience of tails.

The ride in this vehicle was very pleasant. It moved smoothly, with wheels softly rustling against the wet asphalt. I gazed out of the window, observing passersby and streets, trying to capture images of this new and unexplored world in my memory. But to be honest, I did it more out of obligation, as my thoughts were entirely consumed with the upcoming reunion

with my cat Watson. Some might find this frivolous, considering the situation I was in, but I was genuinely urging the vehicle forward in my mind.

I watched colorful cars passing by, pedestrians in long hooded togas, and children playing near the roadside, bouncing on long, powerful tails.

What stood out most were the numerous statues—not only of pteryx figures who had evidently achieved great things but also sculptural groups depicting trees with large birds perched on them or wild animals resting after the midday heat. Marveling at what I saw, my heart was still pounding in anticipation of seeing my friend, my cat. The phrase Dr. Kurio had spoken kept echoing in my head: “Your cat is fine, don’t worry.” This implied that the other Kris, the one who communicated using sign language, also had a cat being cared for. Could it really be Watson too? Given all the coincidences so far, it seemed entirely possible.

Impatiently, I shifted in my seat. Dr. Kurio, who had remained delicately silent throughout the ride, noticed my restlessness and said:

“We’ll be there soon, Kris. Just a little longer.”

Indeed, within minutes, we turned onto a side road flanked by trees on both sides. Shortly after, we arrived at a tall gate, whose panels smoothly opened, allowing us to pass through. An enormous park stretched out before us, the grass appearing especially green under the rain. Various structures dotted the landscape, seamlessly integrated into the scenery. Ahead, the main building came into view, its facade entirely covered in ivy

or some other climbing plant. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I caught some movement near a small structure resembling a hut. Pressing against the car's side window to see better, I realized—it was a cat!

Perhaps all the tension of recent events had finally caught up with me, because I lost my patience—a rare occurrence for me—and frantically tugged at the door handle, ready to leap out of the car. Dr. Kurio placed a calming hand on my shoulder and steered the car gently toward the hut. The car door opened, and I could no longer hold myself back. I ran toward the hut, arms outstretched toward the cat. My heart raced even faster when I saw that it truly was Watson.

Apparently, he didn't recognize me or was startled by my sudden appearance, as he backed away slightly, crouching in confusion. To avoid scaring him further, I slowly extended my hand, palm up. The cat cautiously stretched out his nose, sniffed my hand, stretched again, yawned deeply, and stood up, rubbing against my legs. He recognized me!

Looking back, I can say that this was one of the most emotionally intense moments of my life in the world of pteryxes. I picked him up, held him close, and listened to the sound of his purring.

Dr. Kurio's voice brought me back to reality:

"I've arranged for this hut to be adapted to your new needs."

He spoke softly, clearly moved by my reunion with Watson. So this was where Kris—the primate—lived with his cat. Still holding Watson, who had made himself comfortable in my arms, I stepped into the wooden hut, which was divided into

three sections. Just beyond the entrance was a room with a large window overlooking the lawn. Below the window stood a desk with a computer. I wasn't surprised; I'd already surmised that the pteryx civilization was on roughly the same level of development as ours. Against one wall stood a cozy sofa adorned with several cushions and a blanket. Watson jumped from my arms and immediately hopped onto the sofa, curling up on the blanket.

On the right wall were two doors leading to a small kitchenette with a refrigerator and a bathroom.

I turned to Dr. Kurio, who was watching me intently.

"Is everything alright, Kris?" he asked.

I nodded affirmatively. "Yes, thank you, Doctor."

He hesitated before adding:

"We found an opened pack of cookies in your coat pockets. My wife kindly bought a variety of cookies at my request. Take a look and let me know if they're not to your liking."

I was touched by the doctor's thoughtfulness and told him so.

He left me to rest and recover.

"We'll meet tomorrow at my place to discuss everything," he said, patting me on the shoulder. He seemed on the verge of saying more but thought better of it.

Left alone with Watson, my first order of business was to inspect the kitchen and check the food supplies. I knew that I would need to stay in the world of pteryxes for some time. To restore balance, it would be necessary to send me back to exactly the same day and moment, a hundred million years

ago, when I interfered in the events by saving Curious. This required calibrating the time machine appropriately—a challenging task for such a massive “jump” into the past. Besides, the question remained: what would happen to the world of pteryxes? And what was happening now in my world, the world of humans? And where was “their” Kris?

Since I preferred to tackle problems step by step rather than all at once, I focused on inspecting the kitchen for the moment. “Kitchen” was an apt description for this part of the hut: it featured a small table covered with cans of food, packets of cat food, and boxes of cookies. The small fridge, tucked under the table, contained water and soda. We wouldn’t starve, and that was a relief. Next to the table was a water dish and a plate with remnants of cat food.

Satisfied with what I saw, I cleaned up in the sink near the bathroom, first shedding my toga and remaining in just my shorts.

I felt very tired and was grateful to Dr. Kurio for leaving me alone with my Watson.

The rest of the day I spent with my cat, rejoicing in the fact that I had him back. I didn’t even notice when dusk fell. Settling on the couch next to Watson, I fell asleep, momentarily pushing aside all other problems.

The sun was shining straight into my eyes through the window when I woke up. Watson was no longer on the couch. I could hear his demanding meows coming from the kitchen. I hurried there joyfully to fill his bowl with cat food.

All things considered, life wasn’t too bad for me in this world:

I had work, a home, and my beloved pet. The only thing I could use would be a shave. I ran my hand over the stubble growing on my face. I was never a fan of beards, and daily shaving had been part of my routine. I thought to myself that this might become an issue, as the feathered pteryxes didn't need shaving tools. Or did they? I'd have to look into that.

I stepped out of my hut and stretched lazily. The rain had stopped, and everything around me glowed in a bright emerald hue. I felt well-rested and refreshed. Watson, having finished his hearty breakfast, rubbed against my legs and set off for a walk around the surroundings.

From the direction of the main house, Dr. Kurio's residence, a pteryx in a light blue toga with a pink pattern approached me. For some reason, I immediately knew this was a woman. She moved gracefully, her fluffy tail swaying in rhythm with her movements, the tip adorned with glitter. She came closer, smiling widely and revealing small white sparkling teeth.

"Kris, is that you? It's me, Lada," she said, simultaneously signing it in sign language. She studied me, as though trying to make up her mind. I looked at the pink-feathered fluff on her head and her long nails painted the same shade of pink. I didn't respond, not knowing what to say. After all, this was both me and not me at the same time. After an awkward silence, she invited me to breakfast. We made our way toward the large house with a red, round roof. The entire short walk, Lada stayed beside me, her gaze fixed on my face, turning her head to study me.

The house we entered was immense—huge hallways, wide

doors, broad staircases, and panoramic windows. Lada led me upstairs, where we turned right and walked through open doors into a bright room. What caught my eye immediately was the large number of photographs framed and hanging on the walls. Noticing my curiosity, Lada walked over to one of them and beckoned me to join her.

The photograph depicted Dr. Kurio, his wife Lada, and Kris standing between them, embracing them around their shoulders. I instantly recognized him. The resemblance to me was uncanny. Well, if you added some fur on my body, a heavier jaw, and more pronounced brow ridges. He was smiling cheerfully at the camera, his lower lip pushed forward. I was astonished by how much he looked like me. This was exactly how I would look if I were a pithecanthropus. I couldn't take my eyes off the photograph.

"My husband Kurio found you, well, Kris, near a small village in Africa, where he was working on an excavation site," Lada began explaining, placing her well-manicured hand on my shoulder in a familiar manner. "You were very small and very hungry. He brought you home, and since then, we've hardly ever been apart."

Dr. Kurio's arrival interrupted her story. He looked somewhat downcast and tired, as if he hadn't slept all night. I felt a bit guilty about that, realizing that it was my thoughtless actions that had led us all into this incredibly tangled situation. With a deliberately upbeat voice, Dr. Kurio shook his ruffled feathers on his head and said:

“I’m terribly hungry, let’s have breakfast! We’ll need our strength for what’s ahead!”

Setting an example for Lada and me, he leaped high into the air, skillfully using his strong tail as a spring, and landed gracefully by the table laden with fruit salads, which stood by the window offering a breathtaking view of the lush green lawn stretching out in front of the house. I wasn’t prepared for the sight of Dr. Kurio bouncing around, and my confusion must have shown on my face because Lada lightly nudged me in the side and pulled me by the sleeve toward the table.

Honestly, I would have liked something meatier, but I didn’t dare say anything, not wanting to appear barbaric. It was entirely possible that the pteryxes were vegetarians, although their ancestors certainly didn’t shy away from meat—I’d seen that myself. Or maybe it was simply their custom to have fruit for breakfast. Or perhaps Dr. Kurio, feeling conscientious, adhered to vegetarianism. In any case, I thought it best to remain silent, thoughtfully picking at the fruit slices with my fork. Dr. Kurio, observing me from across the table, said:

“Kris, I understand your concerns, but please, have some fruit. After breakfast, we’ll have plenty to discuss.”

Following his advice, I ate a few slices of the juiciest, most delicious melon.

After a while, Lada rose from the table and, citing some urgent matters, discreetly left me alone with Dr. Kurio. Remaining seated on my stool, I silently waited for Dr. Kurio to gather his thoughts. I, too, was deep in contemplation, realizing that the time had come to ask questions.

Dr. Kurio stood up from his seat and suggested that we take a walk.

"I've spent too much time within the walls of the Institute, and a breath of fresh air would do you good as well."

As we headed toward the doors, he paused by one of the photographs hanging on the wall. Turning his head toward me, he broke into a smile.

"This was one of the happiest moments of my life," he said, pointing at the picture.

I stepped closer to examine it. The photo depicted Dr. Kurio and his wife Lada with their fluffy tails intertwined, embracing a large egg speckled with dark spots.

"A week ago, Lada laid the egg in the city incubator. We're expecting an addition to our family," he explained. Then, his expression darkened slightly, and the feathers beneath his pinkish nose drooped. "I wouldn't want our offspring's future to be at risk."

My heart sank, sensing that Dr. Kurio saw me as a potential threat. I remained silent, as I often did when I didn't know what to say.

We then made our way outside, Dr. Kurio striding with large steps, steering himself with his tail, while I practically had to jog to keep up.

Crossing the lawn in front of the house, we turned onto a sandy path leading to a picturesque gazebo surrounded by flower beds. Slowing our pace at the entrance, we stepped inside and settled on the wide seats arranged in a circle around

a small fountain. I got the impression that the pteryxes valued nature and open spaces.

Catching my breath, I looked at Dr. Kurio, who was studying me intently.

Mmm"I've often wondered what Kris would have looked like if primates had developed into a civilization. Now I know," he said. Then, without pause, he continued:

"My colleagues and I have come to the conclusion that you belong to another world. No short-term radiation or mutation could result in such a transformation. And then there's your invisibility cloak. Tell me, is your name really Kris?"

He asked the last question with a kind of hidden anticipation. For some reason, it seemed very important to him.

"My name really is Kris," I replied. "And my cat Watson is indistinguishable from your Kris's cat." I mentioned Watson because I felt it was necessary. These coincidences were too significant to ignore.

"That cat of yours has me thoroughly confused," Dr. Kurio admitted with a smile. "Kris found him somewhere nearby as a tiny, starving kitten. He brought him to his hut and was very attached to him." He fell silent, a touch of sadness in his voice, likely remembering his lost primate friend.

After a brief pause, he asked:

"Do we, the pteryxes, exist in your world?"

I answered honestly:

"By our time, your kind has gone extinct. Your ancient ancestors weren't even known to our science. I was the first to discover one of them a hundred million years ago."

"I don't like your world," Dr. Kurio concluded simply. "And what exactly happened a hundred million years ago that brought you to us?"

I took a deep breath before beginning my story. I told him about our Museum, the new paleontology department, and the decision to send me back a hundred million years to discover new specimens of extinct plants and animals. I recounted my encounter with Curious—as I had named him—and how I struck a predatory bird with a bone to save him from its sharp claws. I also mentioned my marker, which had brought me back to the present—though, as it turned out, to a present inhabited by the descendants of the very Curious I had saved.

Dr. Kurio listened attentively, his black, glossy eyes wide with astonishment. He sat motionless, staring straight ahead even after I finished speaking. Then, slowly, he said:

"From your perspective, our world came into existence purely by chance—only because you saved our ancestor. And if you were to go back a hundred million years and choose not to save Curious, you would return to your world of highly developed primates. A world that knows nothing of us."

"I don't think it's that simple," I replied. "That would imply that my world ceased to exist, giving way to another. And, as I understand it, at the same time as me, there was also your Kris—the primate you expected instead of me. I believe our worlds coexist, and I ended up here by disrupting the balance of events in my own world. The fact that both your Kris and I were in the Cretaceous period simultaneously suggests that we share a common distant past, but our paths diverged

somewhere along the way. Who knows how many parallel worlds exist?"

Dr. Kurio seemed to appreciate my reasoning. He nodded in agreement:

"Last night at the Institute of Time, my colleagues and I discussed this possibility. You must return to our shared past and simply carry out the mission assigned to you without interfering in the events taking place there."

He fell silent, gazing at me thoughtfully. It seemed like he wanted to say something more but couldn't bring himself to do it. I had a feeling I knew what he was thinking. The same thought had crossed my mind.

"I ended up here because my world, as I know it, doesn't exist. I saved Curious, and his descendants left no room for intelligent primates to evolve," I said slowly.

Dr. Kurio closed his eyes and nodded slowly.

"You need to return to the original point of your mission as soon as possible, Kris," he said quietly, leaning toward me. "Our technicians will need about a week to recalibrate our time machine for a 'jump' to the Cretaceous period."

I nodded in agreement. It was the only right decision. After all, I was the one who disrupted the balance by saving Curious from the claws of a ravenous bird. And if I followed the logic of coincidences, the missing Kris should be found by following my tracks, so to speak. No one could handle this better than me. I voiced my thoughts aloud, hoping for approval. But instead, Dr. Kurio leaned in, placed his hand on my shoulder, and said:

"This is just one possibility. From our perspective, it is also quite

possible that our Kris simply vanished, making way for you. And that is concerning."

I understood what he meant.

"My colleagues might be looking for me if my world still exists," I completed his thought.

Dr. Kurio nodded. "And the consequences could be unpredictable." After a brief pause, he added, "We've built our world and don't want to risk its future."

I leaned over the fountain and let the cool water run through my hands.

"We have a few days to carefully examine and weigh all aspects of our situation," Dr. Kurio's voice was steady, and I could tell he was trying to think logically. "Much of the decision depends on you. As someone who has been there in the past and as our full-fledged colleague as well. Recall in detail what happened a hundred million years ago, remember every detail of your stay there. Trust me, the solution often hides in the details."

I ran my wet hands over my face. Dr. Kurio was right; that's exactly what I would do.

I nodded in agreement:

"I'll start working on it today." Then, hesitating, I asked him the question that had been bothering me: "Dr. Kurio, I never got the impression that you would conduct experiments on animals. Especially considering your special relationship with the primate Kris, who, as I understand, became a member of your family. Why did you, as the head of the Institute of Time, send him alone a hundred million years into the unknown?"

Dr. Kurio's tail twitched anxiously. "We never intended to send him! I was supposed to go. It would have been the longest 'jump' into the past." He paused, struggling to contain his emotions. Then, regaining composure, he continued:

"That day, Kris was unusually anxious and didn't want to let me go. I brought him to the Institute with me, which wasn't the first time. Leaving him in my office in the care of one of my colleagues, I explained to him in sign language that I would return soon and might even meet one of his ancestors."

He shook his head bitterly.

"It was foolish of me to mention his ancestors. In sign language, it 'sounded' like 'parents.' Kris became very agitated. I didn't think much of it, planning to calm him down when I returned. I was already standing in the time machine's launch zone when he burst onto the platform, scattering everyone, and simply pushed me aside, taking my place. And then he disappeared."

"And you tried to bring him back right away," I said, half as a statement.

"Of course we did," Dr. Kurio's voice held a note of offense, as if he couldn't believe I had questioned it. "But the time machine's signal had some strange interference; we had never encountered anything like it before. I pushed our technician aside to try and fix the device myself, and then the jumping bone appeared."

Dr. Kurio even smiled slightly at the memory.
I smiled too.

"It must have looked wild from the outside," I said.

We both fell silent.

"I like you, Kris, despite your high level of development. It was my idea to talk to you in an informal setting."

"Thank you," I replied sincerely. "I will do my best to restore the balance."

I heard a light tapping of his tail on the wooden floor of the gazebo. Something was bothering him again.

"I can never quite control my tail," he said, almost reading my thoughts.

His concern was contagious, and I looked at him expectantly.

"It's hard for me to tell you this, but I believe you should know," he began, lowering his eyes. "If we don't have enough grounds to send you back a hundred million years, to restore balance yourself, we will be forced to block our time machine, and..." he hesitated, then continued in a lower voice, "and erase your memory."

I was familiar with the rules of my job, but facing this reality was not easy.

Dr. Kurio sensed my mood—probably without much difficulty.

"I need to return to the Institute. Let Lada know if you need anything." He tried to maintain a casual tone. And I suddenly remembered my growing beard and asked him if he could lend me a razor.

"Oh, right," said Dr. Kurio. "You're growing spiky hair on your face. We don't shave, we just trim or pluck our feathers occasionally." He thought for a moment, then slapped his forehead and said:

"Our veterinarians sometimes use razors to prepare patients for certain procedures. I'll bring you everything you need tonight. See you later, Kris. And remember, I'm always here to support you."

Saying this, he left the gazebo, striding along the main path with large, bouncing steps.

I remained seated for a while, staring blankly ahead. The prospect of losing my memory and becoming a hairless, talking primate didn't appeal to me in the least—even if I would be deeply loved by Dr. Kurio's family.

I need to pull myself together; otherwise, I won't be able to focus and recall the events in detail. Having made my decision, I also left the gazebo and slowly walked towards my hut. I was glad that I didn't have to run after the fast-moving Doctor Kurio. Perhaps it was easier for my predecessor Kris in this regard—after all, being a primate, he probably enjoyed jumping too. Upon entering the hut, I immediately went to the table by the window, where my computer stood, and started writing an explanation, trying to briefly present my arguments in favor of sending me back to the past. But the words didn't come together, and I couldn't think of any strong arguments. So, I decided to postpone writing the explanation. Following Doctor Kurio's advice, I should instead write down all previous events without missing any details. That's exactly what I did, comfortably settling on the couch next to Watson...

I read through what I had written several times. And honestly, apart from the fact that I interfered with events and disrupted the balance, I couldn't glean anything new from my

memories. Would they really erase my memory? My phenomenal memory... How could I forget about that?! Life sometimes takes interesting turns. I never imagined that I would enjoy keeping notes about my adventures. I started writing them down due to serious circumstances that almost led me to lose my world—literally—and my memory, which I had always been so proud of. At that moment, the only comfort that distracted me from sad thoughts and pessimism was my beloved cat, Watson, offering me his affection no matter where I was. No matter what world surrounded me, he was always its center, lying beside me on the couch and connecting these two vastly different worlds for me. Someday, I will write an ode dedicated to him—he truly deserves it. But for now, I need to focus on describing the events I witnessed and took part in. As I mentioned earlier, following Doctor Kurio's advice, I wrote down the events that led to the disruption of balance—events that caused me to suddenly appear in the world of highly advanced pteryxes and stagnating primates. Reading through my notes several times, I initially felt very discouraged, unable to find a solution. I understood the Doctor's concerns. There was still a possibility that our worlds did not exist simultaneously. If that were the case, my return to the Cretaceous period would endanger the existence of the pteryx' world. By leaving Curious to his fate, I would deprive the pteryxes of their ancestor and eliminate their opportunity to evolve and create their advanced civilization. This would mean dooming their world to disappearance.

I had almost resigned myself to my unenviable fate as "Kris the Forgetful" when suddenly it hit me: I had indeed described all the events correctly, both before and after my arrival among the pteryxes. But, perhaps due to my understandable anxiety, I had overlooked some very important details—specifically, my food container and the contents of my invisibility cloak pockets. How could I have forgotten that?!

I recalled how Doctor Kurio had mentioned my cloak and its pockets, but he never said a word about the food and water container. And I hadn't seen it when I suddenly appeared in their world.

Excited, I jumped up from the couch and, for some reason, ran to the kitchen. Watson, now awake, followed me with his fluffy tail held high. After filling his bowl with food, I rushed out of the hut and sprinted toward Doctor Kurio's house.

It only took me a couple of days, with breaks for sleep, to write down everything mentioned above. Based on my calculations, I had a good chance of catching the Doctor at home that evening. By the way, the Doctor had forgotten his promise to provide me with shaving supplies. I didn't hold it against him—firstly, he was a very busy pteryx, and secondly, I had forgotten about it myself, being so focused on my serious problems.

Reaching the house, I pressed the doorbell, keeping my finger firmly on it. I was surprised at my own lack of manners, but the importance of my discovery outweighed all formalities. Lada opened the door, dressed in an emerald toga. Only then did I realize that I was wearing nothing but shorts. This didn't

seem to bother Lada at all. She nodded politely, her green-tinted feathers shining in the light.

“Come in, Kris, you need to catch your breath.” She let me into the cool hallway.

“If I may guess, you’re here on urgent matters. I’ll call Kurio right now.”

“Photo,” I said, breathless with excitement. “Kris in the photo.”

Lada was about to ask for clarification but, noticing how agitated I was, she simply ran upstairs, effortlessly leaping over the steps and pushing off with her well-groomed tail. I followed her, regretting for the first time that I didn’t have a tail, which would have made me much more agile compared to the pteryxes.

We stopped in front of the photo of primate Kris, cheerfully hugging his owners. I looked closely at his hand hanging over Doctor Kurio’s shoulder. “I’ll have to ask about the fingernail,” flashed through my mind. That was very important—it would support my entire argument.

Suddenly, Lada ran her long, rough fingers over my cheek and smiled:

“You’ve grown prickly fur on your face. You look even more like our Kris now.”

At the mention of "our" Kris, she suddenly became sad and sighed heavily. I gently touched her hand and, looking into her large round eyes, reassured her:

“Your Kris will return to you, believe me.”

“But how? How? And what will happen to you?” she asked, visibly worried.

N“It’s a long story. I need to speak with Doctor Kurio.”

Lada flinched and immediately ran out of the room, saying as she went:

“I’ll bring him right now, wait here.”

I could barely hear her last words, as they were already coming from somewhere deep within the house.

I remained standing by the photograph hanging on the wall, studying my "double." He looked very happy in the picture, hugging his joyfully smiling owners. Although the word "owners" probably didn't accurately describe their relationship. They looked like a family.

Speaking to the photograph, I said:

“You’ll be home soon, Kris. Even if I have to hack into the Institute of Time to do it.”

I was about to mention his cat, to reassure him that it was in good hands, but I stopped myself, realizing I was talking to a photo. I surprised myself, as I had never noticed such strong emotional outbursts before. I decided to reflect on this later, when I could think more clearly.

From the corridor, I heard light tapping, growing louder until Doctor Kurio and Lada jumped into the room. I had long noticed that pteryxes preferred moving in large jumps when they were in a hurry.

Slowing down beside me, Doctor Kurio grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the round table by the window. He sat me down on a stool, settling himself across from me. Lada sat

beside him. The feathers on her face were ruffled, and her small black nose was twitching.

Honestly, I hadn't expected such an emotional reaction from her to my promise to bring "their" Kris back. It seemed her attachment to him was stronger than I had thought.

"What did you remember? You remembered something, didn't you?" Doctor Kurio leaned across the table and stared at me questioningly, as if searching for the answer in my eyes.

"I remembered what I had forgotten—my food and water container." Saying this, I tensed, as there was a chance it had also ended up in the pteryx world, and Doctor Kurio had simply forgotten to mention it.

But the Doctor just shook his head in confusion.

"What container? What are you talking about?"

So, the first point in favor of my theory.

I briefly explained to Doctor Kurio and Lada about my journey to the age of dinosaurs with provisions and test tubes packed in a special container, which had a built-in receiver linked to our time machine.

"This container simply gets 'pulled' back into the present by the time machine, following the signal it emits. I mentioned this when writing down the events leading up to my arrival here, as per your advice," I explained. "I can explain the absence of the container by the fact that it 'returned' to my world before I saved my Curious."

I felt slightly embarrassed at referring to the prehistoric pteryx I had saved as "my Curious". This inadvertently acknowledged my emotional attachment to him, which was

unacceptable in my profession. But my companions didn't seem to notice my slip.

Doctor Kurio swept his tail across his lap, placing it there carefully. Lada, glancing briefly at her husband, did the same with her neatly arranged tail, the light green feathers glowing softly. I must have looked puzzled because Lada quickly explained:

"When we feel something exciting is about to happen, we place our tails on our laps to keep them under control."

"We never quite learned how to manage them properly, so we just hold them," Doctor Kurio added.

I nodded to show I understood. The Doctor and his wife watched me attentively, ready to listen.

"The absence of the container suggests that it is currently in my world, the world of highly developed primates. And that means..."

"That means our worlds exist simultaneously," Doctor Kurio finished my thought. "I need to process this." He froze, placing both hands on his slightly trembling tail.

We all fell silent. Doctor Kurio was deep in thought, occasionally moving his lips and pinkish nose. Lada, turning to him, watched him hopefully, waiting for his decision. As for me, for some reason, I immediately felt very embarrassed because I wasn't dressed. I crossed my arms over my chest to cover myself a little, though no one was paying attention to me at the moment.

"Is there anything else you remembered? I don't mean to offend you with my skepticism, Kris, but the mere absence of a

food container, which only you know about, isn't enough for me to fully support your theory that our two worlds coexist."

I wasn't surprised by his skepticism. I had expected it. To him, I was an outsider from a civilization where pteryxes had no place. My desire to return to my world was natural. But would I risk the existence of the highly advanced pteryxes with all their achievements just to get back home? That was the question Doctor Kurio was asking himself.

His doubt upset Lada, though she surely understood his logic.

"Kris," she addressed me, "you insisted on looking at the photograph of our Kris again. You must have had good reasons for that, right?" She looked at me expectantly, holding her tail tightly in her hands.

I closed my eyes and exhaled deeply. Now I had to ask the question that would be decisive not only for me but for all of us. And I wasn't even sure it wasn't just a dream.

Following logic, I first asked about the exact contents of my invisibility cloak pockets. Only after getting an answer would it make sense to ask about "their" Kris. I didn't want to embarrass myself right away.

Doctor Kurio replied:

"This must be important to you if you're asking. I was part of the inspection of your cloak. In its pockets, there were packets of, uh, dry food and several glass vials. And you also dropped a marker from your hand while waving a bone around. You really scared us!" He even smiled at the memory.

My heart pounded. I squeezed my eyes shut and asked:
“Was Kris's fingernail broken? On his right index finger?”

“Yes, yes, it was broken!” Lada exclaimed. “The day before you appeared, Kris broke his nail climbing a tree.”

I opened my eyes, breathing a sigh of relief. So, it wasn't a dream—the hand reaching down from the tree to take my water bottle was real.

“We were there at the same time, in the Cretaceous period. He was up in the tree, and I was underneath it.”

Seeing the astonished expressions of the Kurio couple, I told them how I had dozed off under the tree, only to see a dark, sinewy hand with a broken nail reach down to take my water bottle.

“That's why it wasn't in my pockets. I would never go out in the heat without water,” I concluded.

Lada, turning to her husband with concern, said:
“Kris is stuck there, among wild dinosaurs. My poor boy! We have to get him out!”

Doctor Kurio, looking somewhat nervous himself, tried to reassure her:

“Dear, I will do everything I can. Leave it to us.”

“When will you start? Imagine how scared he must be, alone, without us.”

Her round eyes filled with tears. Trying to hide his irritation, Doctor Kurio attempted to calm her down:

“I'm just as interested in this as you are. And you shouldn't worry too much—think about our future child. By the way, you were supposed to visit the incubator today to check on our egg.

The doctor said it's important for the healthy development of the embryo."

"You're right," Lada agreed. "We need to stay strong; that's important."

"Kris, I trust you," she said to me before leaving the room.

Left alone with Doctor Kurio, we both fell into silence. I'd be lying if I said I was thinking about something clever. My mind was blank, and I had become nothing more than pure anticipation, watching Doctor Kurio drumming his fingers thoughtfully on his tail, which still rested on his lap. I had laid all my cards on the table, and now there was nothing left for me to do but wait.

Finally, Doctor Kurio spoke, clearly having reached a decision:

"Tomorrow morning, I'll go to the Institute to consult with my specialists. There's one more thing that needs to be checked."

"What thing?" I blurted out involuntarily.

"We still have time to weigh everything properly. About five days, by my estimate, until our technicians adjust the time machine. Consider this time a vacation."

Doctor Kurio clearly wasn't going to enlighten me about the "thing" that needed checking. I didn't insist. Besides, I had a hunch that it was related to one of the items that had ended up with me in the world of the pteryxes. Doctor Kurio's team had already thoroughly examined my invisibility cloak; he himself had mentioned it. Another object directly related to my time travels was my marker. Were the Institute's employees trying to establish a connection with our time machine through it? In their

place, I would certainly try. I'd probably find out in the coming days. After all, I had carved out a chance to return to my world. Maybe within these five days, I would remember more details to support my theory. Although, personally, I was already convinced that I was right. Kris the primate's hand with the broken nail had convinced me.

Doctor Kurio handed me a basket of fruit and sent me home with wishes to get a good night's sleep.

Lying on the couch with Watson curled up comfortably at my feet, I decided to treat the following days as a vacation. After all, I was in a world that was still largely unknown to me, and it deserved my attention. Decision made: first thing in the morning, I would go exploring the surroundings. It was better than just sitting and waiting for my fate. This thought reassured me, and I fell into a deep sleep.

I was awakened by a knock at the door of my hut. I rubbed my eyes and shook my head. I don't know why, but shaking my head helped me wake up. Apparently, it improves blood circulation to the brain. Funny, I had never thought about it before.

From the kitchen came Watson's insistent meowing, drowning out the repeated knocking at the door. I walked to the kitchen, calling out loudly to the visitor to enter.

As I scooped food into my cat's bowl, a voice spoke behind me:

"Hey, Kris, um, look, I brought something on Doctor Kurio's orders."

I turned around and saw a pteryx dressed in a short gray toga, waving his tail in a friendly manner. His mouth slightly open, he examined me with undisguised curiosity. Shuffling his feet in worn sandals, he asked hesitantly:

"You understand me, right? Doctor said you've gotten smarter and that I wouldn't have to talk to you with my hands." He nodded towards the pile of clothes and several boxes he was struggling to hold.

I smiled warmly and gestured for him to enter the room, leaving Watson to his breakfast in the kitchen. At the same time, I tried not to reveal that I was seeing him for the first time in my life. Judging by his demeanor, he was well acquainted with my predecessor, Kris, and it was better not to alarm him. He was already noticeably nervous.

"I'll put the stuff on the couch here, and the clothes are for you since you're smarter now," he spoke quickly, never taking his eyes off me. Sitting down on the couch next to the neatly placed items, he stretched his head towards me, smiling encouragingly.

"Don't you want to talk to me?" His curiosity was evident; he was burning with the desire to hear me speak.

I hesitated for a moment, as by my standards, a conversation should start by addressing the other person by name—a sign of politeness and interest. But I had no idea what his name was.

"I'm not sure how to pronounce your name correctly," I said, which caused an outburst of joy from him, expressed by clapping his hands and bouncing on the couch. He grinned

widely, baring his teeth, and nodded his head covered in thick, ruffled feathers.

"What a surprise!" His entire being radiated a childlike delight. Suddenly, he leaned in and began sniffing me around my neck. I froze in surprise—of all things, I had never imagined someone would sniff me.

"It's really you, Kris! Your scent hasn't changed, just as Doctor Kurio said."

Indeed, "what a surprise!" Did Doctor Kurio sniff me? I voiced my question, still recovering from my astonishment.

"Of course, how else? Didn't you notice? I'm not surprised; he's well-mannered, he sniffs discreetly."

He sat back down on the couch in the posture of a spectator expecting an interesting performance. Then, slapping his forehead, he introduced himself:

"Kurkin the Third. There are many Kurkins in our family, and I'm the third one."

He fell silent, clearly giving me the floor.

"Thank you, Kurkin the Third. I need to get dressed. I'd appreciate it if you left me alone now."

Kurkin the Third studied me closely, tilting his head slightly to the side.

"Your skin has gone bald. Maybe it's a side effect of your intelligence upgrade. Or maybe you're just old. My grandmother lost feathers on her head too. She applies some mixture at night and wraps it up warmly. Her head itches afterward, and she says it's new feathers growing in."

I stood in stunned silence, unsure of what to say. Kurkin the Third was clearly not an employee of the Time Institute.

"Thank you, Kurkin the Third, goodbye," I managed to say. "I need to take a walk."

Kurkin the Third jumped to his feet and waved his arms in protest:

"Only within our territory. The Doctor strictly forbade you from leaving it. Under my responsibility." He crossed his arms importantly over his chest, stretching his head upward. "Well, yes, everyone else is busy, and I've already trimmed the green hedge this morning." He seemed pleased with his efficiency. "Besides, we are friends," he added.

"Alright, Kurkin the Third, I understand, but I need to freshen up."

"Just Kurkin, for friends," he said condescendingly. "If you need anything else, I'll be in the park."

He gave me one last once-over and, giving me a friendly pat on the shoulder, left.

I sighed with some relief and began examining the items brought by the talkative Kurkin. A new pair of sandals, two fresh togas—one with a hood—and even three pairs of colorful shorts, clearly newly tailored. I smiled, appreciating Lada's thoughtfulness. Doctor Kurio would hardly have thought of this. A pity that Lada hadn't brought the clothes herself. On the other hand, why limit my interactions? After all, a brief conversation with Kurkin the Third had already introduced me to feather-regrowing methods. Looking back, it struck me as amusing—even pteryxes use folk remedies.

Under the pile of clothes, I found a shaving kit with a picture of a cat and dog. Oh right, veterinarians use these. So pteryxes keep dogs too. Feeling satisfied with my observation, I headed to the bathroom to freshen up.

After washing, shaving, and changing into fresh clothes, I stepped out of the hut. I chose the long toga with a hood, just in case I managed to convince Kurkin to let me leave the territory. I understood Doctor Kurio's reluctance to let me go alone; he was surely acting out of concern for me. But I really wanted to walk through the city streets, so unlike any I knew. Of course, I'd be cautious. I would hide my shaved face under the hood and try not to attract unnecessary attention.

The sky was covered with light clouds, and a gentle refreshing breeze blew. I dislike the heat, so I welcomed the weather.

I took a deep breath of the fresh air and sniffed. Scents play an important role not only in the lives of pteryxes. It smelled faintly of cucumbers, almost like the Cretaceous period a hundred million years ago. The thought of cucumbers made me intensely hungry. For the past few days, I had been living on biscuits and fruit, and honestly, I couldn't stand them anymore. I longed for something hearty, something meaty!

Kurkin the Third approached in great leaps, skillfully balancing with his tail before stopping abruptly next to me.

"I was waiting for you. Lada asked me to feed you." He fell silent, studying me. Apparently, my shaved face caught his attention, but he said nothing, showing surprising tact.

"Where's Lada?" I asked.

"Preparing for the hunt at her 'Loyal Wives Club,'" he explained, still staring at my face.

I didn't quite understand his response but decided not to ask for clarification to avoid a lengthy explanation.

"And where's breakfast?" I simply asked.

"Under your favorite tree. Come on!" He bounded ahead, waving his hand to urge me to follow. I hurried after him, trying not to lose sight of him. Pteryxes certainly help maintain fitness, that's for sure.

After a few turns along the garden paths, we arrived at a large, tall oak tree. Under its thick foliage sat a breakfast tray laden with fruit.

"I made your favorite drink from the biggest insects, my own recipe." Kurkin picked up one of the small thermoses from the tray and handed it to me. "I cooled it to room temperature," he added with a wide smile. His round eyes shone with delight, eager to see my joy.

He suddenly seemed so endearing in his efforts to please me that I couldn't help but laugh.

"I knew you'd be happy," Kurkin said proudly.

I felt a little guilty for my earlier irritation with him. Reaching out, I took the thermos and sat down on the grass, leaning against the tree trunk. Kurkin settled down beside me.

I unscrewed the thermos lid and brought it to my nose. The drink's pungent aroma was surprisingly appealing. I thought to myself that if Kris-the-primate drank it with pleasure, surely I could too. Before taking a sip, I asked:

"Should I save you half?"

"No, I'm already grown. As a child, I drank it often; it's rich in, uh, protein. Good for growth. But you drink up—it's all yours."

"What is this drink called?"

"Insecta."

I liked the name; it was simple and descriptive.

For me, immersing myself in another culture also meant getting to know its cuisine. Besides, if the other Kris and I smelled the same, perhaps our tastes were similar too.

I took a small sip first. I liked it. The drink tasted like thick meat broth. Fortunately, aside from fruit, there were also delicious pastries with a creamy filling on the tray. I enjoyed my breakfast, washing the pastries down with Insecta.

Feeling pleasantly full, we leaned against the tree trunk, stretching out our legs and gazing at the cloud-covered sky. Looking at the peacefully resting Kurkin the Third beside me, I turned to him and said:

"Kurkin, I'd love to take a walk with you around the city. Just as two friends. I promise I won't run off."

"Are you kidding?" Kurkin exclaimed in horror, jumping to his feet. "Doctor Kurio would never forgive me! He put me in charge of you, Kris. And if something happens? I could never forgive myself."

Then, looking around to make sure no one was nearby, he squatted beside me.

"I'll tell you something in secret, because you're my friend and have always enjoyed talking to me."

"Go ahead," I said quietly.

"No one should see you without fur. For some reason, it's a secret. I haven't even told my grandmother, it's such a big secret! You understand? A secret!"

He squinted meaningfully, emphasizing the importance of what he had just shared.

"I have a hood and a long toga. I'll be inconspicuous."

Kurkin skeptically looked me over, shaking his head disapprovingly.

"Sorry, Kris," he said, "but even a fool like me would recognize you right away."

I felt a little hurt for him, that he called himself a fool.

"You're not a fool, you're my friend!" I said sincerely.

"Really? Well, you know, I've heard something about myself, just in passing," he said, scratching the back of his neck, and for some reason, he chuckled. I thought to myself that it was better to have a good friend who was making my favorite drink to cheer me up, than some self-absorbed intellectual as a friend.

We both fell silent. I could have tried to sneak away and go for a walk alone, but I didn't want to put Kurkin the Third in a difficult position—he had earned my sympathy with his sincerity.

"Kris, you know what?" Kurkin nudged me by the arm. "In a few days, the Hunt Festival will begin. Everyone will be in masks and costumes. That's when we'll slip out of the house. You and me, two friends. It'll be great, won't it?"

"Hunt Festival?" I asked again, confused.

"You didn't know? It happens every year." He looked at me questioningly.

I shook my head, not wanting to explain. I didn't want to disappoint him by revealing that I wasn't *that* Kris. Fortunately, we smelled the same.

"You know, I like that you're smart," he suddenly laughed, patting his knees. "I was so amazed when I saw you bald and talking! Almost burst out laughing!"

I laughed too, imagining myself in his place.

After we had both finished laughing, he led me to our secret spot, the hut built at the edge of the estate, hidden from curious eyes by thick bushes. There, he was going to reveal the essence of the Hunt Festival to me.

"But what about the tray?" I asked Kurkin on the way. He waved his hand dismissively.

"I'll clean it up later. We shouldn't be distracted from friendship."

Settling down on the hay-covered floor, I asked him:

"Where is everyone else? The place seems deserted."

"They're all getting ready for the Hunt Festival," he replied, probably assuming I understood the rest. "Oh, right, you weren't exactly smart until recently, so you probably didn't get it," he added with a sudden realization. "I'll explain it now, but first, get comfortable."

He kindly pushed some extra hay under my back and handed me a thick stick covered with some white powder. I looked at him in confusion. He pulled a thin twig from somewhere in the corner and handed it to me.

"This will make it easier for you to pick them out. I sprinkled flour on them so they would fatten up."

Looking more closely, I noticed that the thick stick was actually an ant nest with numerous small openings. The ants were quite large, about half a centimeter.

"Go ahead, help yourself. Don't give up your habits. You always listen to me without distraction when you're indulging in ants."

"I'm so full that I don't feel like eating anything else. But thanks, they look very appetizing. I'll listen to you carefully," I said, carefully setting the stick aside, making sure not to shake out the ants.

Kurkin didn't mind my refusal of the "delicacy." He sat down across from me, placing his tail, covered with soft feathers, on his lap.

"Now, the Hunt Festival." He made a circular gesture with his hand, his long nails gliding through the air. His face clearly expressed pleasure at finding an attentive listener in me. He smoothed the feathers on his face, ran a hand over his head, and began his tale:

"We had ancestors, very ancient ones. And they hunted a lot, for food. Gradually, they began to grow smarter, learned to plant fruit trees and berry bushes, and the smartest ones taught others to bake bread—from plants. But they kept hunting. One day, the chief hunter, named Kurakay, brought home a little calf. And it was so beloved by all the Ptirexes that it stayed among them, and they took care of it and played with it."

"Did you mean 'Pteryxes'?" I interrupted, realizing only now that I had invented the name "Pteryxes" myself.

"Pteryxes, of course—we are Pteryxes." I was surprised by yet another coincidence, and he laughed, shaking his head, causing a few feathers to fall off. "You're a primate, there are many primates, but none as developed as us, Pteryxes. But still, you're the smartest primate," he concluded.

"And what happened to the calf?" I asked.

"They brought other wild calves so it wouldn't be lonely, and since then, cows have lived near us. But not in the cities, only outside. There are many of them there. So, since then, the Pteryxes stopped hunting wild cows, because it would have been too sad to kill such lovely creatures. Over time, Kurakay brought home a wild boar, a goat kid, a wolf cub, and many other animals. And the Pteryxes felt really bad about killing their wild relatives, but without meat, they wouldn't have survived. So, they decided that hunting could only happen twice a year, to store up meat for the future. It was a very sad event—the hunt. Everyone cried." Kurkin paused and shook his head sadly.

"Such were the wild times, yes."

"And what happened then? Why is hunting a festival now?"

"Because we, the Pteryxes, began to grow smarter and learned how to grow our own meat. In special factories, in glass pots."

"Glass pots?" I asked, surprised.

He crossed his arms over his chest, his thin black lips curling down at the corners in displeasure.

"If I say pots, I mean pots. By the way, I was there," he turned his head sideways, raising his black nose proudly. Suddenly, he sneezed and added, "I was still in 'Jumpnasium'

back then, and they took us on a tour there just before the Hunt Festival. That's how it was!"

I decided to leave the question about 'Jumpnasium' for later, and listened to the rest of his story until the end.

"And what happened next?" I asked.

"Then we tried on costumes for the Festival of the Hunt."

"I meant what happened with the hunt," I clarified.

"Oh, right. Later, when the Pteryxes were able to provide meat for themselves, they abandoned hunting. But in memory of our ancestors, and of Kurakay, who loved animals so much, we celebrate the Festival of the Hunt twice a year. After the festival, everyone eats meat. Do you understand?"

I nodded, deeply impressed by what I had heard.

Kurkin leaned closer to me and shook me by the shoulders.

"Hey, Kris, what's the matter with you?"

I shook my head and said:

"It's nothing. You tell such interesting stories, and I didn't know any of this."

Kurkin smiled broadly.

"And I know many stories, even though I only studied in the Jumpnasium. Just ask!"

"Please explain about the Jumpnasium," I asked him.

He nodded happily and replied:

"All children go to Jumpnasium first. There, we learn to behave properly, not to jump around recklessly, and we also learn to count and write. After that, comes the Worldnasium: that's where we learn to sit still, read a lot about the world, and perform various tricks with numbers. They didn't accept me

there. And I didn't want to either — sitting all day, you know, reading. No, that's not for me."

He fell silent, looking down and starting to pluck feathers from the tip of his tail.

"Oh, I really need to visit a feather care salon sometime. I've let myself go, you know," he added, trying to change the subject.

I looked at him sympathetically and felt the urge to cheer him up.

"You know, Kurkin, you're the best friend anyone could have! And no school can teach that! I wouldn't waste my time on any Worldnasium if I were you." I said this with sincerity, remembering my own student years in stuffy, overcrowded classrooms.

"Exactly! My grandmother said the same thing. That you don't need to read so much, it only ruins your eyes."

He jumped to his feet, raising his tail and bumping into the low roof of the hut.

"Let's go run around! I don't know about you, but I need to stretch my legs. But you understood about the Festival of the Hunt, right? I explained everything well?" He stopped, clearly waiting for praise.

"You explained everything wonderfully. And I understood everything. It's really an interesting story."

Kurkin nodded several times, wagging his tail in satisfaction.

"What can I say, I do what I can. Now, follow me!"

We left the hut and stretched at the same time. Then a thought occurred to me, and I immediately asked Kurkin:

“You mentioned that no one from outside should see me now that I’m hairless. I’ve been here for several days now, and surely many of the estate workers know I’m here. Am I right? There are many workers here, aren’t there?”

Kurkin turned toward me and explained seriously:

“You arrived on a day off, and then preparations for the Festival of the Hunt started. Even my grandmother is spending all her time at her club, ‘Together at the Sunset of Life.’ Doctor Kurio thinks we’re lucky that, apart from us and his staff, no one else has seen you in your changed form.”

“Doctor Kurio spoke about this with you?”

Kurkin answered, still serious:

“The doctor trusts me. I’ve lived here all my life with my grandmother. He says I’m as simple as I am valuable. I think that’s a compliment.”

I agreed with Doctor Kurio on that matter.

I decided not to ask Kurkin any more questions for now, choosing instead to think about the possibility of leaving the estate. The story of the Festival of the Hunt had sparked my curiosity and desire to learn more about the Pteryx way of life. After all, what did I really know about them? Practically nothing. My interactions with Doctor Kurio and Lada had mainly been limited to discussing problems that had arisen because of me. And my mind had been preoccupied with little else. I had to run to catch up with Kurkin.

“Wait, not so fast!” I called out.

Kurkin quickly spun around, immediately slowing his pace. I suppose the lessons in the Jumpnasium had paid off.

"You've gotten smarter, but you've forgotten how to run," he observed with satisfaction. "What's up?" he added condescendingly.

I caught up with him and whispered:

"Listen, Kurkin, everyone is probably sitting in their clubs by now, and the streets are empty. What if we take the risk and go into the city? Look." I slumped my shoulders, let my arms hang, stretched my head forward, and tried to walk a few steps like a gorilla, an animal I'd seen many times in the zoo. "I still smell the same," I added as a further argument.

Kurkin seemed upset by my attempts to imitate a monkey. He hugged me, pressing my face into his feather-covered neck. "How quickly you've aged, my poor Kris. You'd have been better off not getting smarter," he said, his voice tinged with real bitterness. "And you move so slowly. What if you die?" He sniffled, hugging me even tighter. I broke free from his embrace and tried to explain:

"Don't worry, Kurkin, I just lost my fur all at once, and my bones straightened. But I haven't aged."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I know it. And Doctor Kurio will confirm it."

At the mention of Doctor Kurio's name, he calmed down. With some relief, he said:

"Well, now I'll show you around our territory. Then I must escort you safely to Lada. She'll be home soon."

I sighed with regret. It was time for me to return to my problems and worries about possibly losing my memory.

Kurkin misunderstood my sadness. “Alright, I’ll think about it. I’ll tell you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay,” I replied.

We strolled a bit more through the estate, where Kurkin showed me the workers' houses and explained who did what: in the house with the red and green roof, the gardeners lived; in the house with the picture of a tree with birds sitting on it, lived the caretakers of the animals. I didn’t pay much attention, distracted by the buildings. What struck me, however, was that all the roofs of the houses were round. Some of them were painted in different colors or decorated with images of animals. I hadn’t noticed this on the day when Doctor Kurio first brought me here. Compared to them, Kris-the-primate's little hut seemed rather shabby.

Each little house was surrounded by a circular lawn, connected to other buildings by wide, bright paths. The houses with the colorful roofs were arranged on both sides along the main road that led from the gates to Doctor Kurio’s house. Closest to the main house stood Kris-the-primate's hut, built differently from the other stone houses covered with white lime — it was made of carefully fitted logs.

Behind the houses stretched green lawns, with flowers growing on them, interrupted by clusters of trees, and further beyond, dense shrubs.

My curiosity turned into admiration, which didn’t escape Kurkin’s notice.

“Well, this is our territory,” he said, turning his head. “I try to look at it through new eyes, too.” He nodded meaningfully and

added, "Well, what can I say, one of the best in our residential belt, that's for sure."

I gave him a questioning look, and he smiled knowingly:

"As my teacher from the Jumpnasium used to say, only a fool doesn't ask questions. And you've gotten smarter. Go ahead, ask."

"What does 'residential belt' mean?" I immediately asked. Kurkin tilted his head back, tapping his chin with his finger. With a flick of his tail, he squinted and said:

"I have this... what's it called, an aidual illustration, at home. If you guess which house my grandmother and I live in, I'll show it to you, and you'll understand everything right away."

I was very eager to see this mysterious aidual illustration.

"What if I don't guess?" I asked.

Kurkin sighed and replied:

"I'll show it to you anyway, but it won't be as interesting. So, you get two attempts. Attempt number one!"

He jumped to the side and stood tall, folding his arms across his chest. "I'm waiting, let's go!" He began bouncing impatiently, and I started to look around, examining the charming little houses with wide windows.

I found myself getting quite involved in this guessing game. So, what's the difference between the houses? To me, it seemed to be the roofs. More specifically, the images on them. Kurkin, with his personality, definitely liked animals and was friends with Kris. I began to study the pictures on the roofs, depicting flowers, trees, fruits, buns, and even, for some reason, a propeller. I tried to commit these images to memory,

intending to sketch them when I returned to my world. At the thought of my world, I felt a pang of sadness, which surprised me. I decided to sort out my feelings later.

Suddenly, one roof caught my attention. I approached it to take a closer look. Turning to glance at Kurkin, I realized I was on the right track. Kurkin wagged his tail, clapped his hands, and nodded vigorously.

On the mentioned oval roof, I could see the image of an animal standing on its front paws. It was covered in red and yellow fur, smiling and showing large white teeth. Above its right shoulder, the sun shone brightly, sending rays its way, while above its left shoulder hung a dark cloud, releasing large, round raindrops, carefully painted in dark blue. As I marveled at the originality of the design, I didn't notice that Kurkin had approached from behind. He placed his hand on my shoulder in a confidential manner and explained:

"Smile in any weather! Now, do you recognize who this is, under the rain and sun?"

Smiling and stretching his neck, he watched me expectantly for an answer. I didn't hesitate long, for the only furry creature I knew of in this world was Kris-the-primate.

Swallowing, I said:

"That's me," which caused a burst of joy from Kurkin.

"Well, that was before you got smarter. Can you believe it? You guessed it on the first try. Although, you could have remembered; you've been here before. But let's pretend you guessed, it's more fun that way."

He darted toward the entrance of his house, waving at me. I ran after him as usual, almost tripping over a colorful chicken that had cheerfully waddled under my feet.

"We'll talk to them later," said Kurkin, taking a key from the flower pot standing by the door. "First — to the aidual illustration. Let's see if you understand."

We entered a house that resembled a miniature version of Doctor Kurio's house. By the stairs stood a small metal contraption with two large springs.

"This is for my grandmother, to jump up onto the platform," Kurkin explained, noticing my interest. "She steps on the springs, pushes off, and jumps up. Kedison, from the house with the propeller on it, made it especially for her."

Having finished his explanation, he crouched down and, pushing off the floor simultaneously with his feet and tail, literally soared up to the upper floor.

"Like this!" he shouted down at me. "But no one can jump higher than me!"

For no particular reason, I found myself suddenly very amused. I ran up the stairs, smiling joyfully for some unknown reason. A fleeting thought crossed my mind that it was good that none of my acquaintances could see me. I quickly pushed it aside into my subconscious, deciding not to get distracted from the events unfolding around me with unnecessary musings.

When I reached the top, I followed Kurkin to the left, entering a light-filled room with a wide bed. There was also a table cluttered with paint cans, brushes, and papers filled with various

sketches. Underneath a pile of papers, I spotted a small computer. It seemed to be rarely used.

Turning me towards the bed, above which a map of the city hung, Kurkin announced, "Here it is — the aidual illustration!" I wasn't planning to correct him and explain that the more accurate term would be "illustrated aid or material." I liked the expression "aidual illustration."

As though confirming my thoughts, Kurkin added, pointing to the map:

"In this case, it's our aidual illustration, which means 'it aids to see and understand.' Got it?"

I nodded in agreement, studying the map.

Kurkin picked up one of the brushes with dried paint on it from the table, using it as a pointer.

With his free hand behind his back, trying to look serious, he began to explain, moving the pointer across the map.

"This here is our city. It's called Cleartown, because it was founded on a clear, sunny day. Right here in the center, you have buildings of public utility: incubators, hospitals, museums, clubs, all sorts of institutes. Right at the center — the House of Song and Dance. It's very big, so many Pteryxes can fit in there. And next to it is the Temple and the Sacred Egg Repository." He pronounced the last name almost in a whisper, his eyes wide. Apparently, he wanted to emphasize the importance of this building.

"What's the Sacred Egg?" I asked, in a similarly hushed voice.

"I'll explain tomorrow, it's a long story," Kurkin whispered back.

Then, switching to his normal voice, he continued:

"Behind the center of the city lies the first residential ring or belt. With different areas. And here we are."

He pointed to somewhere to the right of the belt.

"In our ring, we can only take care of small animals. We have a couple of goats, for example, grazing somewhere." He waved his hand vaguely.

I listened attentively, saving my questions for later so I wouldn't confuse Kurkin.

"In the second belt, the areas are bigger, and they have more animals. They even have a few cows. But in the third belt, they even have horses and elephants! But I still won't move there, my grandmother and I are fine here. She chose this territory when she first laid the egg."

"How did she choose? Do you mean, she found work here?" I wanted to clarify.

Kurkin shook his head in confusion.

"Still not completely smart, are you?" he replied condescendingly. "First, you choose the territory, and then you decide what to do. I'm saying it slowly, so you understand better."

But in reality, his explanation raised even more questions in my mind.

I involuntarily let out a "Ugh!" to which Kurkin knowingly replied, "Yes, Kris, it's hard to be unreasonable. You still have a lot to learn about the world." Suddenly, as if remembering

something, he announced, "It's time to return you to Lada. Let's go."

I had no choice but to leave the house with Kurkin, feeling a bit regretful.

Right at the door, we were greeted by a large number of chickens and other birds I didn't recognize, peacefully strolling about the surrounding area. They must have come out of a chicken coop. Kurkin occasionally stopped to crouch down and pet some of them on the head. It seemed they knew him well, because they ran up to him, clucking loudly as they approached. Some even tried to climb onto his tail. In response, Kurkin jokingly scolded them:

"You little rascals! You've scattered feathers all over again. And who's going to clean it up, huh?" He waved his tail, brushing off the particularly persistent chickens.

I was deeply touched by his warm relationship with these birds.

"Kris, these little troublemakers, right?" he said to me with a smile.

"Yet, useful little troublemakers," I replied in the same tone. "They lay delicious fresh eggs."

Kurkin froze, his arms spread wide. His round, black eyes stared at me in horror.

"You said 'delicious'? You've eaten eggs? You, how should I put it... a barabara... no, a barbarian!"

I felt very embarrassed, and indeed, I truly felt like a barbarian.

"I don't eat eggs," I lied, trying to justify myself. "I only recently started talking and was just trying to make a joke."

Kurkin shook his head reproachfully:

"Honestly, Kris, you're lucky I know you, but even I was frightened by your stupid joke. Don't joke like that around others, understood?"

I nodded vigorously, signaling my complete agreement. Kurkin placed his hands on my shoulders and said:

"And you haven't exactly gotten smarter, I'll be teaching you forever."

He sighed dramatically and added:

"Oh, the responsibility they've placed on me. Good thing I'm here for you, I'll be the one explaining everything to you. Let's go to Lada, and on the way, I'll start your education."

For some reason, he adjusted the toga slipping off his shoulder and tried to smooth down the feathers sticking out in all directions on his head. With his hands behind his back, and his tail swaying rhythmically with his steps, he made his way to the house with dignified strides.

"Walk beside me, Kris, my friend. I'm going to explain something to you."

Making sure I was obediently walking beside him and listening intently, he continued:

"Let's start with a comparison. My teacher at the Jumpnasium used to always begin explanations with a comparison. And he was a smart guy. So, tell me: who has feathers and lays eggs?"

He tilted his head to the side, waiting for my answer. I understood the point he was making.

“Pteryxes and birds have feathers, and they all lay eggs,” I replied.

Kurkin nodded slowly:

“Good job, sit down.”

Then, realizing what he had said, he added:

“Just kidding, don’t sit, keep walking beside me. Now, next question: what is the beginning of all beginnings? Hint: this object has a perfect shape.”

“This object is an egg,” I answered.

Kurkin stopped, turned to face me, and joyfully proclaimed: “End of the first lesson! You got it, Kris!”

He struck a dignified pose again, and we continued our walk along the gravel path.

“You’re getting smarter by the minute, Kris, I’m impressed.” He walked silently ahead, seemingly lost in thought. I assumed he was contemplating the next lesson for me. When we were almost at Dr. Kurio’s house, he nodded a few times and said: “You know what, I think I just found my calling. I’ll tell you later, I need to think it through first.”

He took a key from a large pot with a fluffy green tree standing by the entrance of Dr. Kurio’s house and unlocked the door.

“We’ve earned ourselves a glass of cold sakita,” declared Kurkin, seating me on the couch to the left of the door. “Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

He skipped off merrily somewhere deeper into the house, and I sat, lost in thought on the couch. I think I finally understood why Pteryx homes have round roofs. They consider the egg's shape to be perfect. My thoughts were interrupted when Kurkin appeared, handing me a glass of cold sakita. "Drink, it's delicious and healthy," he said.

Downing his own glass in one gulp, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and announced:

"I'm off now. That was great, wasn't it?"

"Are you really leaving already?" I asked. For some reason, I didn't want him to leave.

"I'd stay, but I still have to clean the tray and take care of the birds. And Lada will be here soon. Tomorrow, I'll take the whole day off, is that okay?"

"Okay!"

"Well, then, see you tomorrow! I'll come by for you!"

Kurkin handed me his empty glass and left, leaving me alone. I remained sitting on the couch, deeply impressed by the time I had spent with Kurkin the Third. I had learned a lot about the life of Pteryxes. Besides the fact that they were advanced enough to have their own time machine, they also enjoyed forming clubs based on shared interests. Perhaps that had even become a tradition; I'd have to ask Lada about it. She should be here soon. And I would also ask Kurkin tomorrow whether he belongs to any club. Of course, I planned to ask delicately so as not to offend him, in case he didn't belong to one.

Lada's arrival interrupted my thoughts. I decided to finish thinking them through later, before bed, with Watson lying beside me on the couch.

"You're almost dozing off, I see," Lada said, smiling as she took the glasses from my hands.

I jumped to my feet, astonished, noticing the golden shimmering feathers around her eyes that gave her gaze a radiant expression.

"You look simply," I faltered, searching for the right word, "simply radiating!"

She smiled contentedly, flicking her tail.

"Thank you, Kris. Come on, go upstairs to the living room, I'll be there in a moment, and we can have lunch together."

I headed towards the staircase leading upstairs, gloomily imagining the table once again covered with fruit.

I had nothing against fruit, but somehow I wasn't feeling as hungry for it anymore.

When I entered the vast living room, I was surprised to find that the table was empty. Although, on second thought, why should it always be set? I heard footsteps approaching quickly, and Lada appeared, carrying a tray with plates covered with lids.

"We let all the staff go, so I prepared lunch myself, in advance, this morning," she explained as she placed the plates on the table. Then, with a conspiratorial smile, she added, "Kurio won't be home until late evening, so we can break the week of abstinence today."

In another situation, I would have immediately tried to find out more about the "week of abstinence," but seeing the delicious piece of roasted meat on the plate in front of me, I couldn't think about anything else. With eager anticipation, I cut a piece and put it in my mouth. The meat was tender, seasoned with fragrant spices that left a pleasant aftertaste. I hadn't experienced such pleasure from food in a long time. Finally, after satisfying my hunger a bit, I remembered that I wasn't alone at the table. I felt somewhat embarrassed about my appetite, and when I heard Lada's bright laugh, I blushed. I think I did, as I could feel the warmth rising in my cheeks. "I knew you'd like it! You think I didn't notice how you looked at the fruit?" She smiled cheerfully, showing her sharp white teeth. Lada was clearly in a good mood, and it rubbed off on me too. Or maybe it was the delicious piece of meat I had just savored. I decided to ask her about the week of abstinence.

"Is this week related to the upcoming Hunting Festival?" I asked.

"I see that Kurkin the Third has already filled you in," she replied, cutting a piece of meat from her plate. "It's our tradition to have a week of no meat twice a year before the Festival. Though, now that we have enough meat, we grow it on special farms."

"Yes, Kurkin told me about it. And he also mentioned that he visited there once on an excursion," I said.

Lada slowly nodded her head, still smiling. Then, putting her fork aside, she suddenly spoke in a more serious tone.

"Kris, I have some very good news for all of us. Before I came home, I stopped by the Institute of Time to see Kurio and find out how things were going with the time machine. And he told me that thanks to your marker, they'll be ready to send you back to the past in the next couple of days, so that you... um... restore everything to balance and save our Kris." She flicked her tail, placing it gently across her lap.

"Your marker emits some different time rays, incompatible with our time machine, which confirms your version of events about our parallel worlds." She looked at me expectantly, clearly hoping for a joyful reaction from me. But I was unexpectedly upset.

"So soon?" I blurted out involuntarily.

"I'm glad you like it here, but, well, you understand," she said, lowering her head and tightly hugging her tail. I understood the reason for her earlier cheerful mood—she was probably looking forward to the soon meeting with Kris the primate, her Kris.

"Couldn't we delay my departure for at least a week?" I asked, hoping. "After all, nothing will change for Your Kris; he'll return to the same time he left for his unexpected journey to the dinosaurs, and I'll have more time to learn about your world."

She shook her head.

"No, it's too risky. The rumors about you are growing like a snowball. Too many people have seen you at the Institute of Time, and our staff from the estate are wondering why they're being asked to return home only late at night."

This was pretty much to be expected. My appearance, instead of Kris the primate, had indeed been an extraordinary event. I imagined what would happen if a similar-looking humanoid ape had appeared in my world instead of me. Yes, problems would be inevitable. Or maybe one had appeared there instead of me?

Lada's voice brought me back to reality:

"The consequences could be unpredictable. This was Kurio's idea, to give you a chance to at least familiarize yourself with the estate while spending time with Kurkin the Third."

She smiled when mentioning Kurkin's name.

"But from tomorrow, it's better for you to stay at home, please!"

The prospect of being cooped up for a few days was not appealing to me. I pleaded:

"Please, Lada, I'll be careful! And tomorrow, Kurkin and I were planning to spend time together!"

I knew my request sounded a bit childish, but I really didn't want to give up my time with Kurkin, who was not only unveiling the mysteries of the Pteryx life but also giving me an incredible sense of diving back into childhood.

Lada was clearly torn, and this showed on her face: she scrunched up her little black nose and closed her eyes.

"I can only appeal to your common sense," she said after a brief silence. "Don't let us down. Nothing should happen to you. You are the key to solving the problem, Kris, our problem!" She looked at me with pleading eyes.

"I'll go to my place, until everyone returns. Thanks for lunch, Lada," I said, standing up from the table.

Lada suggested an evening car ride through the city streets when it got dark. I gladly agreed, despite the fatigue, probably caused by the eventful time spent with Kurkin. We agreed that Lada would pick me up at my hut, and I'd have some time to rest.

Returning to my room, glancing around just in case to avoid running into anyone, I immediately took off my toga and, after freshening up, sat down on the couch. Watson was nowhere to be seen yet. I adjusted his blanket and sank into thought. If I were to reason by comparison, as the smart teacher from the Jumpnasium had recommended, I should start with the question: what would have happened in my world if, instead of me, Kris the primate had appeared in front of Otto Schneider on the launch pad? Otto Schneider would certainly have tried to keep this fact secret. And not only from the public, who had no idea about the time machine at our company, but also from the employees in our department. This would be problematic, as restoring balance would require cooperation from the technicians, who would surely ask questions—and they know how to put two and two together. Sooner or later, the secret would be revealed, and consequences would be unavoidable. I understood that Lada was right to beg me not to leave the house. And my duty compelled me to do everything necessary to restore the balance I had disrupted.

I was glad that Lada had suggested a car ride through the nighttime streets of Cleartown. After all, starting tomorrow, I

might be stuck in my hut, waiting for my journey back to the past.

I waited for Watson to return from his walk, fed him, and sat down next to him on the couch, placing my hand on his soft, furry back, waiting for Lada. I didn't want to think anymore. The only thing I now wished for was for time to move faster. I had never liked waiting.

The anticipation of the night ride through Cleartown energized me, and I no longer felt tired. Hearing a soft knock at the door, I immediately jumped up from the couch and headed for it. Stepping out of the hut, I climbed into the car parked outside, where Lada was sitting behind the wheel. We drove out of the Territory and headed down the central streets filled with pedestrians, lit by street lamps. The closer we got to the city center, the taller the buildings became.

"And here's the Institute of Time," Lada pointed to a glass skyscraper reflecting the yellow light of the street lamps. I remembered standing on one of the upper floors in Dr. Kurio's office, gazing at the blurry outlines of an unfamiliar city through the rain.

I carefully examined the buildings with domes, surrounded by well-kept lawns with flowers. Lada eagerly explained their purpose. Most of them were clubs for various interests, schools, and buildings for sports activities.

"And now we're approaching the very heart of the city," she announced. "On your right is the House of Song and Dance, and the next building is the Temple of the Beginning of All Beginnings."

My heart stopped at the sight of the Temple, built in the shape of a massive snow-white egg. Crystal threads ran along its oval walls, sparkling even under the artificial light of the evening. Between the shimmering threads, golden inscriptions could be seen. A large crowd of pteryxes filled the square between the Temple and the House of Song and Dance. Many of them were wearing short fur tunics. I assumed they were made from synthetic fur, knowing how much pteryxes loved animals. This guess of mine was later confirmed. I lowered the side window to get a better look at the scene before me.

"As you can guess, many have already dressed in hunting costumes," Lada explained, pointing to the crowd. Looking closely, I noticed that the heads of some of them were covered with small knitted caps, with strings hanging down to their cheeks, and the feathers around their eyes were painted dark. We had to slow down to let a group of jumping, loudly chatting pteryxes cross the street. One of them suddenly stopped near our car on my side and began sniffing loudly.

"Kris, please, close the window," Lada asked, somewhat nervously. She then explained, "Just in case, so they don't sniff you out."

Reluctantly, I closed the window and sighed heavily. Visiting the Temple was now out of the question. But I didn't argue with Lada, sensing her sudden inner tension. I would have to ask her later what consequences she feared. After all, this directly concerned me.

We slowly drove past the central square, from which wide streets radiated. I examined the unusual skillfully illuminated

sculptures made from multicolored stone, depicting not only majestic pteryxes but also animals, trees, and even birds. They stood almost in front of every building.

Lada continued explaining what was where. Then it suddenly occurred to me that something was missing in this beautiful Cleartown. Of course!

"I haven't noticed a single law enforcement officer on the street," I voiced my thought. "And you haven't mentioned a single police station."

Lada shook her head in confusion, not taking her eyes off the busy road filled with cars and pedestrians.

"I don't quite understand what you mean, Kris. Is that some kind of club?"

I tried to briefly explain what I meant:

"Police, or law enforcement officers, are people—uh, pteryxes—who protect the citizens from lawbreakers and criminals. And they guard the city during large festivals or processions, when whole crowds gather together."

"How interesting! I'm even embarrassed that I didn't show curiosity about your world. Sorry about that. I just couldn't imagine that things could be different." Lada turned her head to smile at me, causing the glittering feathers on her face to stir, reflecting the light coming from the street. "Let's make a deal: I'll tell you how our world is organized, and then you'll tell me about yours," she suggested simply.

I happily agreed.

It was a wonderful car ride: we slowly drove through the busy streets of the pre-festival city with its amazing buildings,

while Lada told me about the social structure of pteryxes. I listened attentively, deciding I would definitely write all of this down when I got home. It would help me understand and remember everything better. And now, here I am, comfortably settled on the couch next to Watson, writing down everything in the order Lada told me. After all, it's best to do things properly, isn't it?

Pteryxes live in communities, sharing a defined territory. Everyone has the right to choose any area to live in, of course, with the consent of the majority already residing there. Lada claims that when choosing, it's best to rely on smell, and it should be "compatible" with one's own. It's hard for me to judge the truth of this statement, but if you consider our human expressions like "they sniffed each other out," "smell this out," or "something smells fishy," there's a sense in it.

According to ancient tradition, each territory is home to many animals, but not for eating. When I asked:

"So why breed them?" Lada just shrugged in confusion, answering:

"How can we live without them? They bring us joy, and they're kept under supervision. We control their reproduction through special food supplements, so there's no need to shoot anyone." She then laughed briefly, clearly pleased with her joke. Each territory has a large main house where the Territory Overseer resides.

"Kurio's ancestors have been responsible for our Territory for generations," Lada explained. "The ground floor of the Main House is open to all our residents. It's a convenient place for

celebrating birthdays and simply gathering together, especially on long winter evenings."

The Territory Overseers form the city council and take turns standing watch by the Sacred Egg on Temple Days. Every resident chooses their future profession based on their own inclinations.

"Kurio and I, of course, help with career choices and job placements. Some of our residents even work with him at the Institute of Time."

"What about Kurkin?" I asked. "He only has a basic education." I was naturally concerned about my friend's future. Lada smiled knowingly.

"Don't worry about Kurkin. He has a special ability to communicate with animals, which is highly valued in our world. And he's not as simple as he seems. At fifteen, he was already assisting a veterinarian. The veterinarian said that with his intuition and eagerness to help, he could do very well in this profession."

I felt proud of Kurkin, and Lada noticed it. Yes, taking care of animals was definitely the perfect path for Kurkin the Third. I sat there smiling, picturing Kurkin as a veterinarian. It suddenly occurred to me that I had been smiling to myself quite often in recent days. It was probably because I genuinely liked the world of Pteryxes. Or perhaps I had just been lucky to meet the best among them. Only a few days ago, I had no idea they even existed. I wondered what the odds were of stumbling into an alternate world that had evolved along a completely different

path. And where did our shared past end? After all, considering...

Lada's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Kris, now it's your turn to tell me about your world."

I told her about how we study, get an education, find jobs, and look for housing. I explained that in case of danger or an emergency, we dial a special number and wait for rescuers. As I spoke, Lada's expression grew noticeably somber. She pulled over to the curb, placed her cool hand on mine, and said:

"There's no place for us there, is there? Your world is completely different, Kris, and complicated. But things aren't so simple here either. There are still Territories..."

She suddenly fell silent, glancing anxiously behind us.

"Don't open the window," Lada said, starting the car abruptly.

"What's wrong?" Her anxiety spread to me, and I turned to see what had frightened her. A car had just pulled away from the curb and was now following closely behind us.

"Maybe they're just struggling to turn in this heavy traffic?" I suggested.

"Perhaps you're right," Lada replied, keeping her eyes fixed on the road and gripping the wheel tightly. "But we should be cautious."

I heard the rhythmic tapping of her tail against the car floor, a clear sign of her heightened tension. I decided not to distract her with more questions; besides, I was beginning to feel anxious myself. I remembered the Pteryx who had sniffed the air loudly at the Temple of the Beginning of All Beginnings. I hadn't even managed to get a good look at him.

We entered the first residential ring surrounding the city and drove along it, apparently heading toward our Territory. The traffic here was calmer, with only the occasional car leisurely passing by, delivering a group of tired Pteryxes home. Lada pressed the accelerator, speeding down the deserted street. The lights of the pursuing car remained close behind us. Whoever was inside wasn't even trying to hide their intent to follow us. I had no idea how many Pteryxes were in that car. Glancing back, I tried to get a better look, but the tinted windows and the glare from their headlights made it impossible to see even a single silhouette.

With a trembling hand, Lada activated the loudspeaker.

"I'm in the car with Kris. We're driving along the first ring road, heading home. We're being followed." Her voice trembled as she struggled to maintain her composure.

Our car filled with the voice of the responder:

"Hold on. We're coming to meet you now. Where are you exactly?"

I was struck by the immediate response of the person on the other end. His voice carried no hint of surprise or confusion, only genuine concern for us, as if he had been expecting such a turn of events. These thoughts flashed through my mind, leaving me somewhat puzzled.

Lada glanced out the window and replied: "We are passing through the Third Territory."

"Understood."

The connection was cut.

We continued driving at high speed, straining our eyes for the approaching headlights of the car coming to meet us. The pursuers remained close, attempting to overtake us. Finally, the sound of a roaring engine up ahead signaled reinforcements. Two convertible cars swiftly passed us, maneuvering around and flanking the vehicle behind us. Our pursuers decided to slow down, apparently unwilling to confront the determined Pteryxes who had come to our aid.

In a convoy of three vehicles, we finally reached our Territory and passed through the wide gates, which promptly closed behind us. Dr. Kurio rushed toward us, leaping high into the air. A whole crowd of Pteryxes stood along the driveway, illuminating the area with flashlights. Many of them wore fur togas of various colors.

Lada stepped out of the car and, extending her hands toward her husband, collapsed exhausted into his embrace, wrapping her tail around his legs.

I remained seated in the car, unsure of what to do next. I was supposed to hide, but was there still any point in doing so? My question was answered when a broad-shouldered Pteryx with thick feathers styled into a tall crest, dyed black, opened my door. Smiling kindly, he effortlessly lifted me from the seat and set me down in front of him.

"So, this is what you look like now, Kris," he said, examining me with undisguised curiosity.

I suddenly found myself surrounded by Pteryxes, their tails tapping excitedly against the gravel path. Someone whispered: "He's from another world," and the whisper spread in waves

through the crowd. "From another world, from another world," echoed from different directions.

Suddenly, Kurkin the Third pushed his way through the crowd. Pushing everyone aside, he shielded me from the others and said:

"Whether he's from this world or another, he's Kris. And he's my responsibility. Hey, Doctor Kurio, confirm it!"

A high, trembling voice broke the silence:

"Well done, grandson, that's the right attitude!"

"That's my grandmother," Kurkin whispered proudly in my ear. "Doctor, what do you say?" he repeated loudly.

The crowd parted to let Dr. Kurio through, holding Lada by the hand as she followed him. He stopped in front of us and reassuringly said:

"Kurkin, no one intends to harm Kris, but you're right—there's no need to turn this into a spectacle." With that, he gestured for everyone to disperse.

"Thank you, Kuadron," he said to the Pteryx who had helped me out of the car.

Kuadron smirked slightly and narrowed his eyes saying:

"No problem, Doc. We're always on guard. But you should know, rumors are spreading faster than expected," he said quietly.

"Set up a patrol across the Territory to ensure no intruders get in, at least for a few hours," Kurio requested.

In response, Kuadron let out a sharp whistle, and several muscular Pteryxes with sleek black feathers brushed past the lingering crowd, forming a protective perimeter.

"And, Kuadron," Kurkin the Third added meaningfully, "don't mess this up. I'm responsible here."

Kuadron gave Kurkin a firm pat on the shoulder and, leaning closer, assured him:

"I'll do my best, boss." Then, with a grin, he added, "You're doing great, I respect that!"

Kurkin straightened up, lifting his head proudly. It was clear that Kuadron's compliment pleased him.

Dr. Kurio, with Lada by his side, hurried toward their home, signaling for Kurkin and me to follow. We raced down the dark alleys, voices trailing behind us: "They're off to discuss secrets without us!", "I bet they're planning a trip to another world."

I clung to Kurkin's hand to keep up, but it seemed he had visited a feather care salon recently, as his feathers felt incredibly smooth and slippery. Tripping occasionally and being yanked back to my feet by Kurkin, I made a silent vow to myself that, should I return to my world (if things turned out well), I would spend an entire week lying motionless on my couch.

At last, we dashed home and practically burst into the spacious hallway. I immediately lunged toward the sofa standing by the door, but Kurkin dragged me further.

"Who are we running from?" I asked, slightly out of breath.

"The Hilarts. I'll explain later," Kurkin muttered without stopping.

Passing through a couple of side doors, we found ourselves in front of a staircase leading down into darkness. Dr. Kurio, who was ahead of us, pressed an invisible switch, and the stairs, revealing a long, seemingly endless corridor below, lit up.

"Hold on to me," Kurkin said, grabbing me by the waist, and in two swift leaps, he cleared all the steps.

It occurred to me that if Dr. Kurio had asked Kuadron for a couple of hours, that must be exactly how long it would take us to reach wherever we were headed. The thought did little to encourage me. I hoped I was wrong. Fortunately, the tunnel revealed a set of rails and a cart with a cabin standing on them. Dr. Kurio jumped into the cabin while the three of us sat down on the cart, equipped with two rows of seats. I felt somewhat relieved; my legs had been turning to jelly, and now I wouldn't have to embarrass myself in front of the athletic Pteryxes. I couldn't explain why, but it mattered to me.

The cart started moving, quickly picking up speed. Now that I was sitting instead of running headlong, I decided to ask where the tunnel led. Just as I was about to speak, Lada, sitting in the front seat, turned to explain:

"This tunnel leads to the Temple of the Beginning of All Beginnings. As the head of the Territory, Kurio participates in the ritual ceremonies during Temple Festivals. There are tunnels leading to the Temple from all Territories. From there, it's not far to the Institute of Time, where they will hide you until your departure back."

Everything suddenly became clear. It was a logical explanation. Moreover, the recent incident with the pursuing vehicle made it evident that I shouldn't be seen on the streets. If they didn't spot me, they'd surely sniff me out. Otto Schneider's words before my departure to the Cretaceous period to the

dinosaurs came to mind: "In this cloak, they won't see or smell you." Exactly!

"My invisibility cloak!" I exclaimed. "In it, I'm invisible and scentless!"

Lada smiled sadly:

"You're right, Kris, but your cloak is in the Institute, and we still have to get there."

Kurkin the Third, listening intently to our conversation, leaned his head closer to me. At the mention of the invisibility cloak, he even jumped on his seat, making the cart wobble. Instinctively, I grabbed the front seat where Lada was sitting.

"Wow, Kris, you actually have an invisibility cloak! Will you let me try it on at the Institute?" he whispered excitedly in my ear, tickling it with his soft feathers.

Honestly, with all the chaos, I hadn't even considered whether Kurkin the Third had figured out my true identity by now.

"Kurkin," I addressed him, "I need to tell you something important about myself."

I was plagued with guilt, feeling like a fraud deceiving the sincere Kurkin.

He placed his heavy hand on my shoulder and whispered: "I figured it out almost immediately, Kris, but I liked you. Remember, I wasn't even surprised when you refused to eat the fattened ants in the hut, remember?"

To be honest, his revelation stunned me. So much for simple Kurkin!

"But you were upset and thought I was just old!" I objected, trying to understand.

"I thought you were old; I've never seen such sluggish bipeds with dried-up legs before." After a pause, he added, "Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you."

I glanced at Kurkin from the side, trying to see him in a new light.

"You still haven't answered about your invisibility cloak," he reminded me. "Will you let me try it on?"

Suddenly, the dim tunnel light was pierced by a dazzling glow coming from an arch ahead, and our cart came to a stop. Dr. Kurio jumped out of the cabin and announced:

"We're at the Temple. But it may not be safe here either, so stay alert."

We all stepped off the cart and entered the brightly lit hall in reverent silence. The tunnel door closed behind us, and we found ourselves in a room with curved white walls. Above a tall arched door, golden letters formed an inscription:

Beginning and the end

Have merged in endless flow.

Go where the hearts ascend,

Don't ever look below.

"Don't ever look below," Dr. Kurio, Lada, and Kurkin whispered in unison, bowing their heads solemnly.

"We need to hurry," Lada whispered without raising her head. "This tunnel is no secret to anyone."

"I only hope time is on our side. Let's go," replied Dr. Kurio, opening the door under the inscription.

Ironically, just a couple of hours ago, I was convinced I would never set foot in the Temple of the Beginning of All Beginnings, and now here I was, standing within its walls.

Our small group entered the next room, where a crystal round table stood at its center. Dr. Kurio led us past the table toward another door, carefully stepping and ensuring not to swing his tail too much. As we passed, I craned my neck toward the table to get a closer look at the object beneath a glass dome. It turned out to be a slightly irregularly shaped oval stone about the size of an ostrich egg.

"A gift from the heavens—a stone egg," Kurkin whispered, noticing my curiosity. "And at the same time, our stumbling block. That's right—a stone egg, a stumbling block, or stone of stumbling. I really know how to wax poetic, don't I?" he added.

"Save the poetry for later, Kurkin," Dr. Kurio said impatiently. "Move along."

As silently as possible, out of caution and respect for the Temple, we entered the next chamber, which was lined with rows of benches. Walking down the central aisle, we stopped before a door curved to match the oval shape of the surrounding walls.

On it was depicted a dark egg, seemingly falling from the sky and leaving a glowing trail behind it. The image was made of mosaic, its shiny stones carefully fitted together. The glowing trails in the sky were crafted from crystal beads that shimmered in the reflected interior light. The door's curved surface gave the artwork a three-dimensional effect, making the egg appear to hover in the air when viewed from a distance.

I was awestruck by the craftsmanship of the artist who had created this stunning composition—I couldn't tear my eyes away. Suddenly, I realized that, for some reason, we were no longer in a hurry. Our group had gathered near the door, which had captured my attention.

I looked at Kurkin, who stood beside me. Noticing my questioning glance, he in turn looked at Dr. Kurio and pressed a finger to his lips.

Dr. Kurio was talking to someone on a mobile device that resembled a large spoon. Judging by the tense expressions on Kurkin's and Lada's faces, I understood that now wasn't the time to ask questions—I had to wait. Lada, in particular, seemed anxious, as evidenced by how she held her tail close to her knees with one hand. At last, after nodding several times, Dr. Kurio folded his communication device, which transformed into a round black brooch that he reattached to the belt of his toga. And to think I had assumed it was merely decorative. I had noticed similar brooches on Kurkin and Lada, which suggested that Pteryxes only used their mobile communication devices when absolutely necessary. During my nocturnal car ride, I hadn't seen a single passerby talking on the phone. I wouldn't have minded musing on this topic, but Dr. Kurio's voice interrupted my train of thought.

"I was just in contact with Kuadron," he said, moving toward one of the benches. He sat down heavily, his tail drooping wearily. Even the feathers on his face seemed to sag, betraying his concern.

Lada sat beside him, peering at him with worry, while Kurkin and I took seats on the next bench facing them—all the benches, fortunately, were backless.

"No need to panic," Kurio said, looking at our worried faces. "Events are unfolding as we anticipated, though, unfortunately, much faster than expected. Kuadron and a couple of his people will be here soon—we need to wait for them."

"What's threatening us?" I asked. "And who am I supposed to hide from?"

Perhaps I would have had the time to figure all of this out, but instead, I suddenly found myself on the run alongside the Pteryxes, who were trying to protect me from someone—or something. Or maybe from both someone and something. Dr. Kurio leaned slightly toward me, placing his hands on my shoulders.

"Kris, unfortunately, your presence here has caused significant alarm. Even earlier, there were concerns that using the time machine could lead to unpredictable consequences, including the invasion of unknown aggressive entities. These rumors and fears were especially perpetuated by the Hillart communities, who are eager to seize the time machine for themselves. My colleagues, who saw you on your first day here, couldn't resist the temptation to share this sensational news with their families—of course, in secret. But the Hillarts have ears everywhere, and the rest is self-evident."

Dr. Kurio sighed heavily and quickly added:

"I don't blame anyone. We weren't prepared for such a turn of events. I'm not even sure what to do next."

"Go where the hearts ascend,
Don't ever look below," Lada quietly whispered.

"We need to hold hands, like during the service," Kurkin said in a subdued tone. "Since fate has brought us all here to the Temple, even though it's supposed to be closed..."

He didn't finish his thought, which was clear to all of us. We took each other's hands, bowed our heads together, and whispered:

"Beginning and the end
Have merged in endless flow.
Go where the hearts ascend,
Don't ever look below."

Sitting in a circle next to the Pteryxes, whose existence I hadn't even known about until recently, I suddenly felt an unbreakable bond with them. And I was deeply grateful that they didn't even think of blaming me for everything that had happened. After all, it was because of me that the balance of events had been disrupted.

We remained sitting like that for a while, our hands clasped together. A strange sense of peace washed over me—perhaps it's in moments like these that people wish time would stop. But time marched on relentlessly and made its presence known in the form of Kuadron, who coughed delicately near my ear.

"Dr. Kurio, we have trouble," he said.

Kuadron didn't have time to explain the nature of the trouble, as someone suddenly began pounding furiously on the front door from the outside.

“You’d better return to the Territory; it’s safer among our own,” he suggested.

The banging on the door intensified, accompanied by the growing noise of a crowd that seemed to be gathering in the square in front of the Temple.

I’ll be honest—I was scared. My fear deepened when I noticed uncertainty even on Kuadron’s usually confident face.

“What’s going on?” Dr. Kurio asked anxiously, jumping to his feet.

We all stood up, surrounding Kuadron.

“Not now, we’ll discuss it later. We need to return immediately.” Kuadron spoke quickly, nervously, and for some reason, avoided looking us in the eyes.

The pounding on the door was now joined by the crowd’s chants, which grew louder and louder:

“Hand over the alien! Hand over the alien!”

A sudden loud beep startled us. It came from Dr. Kurio’s communication device. Kuadron instinctively reached toward the Doctor, then froze, closing his eyes. With trembling hands, Dr. Kurio unhooked his phone from his belt and, opening it, brought it to his ear. As he listened to the unseen caller, his shoulders slumped lower and lower, and his round dark eyes widened in what seemed like horror.

“Kurio, Kurio, what is it?” Lada asked worriedly, moving closer and pressing her ear to the phone.

Dr. Kurio quickly closed the device, which transformed back into a round brooch.

“How? How?” he kept repeating, his tail swaying more and more vigorously.

I realized that something very serious had happened—and it was all because of me. I stood frozen, afraid to move.

Kuadron understood that there was no point in delaying the explanation any longer.

“The Hillarts have kidnapped the family of the Incubator’s director, Krens. They’re threatening to kill them all. Krens is complying with their demands to save his family, and... and...”

“Our egg! Kurio!” Lada’s cry filled the entire Temple.

I listened again to the shouts of the crowd demanding the “alien” to be handed over—meaning me. My heart was pounding as I looked at Dr. Kurio, who was holding a weeping Lada in his arms, with Kurkin and Kuadron standing beside them, looking devastated. Then, without thinking, I dashed toward the entrance door and, grabbing the heavy handle, pulled it open. I heard Kurkin’s shout: “Kris, wait!” But I had already made up my mind. Repeating to myself, *“Don’t ever look below,”* I stepped through the door and was instantly surrounded by a tight circle of Pteryxes, sniffing me curiously.

“We’ve got the alien!” someone shouted right near my ear. I heard Kurkin the Third desperately yelling:

“Leave him alone! I’m responsible!”

But before I could react, someone hoisted me onto his shoulders and carried me away amid the excited shouts. I heard the pounding of feet and the rhythmic thudding of tails against the asphalt, merging into a strange drumbeat.

Finally, we reached a truck with an open cargo bed, and I was thrown into it. Two Pteryxes jumped in after me, sitting on either side. One of them leaned in close and whispered into my ear:

“Uh... Kris? Yeah? Look, sorry, but I’ve got an egg maturing in the Incubator too. You get it, right?”

I understood everything. I wasn’t angry at anyone. Strangely, in that moment, as I was being taken into the unknown, I felt... nothing at all. Even my habit of analyzing and overthinking every situation failed me. I still can’t explain why. I sat there passively, watching the streets blur past.

We left the business district and approached the residential rings. After passing through them, we reached a wide field that stretched into the darkness. The vehicle came to a stop, its headlights still on. The driver got out and walked toward us. Knocking on the side of the truck, he said quietly: “Get out, alien.”

The Pteryxes beside me helped me to my feet. I jumped down from the truck, and the driver standing by grabbed my arm tightly—probably afraid that I might try to run.

"We need to inform the Hillarts that we have the alien," he said.

"I'm calling Krens, keep it down," replied another Pteryx from the truck bed.

So, the director of the city's Incubator, Krens, is in contact with the Hillarts, I noted to myself. Which makes perfect sense, considering his family was kidnapped to force him into compliance.

The Pteryx standing next to me froze, placing his hand on my shoulder.

"Just don't let them shut down the Incubator, just don't let them shut it down," he whispered, gripping my shoulder tightly.

"Alright, Krens, got it. We're waiting," came a voice from the truck bed.

Then, the two Pteryxes who had sat beside me during our ride jumped out of the truck. One of them stopped in front of me and introduced himself:

"My name is Kartis, and these," he nodded towards his companions, "are Kradok and Kredok. Twins."

"I'm Kradok," clarified the Pteryx still holding onto my shoulder.

"Listen, Kris, uh... don't think too badly of us," Kartis hesitantly began to explain. "We're just scared for our kids, you know... the eggs. We're afraid they won't hatch, that's all."

"What did Krens say?" Kradok impatiently asked, finally letting go of my shoulder, to my relief.

"Yeah, tell us," Kredok chimed in.

"Everything's fine, the Incubator is still running; he was just waiting for updates. But he's worried about his family. And he also said the Hillarts will refuse negotiations if other Pteryxes show up here."

Kartis shook his head, his feathers striped with black paint. Only now did I notice that my involuntary companions were wearing short fur togas, and their faces were painted with hunting patterns.

"And there's one more thing," Kartis continued. "Krens said it would be best to hand over the alien in exchange for his family. That will be our condition."

"Good thing the olfactory magnetic traps are active, or they'd grab us all, and that'd be the end of it," Kredok remarked.

"What traps?" I asked involuntarily.

Kartis sat down in the shadow of the truck and pulled me down with him. I obediently sat across from him, waiting for an explanation. Kradok and Kredok joined us.

"You really don't know anything about them?" Kartis whispered, leaning closer to me.

I noticed that all three Pteryxes had placed their tails on their laps, wrapping their arms around them. I already recognized this gesture—it meant they were extremely anxious and afraid of something.

I followed suit, hugging my knees and resting my head on them.

"Tell me about them," I whispered back. "I have no idea why they want me so badly."

"The Hillarts... they're wild," Kartis began. "They move their territories so they're hard to track down. They kidnap Pteryxes to use them as slaves."

"And they force their relatives to spy for them in exchange for their lives," Kredok added. "It's terrifying. But we've set up olfactory traps all around the city's borders. They emit a threatening scent that makes their eyes and ears hurt, and the magnetic field around them blocks metal bullets."

"And not just that," Kradok joined in. "After being exposed to the trap, they temporarily lose their sense of smell—some even lose it permanently. And when that happens, their own kind kill them because without their sense of smell, they're useless." For a few moments, silence hung over us.

"But hey, Kris," Kartis turned to me. "Hang in there, okay?" "And wait for the other aliens," Kredok cautiously added. "Everyone's saying a lot of your kind are coming soon. But you're not scary, so... if they come, maybe we'll visit your people, you know, as guests."

I understood his meaning—he wanted to know for sure if more intelligent primates like me would follow. I wasn't sure if he'd actually be happy about it, but I wasn't offended. They had enough problems of their own. I shook my head:

"No one's coming after me. I ended up here by mistake, and Dr. Kurio is planning to send me back."

My companions let out a sigh of relief, and I could feel some of the tension leave them.

"Yeah, stuff happens," Kartis agreed, standing up and heading towards the truck's cab.

Then, out of nowhere, I asked a question that had nothing to do with the situation but had been on my mind.

"I've noticed all your names start with the letter 'K.' Is that just a coincidence?"

"Of course not!" Kredok replied with surprise. "The letter 'K' is for males, and 'L' is for females. And you're Kris."

"Here, take this and eat," Kartis approached and shoved a flatbread and a small water jar into my hands. "Who knows when they'll feed you over there."

A growing sense of anxiety and fear took hold of me, and I desperately didn't want to fall into the hands of the Hillarts. Instinctively, I glanced around, searching for a place to hide. Sensing my mood, Kradok firmly wrapped his arms around my shoulders, holding me in place. I knew that my urge to run was just a momentary weakness, and even if I tried, the strong and swift Pteryxes would catch me in an instant.

The loud roar of engines echoed from the vast field stretching out before us. We all froze. Somewhere deep inside me, a flicker of hope surfaced—that maybe Dr. Kurio and Kurkin the Third would appear alongside Kuadron to rescue me. But there was only silence. Looking back, I realize that despite my fear, I wouldn't have returned to them. I wouldn't have risked the unborn Pteryx children. I had made my decision back at the Temple, and I wasn't going to waver. I just longed for their presence on the threshold of the unknown that awaited me. And it was drawing closer with every rev of the approaching engine. We all rose to our feet, tensely watching the growing glow of headlights, which suddenly stopped about forty meters away. A metallic creak sounded as a door opened, and two tall figures appeared in the harsh glare of the lights.

"Turn off the trap!" a loud, raspy voice commanded.

"We won't!" Kartis shouted back. "Release the hostages first!"

"Show us the alien!" came the reply.

Kradok lifted me slightly and whispered in my ear:

"Don't be afraid, the olfactory trap is between us."

A growl from the Hillarts sent shivers down my spine. My grip tightened around the water jar in my hand, and it spilled.

"Release Krens' family, and then we'll hand over the alien!"

Kartis insisted.

"Alien first!" the voice demanded from the other side.

"Show us Krens' family!" Kredok countered.

A tense pause followed—the Hillarts were likely considering their next move. I was set back on the ground, and I felt my knees trembling. Kartis pressed a small round object into my hand.

"Try to hide this. It's my communicator. I hope it'll come in handy," he whispered, taking the now-empty water jar from me. I quickly wrapped it in the softened flatbread and stuffed it into the inner pocket of my toga.

The Hillarts' voices murmured in an indistinct chatter, followed by the thudding of their tails against the ground. Then, three figures emerged in the headlights, huddled closely together between two Hillarts.

"What if we just strangle them if the alien doesn't come to us right now?" one of the Hillarts growled.

"Then you'll have nothing to blackmail Krens with," Kartis shot back without hesitation. "This way, you get what you came for!"

"Damn cunning Pteryxes!" came a snarl from the darkness.

"One day, we'll wipe you all out!"

"Let the alien approach the border!" another Hillart shouted. "We'll send your kin once he's there! But he goes first, or they die!"

"Bring them to the border!" Kartis shouted back. "The alien will walk over as soon as they reach us!"

The Hillarts shoved the three frightened Pteryxes forward, practically tossing them toward the boundary. They stumbled, covering their ears with their hands and ducking their heads as they ran.

"Now you," Kartis said to me. "Cover your ears, or they'll hurt later. Hope we meet again."

Kradok and Kredok patted my back, gently pushing me forward.

"Don't ever look below. Don't ever look below," I whispered to myself.

Determined not to prolong the inevitable, I ran forward, nearly colliding with the approaching Pteryxes. Suddenly, a loud ringing filled my ears, and I pressed my hands against my head, running until I was right in front of the Hillarts—who promptly tripped me. Their loud laughter echoed as I fell onto the grassy ground, still clutching my ears.

"Hey, Pteryxes!" a voice boomed above me, nearly deafening me and sending sharp pain through my head. "We'll show you! You'll soon find out who's smarter!"

I lay there, head bowed low, too afraid to lift it. I didn't dare look at the hostile Hillarts, who had already terrified me enough. Through their laughter, I heard the distant sound of an engine retreating—the Pteryxes were leaving, taking Krens' family with

them. I was left alone with the Hillarts, completely unsure of what awaited me. If only I knew their plans. I made a mental note to find out somehow. I silently praised myself for keeping a clear head despite my fear, analyzing the situation rationally. That's right—I needed to figure out their plans.

One of the Hillarts suddenly grabbed me by the collar of my toga, yanking me to my feet. Stepping back a bit, he began to examine me under the harsh glare of their vehicle's headlights with unconcealed curiosity. I had to tilt my head back to overcome my fear and get a good look at him in return. Even compared to the tall Dr. Kurio and Kurkin the Third, he seemed almost like a giant to me. I didn't know what I had expected to see, but I was stunned by his striking resemblance to the Pteryxes. However, his head was much larger, covered in reddish feathers, and his prominent incisors hung from his mouth like sharp fangs, giving him a predatory appearance. I decided to think about this later, once I was left alone. His companion approached and jabbed me in the chest with a long finger, making me lose my balance and fall back onto the ground. This greatly amused the two Hillarts, who burst into laughter.

"Alright, Urgan, that's enough. Time to go," the first Hillart said after finishing his laugh. "They're waiting for us. I'll drive."

Without any ceremony, Urgan tossed me into the back of the vehicle, then climbed in beside me onto the hay-covered floor, and we sped off with a roar of the engine.

If it weren't for Urgan's heavy hand pressing down on my shoulder, pinning me to the floor, I probably would have been

thrown out of the truck. We drove across fields and then through a forest, bouncing over unseen bumps in the darkness and swaying violently on the turns. The journey was long; my back started to ache, and my shoulder throbbed. I couldn't figure out how to position my legs comfortably, so I found myself impatiently waiting for the ride to end.

Urgar was not much of a talker, which I didn't mind. Following a habit I had picked up from the Pteryxes, I sniffed at my companion and detected the scent of smoke mixed with burnt rubber. Or perhaps the truck bed itself was soaked in the smell of rubber; it was hard to tell.

Eventually, we arrived at a massive circular clearing, devoid of trees. Along its perimeter stood large round tents covered with animal hides. At the center of the clearing was the largest tent, its entrance adorned with green branches hanging down over the doorway.

The space was filled with roaring and shouting Hillarts, clad in short, practical togas made from simple coarse fabric. Around them, Hillart children bounced energetically, pushing off the ground with their strong, wide tails. Their cries and tail thumping created an overwhelming cacophony of noise and chaos. Some of the Hillarts waved torches, crowding tightly around our slowly advancing truck as it moved toward the central tent. Urgar grabbed me by the scruff of my toga and lifted me up, displaying me to the crowd. A wave of aggressive shouting erupted in response.

"The alien is ours!" Urgar bellowed over the noise. "He will lead us to his world!"

I didn't think it could get any louder, but it did. Hanging in the air, I tried to keep my legs still and my arms at my sides—I didn't want to look ridiculous for some reason. Dark, sinewy hands with long black nails reached out toward me, but I strained my eyes, trying to spot any female Hillarts in the sea of swaying orange feathers.

I suppose my sudden curiosity about Hillart women at such an inopportune moment—dangling above a hostile crowd—could be explained by the fact that I no longer feared for my life. I had relaxed a little because Urgan had just publicly announced their plans to use me to enter "my" world. They needed me alive—after all, who else would guide them there?

At least, our procession came to a halt. From my elevated position—ironically enough—I saw a Hillart emerging from the main tent, standing tall and imposing. At his appearance, the crowd fell silent and parted to form a pathway, leaving us in the center. Two Hillarts holding torches ran up to the tent and positioned themselves on either side of the dignified figure standing at the entrance.

Urgan finally released me, and I landed smoothly on the straw-covered floor of the truck bed. All the recent running and jumping had made me more agile.

The vehicle stopped, and Urgan jumped down, extending his long, muscular arm covered in sparse, coarse feathers to haul me out, gripping me by the collar. The second Hillart, who had been driving, ran over and grabbed me by the neck, trying to push me away from Urgan.

"Leave him, Bander," Urgan hissed, baring his teeth.

Wedged tightly between the two Hillarts, I struggled to move my legs as they practically dragged me forward, step by step, toward the imposing figure clad in a long green toga.

"We greet you, the most cunning and skillful of all Hillarts, the great Krabun!" my escorts said obsequiously, bowing their heads in submission.

I tilted my head back to get a better look at the "most cunning and skillful of the Hillarts," who stood motionless in front of the large hut.

He was over two meters tall, with a powerful, short neck and broad shoulders. The almost red crest sticking out from the orange feathers covering his head made him stand out from the others, resembling a sort of crown. The long fangs protruding from under his upper lip reminded me of a saber-toothed tiger. His large, round, black eyes examined me closely with curiosity. Slightly tilting his head toward me, he sniffed the air, twitching his nose. Suddenly, he swished his powerful tail and burst into loud laughter.

"The Alien is nothing more than a hairless monkey!"

Everyone around him started laughing too—first sycophantically, then loudly and wholeheartedly, chanting:

"Hairless monkey! Hairless monkey!"

Krabun raised his hand, and the laughter instantly ceased.

"Urgar and Bendor, take him to the slave hut and chain him up. Tomorrow, I will convene the hunters' council, and we shall decide then."

He nodded and turned towards the entrance of his hut. The two Hillarts holding torches on either side of him obligingly parted the green branches, allowing him inside.

I was dragged deeper into the territory, prodded forward by their tails, and thrown into a makeshift shed enclosed by metal bars.

"Don't forget the chain, idiot," Bandor hissed.

"Why me? Do it yourself, idiot!" Ugar snapped back but ultimately obeyed, leading me to a post wrapped in chains. Securing it around my leg, he gave me a hard shove, venting his frustration on me. I didn't take offense, choosing instead to accept events as they were. I couldn't allow resentment or fear to cloud my mind. This night had been full of events, and I needed time to process it all.

I stretched out on the ground and gazed through the open doorway. Dawn was breaking, bringing an end to this long night. I suddenly felt thirsty and involuntarily whispered, "Water..." A shadowy figure silently leapt toward me, sniffed the air, and pressed a cup of water to my lips. I drank greedily and whispered:

"Thank you."

A cool hand gently rested on my head, and a quiet voice whispered in my ear, "Sleep, Alien."

Gratefully, I closed my eyes and immediately fell asleep on the dirt floor.

Despite my exhaustion, my sleep was restless. I dreamed that I was running from something, clutching the long tail of

Curious, which was enormous in my dream. Behind me, I heard the rapid patter of paws relentlessly pursuing me.

I glanced back, and to my horror, saw Curious again—but this time, his mouth was wide open, revealing sharp, menacing teeth.

I woke up with a start and sat up, leaning against the thick wooden post to which I was chained. The sound of pattering paws hadn't stopped. I shook my head and fully woke up.

Through a gap in the wall, I saw the wet ground covered in puddles, and raindrops drummed on the hide-covered roof. A dim light filtered inside, illuminating the hut I was in.

The post I was chained to stood at the center, supporting the round, hide-covered roof. The walls were made of vertically placed logs, loosely fitted together. Along the walls were low wooden benches, neatly stacked with folded clothing.

"Is anyone here?" I asked, looking around.

Apart from the sound of rain, there was no response.

I suddenly felt hungry. Breakfast and lunch probably weren't a thing here. Then I remembered the flatbread I had received from Kartis—and the communicator hidden inside it.

Fortunately, the Hillarts hadn't thought to search me. They must have been too excited about capturing the "alien."

I got up and tried to take a better look at the hut. The chain attached to my ankle allowed me only a couple of steps from the post, clinking loudly with each movement. Carefully circling around the post, trying to make as little noise as possible, I confirmed that I was alone for now.

I sat down on the ground again and listened. Through the rain, I could hear the lowing of cows and the clucking of chickens. I hadn't noticed any animals last night—perhaps they were kept in the back somewhere.

I decided I had to figure out the layout of the Hillart territory. There was no way I would sit idly and wait for my fate.

But first, I had to deal with the communicator.

With my heart pounding, I reached into the inner pocket of my toga and pulled out the crumpled flatbread. It immediately started crumbling in my hands, revealing the round black brooch resting in my palm. I stared at it thoughtfully while brushing off the crumbs, popping them into my mouth.

I didn't want to break it, so I carefully examined it, searching for a button—something that could transform it into a phone, or as Kartis called it, a communicator. My efforts paid off: my index finger found a small bump on the smooth side surface.

Holding my breath, I pressed it. Instantly, the top half of the brooch flipped open and extended outward on a slightly curved metal arm. I almost dropped it, realizing I had been holding it wrong. Suddenly, a shadow appeared in the doorway.

Before I could react, it leapt at me, clamped a damp hand over my mouth, and snatched the communicator from my grasp, pressing the button to fold it back into a brooch.

Frozen in surprise, I stared into the round, worried black eyes of the stranger crouching beside me, his small black nose trembling anxiously, with a droplet of water clinging to it. The sparse feathers on his head were wet from the rain, sticking to him like a gray cap. It was a Pteryx!

"Stay quiet, Alien," he whispered in my ear before silently retreating into the shadows.

I remained motionless, sitting by the post with my hand stretched out, palm up.

The sound of loud wooden sandals clattering against the floor announced the arrival of Urgan and Bandor.

They halted in front of me, tossing back their soaked hoods and splattering me with water. Suddenly, a heavy blow to my shoulder sent me sprawling to the ground. Instinctively, I covered my head with my hands, scattering the remaining crumbs still resting in my palm.

Loud, wheezing laughter filled the air, accompanied by the rhythmic thuds of a tail slapping the dirt floor.

"Ah, ah, I can't—just a little push with my tail, ha-ha, just a little, ho-ho, and he—"

I lowered my hands from my face to see Bandor, nearly doubled over with laughter. Drool dripped from his sharp, elongated fangs, and his black eyes had narrowed to slits, making his high-cheekboned face seem even wider. Smirking crookedly, Urgan bent down and picked up a few of the crumbs I had spilled. Straightening up, he brought them to his nose and sniffed loudly.

"Quiet, Bandor, quiet!" he hissed. "These crumbs smell like Pteryxes and their electric stove. Who knows what else he's smuggled in!" He shot me a menacing glare. Bandor suddenly turned on him with reproach.

"Smuggled in, smuggled in!" he mimicked mockingly. "You should've searched this hairless monkey properly instead of picking crumbs off the floor!"

Urgar nearly choked with indignation. Straightening to his full height and bulging his eyes, he barked:

"And what were you doing? We were both there!"

"Don't open your mouth at me! Just search him already. What are you waiting for? Get moving!"

In my mind, I silently thanked the Pteryx for taking the communicator. I shuddered to think what they might have done if they had found it on me.

Fuming, Urgar grabbed me by the collar of my toga and yanked me to my feet. My head barely reached his chest, where tufts of reddish feathers peeked through the opening of his garment.

"I don't think the great Krabun would want to see a battered and useless Alien," a smooth voice said. The Pteryx, who had been quietly observing from the sidelines, now stepped closer, slightly bowing his head.

"Besides, we have a long day ahead, and he should be fed and watered. But of course, in your wisdom, you already know this. Forgive an old man for speaking out," he added, his tone respectful.

Urgar and Bandor exchanged glances, considering his words.

Still gripping my collar, Urgar checked my inner pockets. Finding nothing, he grimaced and brushed off the crumbs that had stuck to his hand before releasing me.

"Take care of him, Bonesetter," he ordered the Pteryx standing quietly beside us.

"The Alien is still chained," the Pteryx reminded them. "By Hillart law, newcomers must be washed and dressed properly."

"Do you take us for fools?" Bandor snapped. "We know that without you. Maybe that's why we came!"

He elbowed Ugar, who grudgingly pulled a ring of keys from his tunic, selecting one and handing it to the Pteryx.

"Feed him, water him, and all that stuff. I'll check later, got it?" he commanded authoritatively.

"And bring him to the main hut afterward," Bandor added, wagging a strict finger at the Pteryx.

Turning with an air of importance, they made their way to the exit, pulling their hoods back over their heads.

I should have felt relieved after their departure, but instead, I was burning with curiosity. The sudden change in the aggressive Hillarts' behavior after the Pteryx's intervention deeply impressed me. Such respect had to be earned. I couldn't wait to ask him about it.

After all, from what I understood, Pteryxes were in a position of servitude here—hardly the kind of creatures whose opinions were usually considered.

The Pteryx, now called Bonesetter, unshackled my leg and straightened up, looking at me with a warm, friendly gaze.

"Thank you," I whispered for some reason.

He smiled, revealing his small teeth with a missing incisor.

"A sensible primate, and polite," he muttered to himself, nodding his head slightly and looking at me with curiosity.

I didn't know how to start a conversation. There was something about this Pteryx that kept me from asking questions. And what could I possibly ask? "Why are you respected?"

The arrival of four more Pteryxes distracted my attention from Bonesetter. The newcomers stopped at a distance, eyeing me with unmistakable curiosity. I observed their disheveled heads and slumped shoulders. They were extremely thin, and their patched tunics hung loosely on them like sacks. There was a deep-rooted fear about them, a fear they had long become accustomed to. How long had they been here?

"Well, enough of that, you little ones, you've had your look," Bonesetter called to them as he headed toward one of the wooden benches to grab a pile of clothes. "Don't hang around, why bring trouble upon yourselves? Who'll take care of the cattle?" he added.

One of the Pteryxes, shyly smiling, bent down to pick up a bowl with some leftover water from the ground near me.

I took his hand as he straightened up.

"Thank you for the water," I said quietly.

"Good luck, Stranger," he replied.

"Alright, alright, let's go," Bonesetter, now with a bundle of clothes under his arm, hurried toward the exit, urging us to follow.

The rain had lightened, and I gladly tilted my face upward to catch the cool drops falling from the sky. I remembered Kurkin's words that commented on his drawing on the roof, depicting Kris the primate bathed in sun and rain: "Smile in any weather." How long ago that was! To be honest, I could barely hold back

the tears. I decided to distract myself from the sad thoughts by searching for answers to the many questions buzzing in my head. There were many of them. And the main one was: how could I get out of here?

Despite the rain, there was a bustle around me: Hylarts of all ages were scurrying past, talking loudly. I saw their women for the first time, gathering trash and sweeping the wooden paths that formed makeshift walkways between the huts. Among them, very young hylarts darted around, clinging to the hems of their garments or playfully hopping around. I noticed that some of the female hylarts were carrying tiny children on their chests, their little heads, with a faint orange fuzz on top, sticking out from the opening of their tunics. Although "carrying" wasn't quite the right word: the children somehow managed to stay on their own, while their mothers skillfully used both hands without paying much attention to them. I closely observed their sturdy, stocky figures with long, wide tails that they tried to keep in the air, waving them widely to avoid getting them dirty. But what intrigued me the most was the trick with the children, who stayed securely on their mothers' chests.

"How do they stay under the toga?" I asked Bonesetter. "I mean the children," I clarified, pointing in their direction. Bonesetter widened his eyes in surprise.

"Didn't anyone tell you about this? Hylarts are marsupials. Though they're distant relatives of us Pteryxes."

It took me a couple of seconds to process what I had heard. We had to step aside to avoid being in the way. The sounds of disturbed animals mixed with the rough voices of the hylarts

from all directions. It seemed like no one was paying attention to me.

I glanced at Bonesetter, who was staring ahead, and carefully took a few steps backward, intending to blend into the crowd and quietly leave this inhospitable territory. I had already pulled my hood over my head to hide my face as much as possible. In this cacophony of smells, it would be hard to track me down. Suddenly, a strong hand grabbed my shoulder, preventing me from moving.

"Don't even think about it, Stranger," Bonesetter whispered in my ear, holding the bundle of clothes under his arm. "You don't stand a chance, you'll only bring trouble upon yourself." He pulled me by the sleeve toward a small wooden building.

"Here, take this. There's soap, a towel, and clean clothes to change into. There's a bucket of water over there; you can wash up." With these words, he handed me a folded clean tunic with a bar of soap on top and nudged me toward the entrance. "Leave your dirty tunic there!" he called after me.

I gladly tidied myself up, pouring cool water from the bucket over myself with the ladle. If I thought positively, even the short time spent in the world of the Pteryxes and Hilarts had toughened me up a little.

The new tunic Bonesetter had given me was too large, almost reaching my feet. I wrapped a wide belt around my waist and pulled the hood over my head, which immediately fell over my eyes. Reasoning that I was already wet from the water, and that the rain wouldn't be an obstacle, I stepped out to where

Bonesetter was waiting for me at the entrance. He grabbed my hand, and we hurried back toward our dwelling.

During my time here, I had gotten used to the quickly moving and hopping Pteryxes, so I even managed to keep up with him. "I've already picked up our daily ration, we'll talk over food," he said to me on the go. Only then did I notice two canisters in his left hand.

"Don't you have work? I hope you won't get into trouble because of me," I said as we walked.

"I'm responsible for you, so it's all fine," he replied.

The word "responsible" echoed painfully in my ears, reminding me of Kurkin the Third. He was surely looking for a way to find me in the lost Hilart camp in the forest. I would need to take the communicator that Kartis had confiscated from me back from Bonesetter.

With my head lowered from the memories, I followed my "responsible" into the hut and sat next to him on one of the wooden benches.

I watched Bonesetter ladling thick, hearty soup into wooden bowls, trying to push the sad thoughts from my mind.

"Why are you called 'Bonesetter'?" I asked him. "I don't think that's your real name."

He handed me a bowl with a wooden spoon and sat down next to me.

"You're right," he replied. "I'm both a doctor and a barber here. The Hilarts need medical help too, and with my knowledge of healing herbs, I'm very useful. They value me here and call me 'Bonesetter'."

He spoke quickly, eager to finish his explanation so he could ask me questions. His face lit up with curiosity as he set his bowl aside and placed his tail on his lap, gripping it with his hands. He seemed ready to hear an exciting and captivating story.

"Tell me about your journey, Stranger, what have you seen? And how did you end up here?"

He froze, waiting for my response, staring at me with his mouth slightly open.

"Actually, my name is Kris, just like Doctor Kurio's pet primate, and I'm a time traveler," I began. I briefly told him about the reason I was sent back one hundred million years, my encounter with Curious, and how I disrupted the balance of events, which led me to the world of the Pteryxes and Hilarts—descendants of Curious. I also mentioned my brief meeting with Doctor Kurio's pet primate, Kris, who had somehow ended up in the Cretaceous period at the same time as me.

At the end of my story, he remained still, gripping his tail tightly in his lap. Finally, with a voice trembling from excitement, he spoke:

"So, Kris, you saw our ancestor, right?"

"It seems that way. But I need to go back. And I need my communicator."

Bonesetter seemed not to have heard me, lost in deep thought.

"Did you see the celestial stone egg?" he asked. "According to legend, it fell to Earth, bringing fire and smoke with it, and it divided our ancestors into Hilarts and Pteryxes."

I remembered the stone egg I had seen in the Temple of the Beginning of All Beginnings. Apparently, it was a fragment of a comet that had fallen to Earth around sixty million years ago.

"The Stone of Stumbling," I said, recalling what my friend Kurkin the Third had said about it.

"Yes, yes, so you're aware," Bonesetter confirmed energetically, nodding his head. "The Hilarts believe it marks the beginning of their line, and the Pteruxes stole it from them. They might even want to trade you for the stone egg."

"And I thought they wanted to come to my world," I said, puzzled. "What's their plan?"

"They don't have any plan," he laughed shortly. "They've got the valuable prize, which is you, and they'll decide what to do later. More precisely, tonight, during the hunters' ritual."

Suddenly, he seemed to remember something:

"You'd better eat. We're expected in the main hut."

My heart started pounding, and I felt an urgent need to get hold of the communicator I had received from Kartis. I saw no other way but to use it to signal the Pteryxes who were searching for me in this vast forest and let them know my location. The sooner, the better, because I didn't know if I would get another chance to be alone with Bonesetter.

I leaned toward him, placing my hand on his shoulder.

"My friends, the Pteryxes, are looking for me. I need to contact them through my communicator. I need to restore the balance," I said, looking him in the eyes. Unfortunately, I had never been good at rhetoric or persuasion; I had to rely solely

on his understanding of the situation. He gave me the impression of being quite reasonable.

Bonesetter fell silent, hunching his shoulders and lowering his head. It seemed like he was torn between his fear of the Hilarts and his desire to help me.

"Don't you care what happens to the world of Pteryxes? Events have already started to develop in the most wild, unpredictable way!" I tried to appeal to his reason.

"I stopped caring a long time ago. Since the day I was kidnapped, when I was gathering healing herbs beyond my territory. I had my little son with me; he had just hatched. I couldn't protect him. Since then, I've just been Bonesetter—without a name, without desires. But here, I'm needed. How's it go in that quatrain: 'Don't ever look below? Well, I don't look below.'"

I listened to him with mixed emotions. I felt sorry for him, but his pessimism made me angry.

"There are more lines: Go where the hearts ascend.' And I'm sure my friend Kurkin the Third is looking for me by the call of his heart, not just because it's necessary for the cause. He would explain the true meaning of the words: 'Do not look below.'"

I was surprised at the tirade I had delivered. I wasn't used to expressing my emotions, and I felt a little ashamed in front of this older Pteryx, who had surely gone through much and suffered. And here I was, with my passionate speeches. No, I needed to find another way to contact those looking for me. And I was certain they were looking for me.

Bonesetter covered his face with his hands, his tail limply falling to the floor. I embraced him in full remorse for my hurtful words to him.

"I'm sorry, I got carried away. I never meant to offend you," I whispered, gently stroking the still damp feathers on his head.

He freed himself from my embrace and, to my surprise, smiled, wiping large tears from his eyes.

"Thank you, Kris, you've returned my life to me. My name is Kurkin the Second, and I've just learned that my son survived," he told me.

While I was processing this shocking news, he pulled a large round brooch from somewhere in his wide sleeve, which he immediately transformed into a phone. He tapped several times on the surface of the lower part of the brooch, and it lit up. Names and numbers appeared on it.

"It looks like my old communicator, only smaller. Probably doesn't matter who we call now," Kurkin the Second muttered to himself. "Let's pick the first number, the first one, as the main one."

He pressed the phone to my ear, and after a couple of seconds, I heard a voice shout loudly into my ear:

"Who's this?"

"It's me, Kris. Can you locate me?" I whispered cautiously.

"We'll try, just don't turn off the communicator," the voice replied.

I glanced at Kurkin the Second, who was watching me questioningly, and nodded, whispering:

"We need to wait. Don't turn it off."

Suddenly, there was a loud knock on the logs from the outside. Someone's heavy breathing filled the space around our bench, where Bonesetter - Kurkin the Second - and I were sitting. In panic, we turned around and saw, through a crack between the logs, a black eye trying to spot us.

"What are you two doing in there for so long?" came the loud voice of Ugrar.

He was joined by Bandor, who appeared unexpectedly in the doorway.

"Ugrar," he growled, "I told you: check why they're delayed. Let me explain for the slow-witted. The meaning of this: bring them in. And why do I need such a fool as a partner?"

The black eye disappeared from the crack, and loud footsteps could be heard circling around the hut. Kurkin the Second quickly grabbed the communicator from my hands and shut it.

"I hope this is enough. If the brooch lights up, it means they've located you and established a connection with this communicator. That's how it worked in my time. That's why the Hilarts don't use them—to avoid being found," he spoke quickly and quietly, while attaching the brooch to the back of my belt. Luckily for us, Ugrar and Bandor were too busy arguing, trying to sting each other with sharp words.

"And I'll tell our cleverest that you haven't trimmed your comb for a week. Maybe you're aiming for his position, huh?" Ugrar yelled, baring his teeth with sharp fangs and waving his tail.

“What are you staring at?” Bandor suddenly barked at us.
“Move it!”

He rushed to me, grabbed me by the collar, and pulled me toward the exit. Kurkin the Second hurried after us, but Ugrar stopped him.

“Go back to your duties, Bonesetter,” he said. “You’ll be called if needed.”

The rain had stopped, and under different circumstances, I would have stopped to admire the shining water droplets on the leaves of the trees around us, illuminated by the sun. But now I was rushing, accompanied by two grim Hilarts, over the still slippery planks to the tall wooden structure towering over all the others. I couldn’t wait to check the brooch-communicator, hoping it would light up. But I understood that it would be problematic to do so in the immediate future. The Hilarts absolutely must not find it on me. I kept running, repeating to myself: “I hope it works! I hope it works!”

“Why did you let Bonesetter go?” Bandor asked Ugrar as we ran. “They said to bring them! Bring them!”

“I’m explaining for the slow-witted: I had to see why they were delayed, but I was supposed to bring only the Alien!”
Ugrar snapped back.

“We’ll see who’s right,” Bandor hissed.

At the entrance to the Main Hut, we were stopped by two other Hilarts, blocking the doorway with crossed rifles.

“Only the Alien passes,” one of them said. “You wait here,” he added, addressing Ugrar and Bandor.

The guards moved the rifles apart, allowing me into the spacious room, the floors of which were covered with soft animal skins. I placed my hand on my belt, squeezing the hidden brooch of Kartis, and looked around.

Along the walls, in a semicircle, stood tall, wide benches, polished to a shine. Tall windows, cut into the walls, generously let in daylight, giving this sparsely furnished room a festive appearance. A heavy curtain made of dark wool divided the room into two parts, hiding the rear from curious eyes. In front of the curtain stood a tall stool with carved legs, resembling a throne.

While waiting for the great and cunning Krabun to arrive, I dared to take a quick glance at the communicator. I turned part of my belt, revealing the coveted brooch, and saw glowing blue rings spreading from its center. My heart raced, and my cheeks flushed with excitement. A single thought echoed in my head: I've been discovered. I was so agitated that I couldn't think about my next step or at least the possible outcomes of what was happening. I just stood there, rooted to the spot, not taking my eyes off the empty throne-stool.

The curtain parted, admitting two fierce-looking Hilarts, dressed in ceremonial white togas with red embroidery along the hem and wide red belts. Their large hoods were spread out over their shoulders like broad collars. They stood on either side of the stool, slightly bowing their heads and folding their arms across their chests. Through the reddish feathers on their heads, small red combs were visible. I remembered how Ugrar

had reproached Bandor for not trimming his comb for a week. Apparently, it's a symbol of status among the Hilarts.

The guards standing by the stool rhythmically tapped the floor with their tails, while widely parting their black lips to reveal powerful white fangs. From the back of the room, the majestic Krabun appeared, his large red comb adorned with golden sparkles. He sat on the stool facing me, spreading his ceremonial burgundy toga over his knees. He raised his hand, and the tail thumping immediately ceased.

Krabun studied me for a few seconds before speaking.

"Do not be afraid of me, Alien. You have already experienced our hospitality. You've been washed and fed, now we can talk," his deep voice filled the room, loudly reverberating in my ears. His black eyes literally bored into me, as if he were trying to read my thoughts. Instinctively, I tightened my grip on the hidden communicator under my belt.

"Great and most cunning Krabun, I am ready to speak with you," I said, trying to maintain my dignity.

My words provoked an outburst of uncontrollable laughter from him, immediately echoed by his guards. Strangely, this reaction didn't offend me. On the contrary, it somewhat eased my internal tension. Krabun laughed heartily, slapping his knee, making the crown-like comb on his head tremble. I forced a smile to match the situation, which further amused the Hilarts. Finally, Krabun wiped tears of laughter from his eyes and said: "The talking hairless monkey, and what a way he speaks! 'I am ready to speak with you,'" he mocked me, imitating my words in

an exaggerated high-pitched voice. Then, slapping his knees again, he added:

“Now, let’s get to the point. I’ll do the talking, and you’ll listen. As those upstart Pteryxes say, let’s get all the dots on the ‘i’ right away. First: don’t even think about trying to run. You won’t make it. Armed guards are posted around the entire perimeter of our camp. They’re also watching our slave shepherds. They’ll shoot them on sight the moment you approach the border. Am I making myself clear?”

I nodded. I had been listening carefully, trying to memorize everything he said.

Krabun gave a satisfied nod and, extending his long dark finger with a yellow nail, continued:

“Second: You may be a monkey, but you’re clearly intelligent. Help us take the Institute of Time, and you can continue enjoying our hospitality. Otherwise...” he looked me over thoughtfully and beckoned me with his finger.

I took a few small steps toward him, and he immediately grabbed my arm, pulling me closer. He felt my biceps and patted me on the back before pushing me away, shaking his head in disappointment.

“For a slave, you’re too weak, and there’s not enough meat on you. What’s wrong, don’t you have enough food in your world?” he asked.

My heart sank, and I tried to push away the grim thoughts about my future. Instead, I decided to ask him questions that interested me. They needed me for now, so there was no need

to fear at this moment. Encouraging myself this way, I asked Krabun:

“Why do you need my help to capture the Institute of Time?”

Krabun squinted his eyes cunningly and began to flick his tail nervously.

“You will lead us to your world. And the sooner, the better.”

I thought, Kurkin the Second had been wrong; they really did have a very specific plan.

“Our scouts say that Tramar’s fighters are only a day’s journey away. They’re searching for the Alien,” one of the Hilarts standing to Krabun’s left said anxiously.

I had just opened my mouth to ask who Tramar was, when Krabun, his mouth bared in a snarl, jumped off his stool, seized the speaking Hilart by the neck, and threw him forcefully into the middle of the room. I had to jump aside to avoid a collision with the frightened guard.

“Gossips have no place next to me,” Krabun growled. “Get out of my sight, and find Bonesetter to trim your comb!”

The unfortunate, rejected Hilart hurried out of the Main Hut, covering his head with his hands, and Krabun sat back on his stool, resuming his majestic posture.

“There, Alien,” he said, addressing me, “I make decisions quickly, and I rule my people strictly, but fairly. Don’t disappoint me, and you will become my advisor in your world.”

From behind the door of the Main Hut, where we were, there was a sound, muffled by the rhythmic beat of drums. Krabun stood, arms crossed over his chest, assuming his majestic posture.

“Alien,” he called to me, “sit on the bench to the right of me.”

I gladly accepted his invitation, climbing onto the high bench. The lack of backrests on the seats in the world of Pteryxes and Hilarts posed some discomfort for me, but in any case, it was better to sit than to stand under Krabun’s penetrating gaze. In the doorway appeared the familiar Ugrar and Bandor, standing on either side of the door.

“Great and most cunning Krabun! The hunters are waiting for your permission to begin the Council,” Bandor loudly proclaimed, lowering his head humbly in expectation of a response. Through the red feathers on his head, a small red comb was visible.

A heavy silence fell over the room, during which the most cunning Krabun fixed his gaze on Bandor’s head. I began to feel pity for the Hilart, who was undoubtedly expecting harsh punishment for his untrimmed comb, when the voice of “the most cunning” ordered:

“Bandor, son of Harum, stand to my left, in place of the traitor Ravkan.”

Bandor raised his head in disbelief, then, trying not to run, made his way to the throne to take the honored position at Krabun’s left side. From there, he shot a scathing glance at Ugrar, who was grimacing in annoyance.

“Let them enter!” announced Krabun.

First, two Hilarts entered, rhythmically drumming on the drums hanging from their necks. They moved forward and stopped, turning their backs to Krabun and his bodyguards. Then, two rows of Hilarts entered, dressed in knee-length tunics

trimmed with fur. They carried cudgels on their shoulders, adorned with carvings. Holding their powerful tails aloft, they marched in time with the drumbeats and stopped at the benches arranged in a semicircle along the walls. The drumming ceased. Everyone started looking around, as if searching for someone with their eyes. To my relief, no one seemed to notice me, but still, I didn't dare glance at my hidden communicator, still tucked under my belt. Furthermore, the general anticipation seemed to shift to me, stirring my curiosity.

"Where is the Spirit Summoner?" Krabun cried. "How dare he be late?"

In anger, he swept his gaze over the motionless hunters.

"I'll replace everyone! Those who are guilty will be destroyed!" he shouted, shaking his fists. His thin black lips curled in anger, revealing long fangs. "I, the great and most cunning Krabun, am preparing to conquer an entire world, and with whom? I can't even gather the Hunter's Council! I'll destroy you all! I'll bring order with my own hands!"

His fury was boundless. All the Hilarts present in the Main Hut pulled their heads into their shoulders and lowered their eyes, afraid to attract his attention. I, too, began to feel uneasy from this display of rage. It seemed as though arrows of hatred radiated from Krabun, ready to pierce anyone who stood in their path.

Suddenly, the branches covering the entrance to the hut parted, admitting a tall, thin figure dressed unusually. His toga was sewn with long multicolored ribbons, hanging to the floor. On his head was a leather cap adorned with curved horns

attached to either side.

"The Summoner has arrived," someone whispered. A sigh of relief swept through the rows of Hilarts.

Krabun, frozen with his fist raised, turned his gaze to the newcomer. The Spirit Summoner raised his arms, palms open.

"Oh, great and unparalleled Krabun! The spirit of our ancestor is with us! I have just spoken with him."

His voice was low, even for the Hilarts, resembling the menacing hiss of a snake. He took a pinch of some dark powder from the canvas bag hanging from his neck, decorated with fringe. There was something mesmerizing, even hypnotic, in his movements. I watched him intently, expecting something unusual.

He threw the powder at his feet, and immediately, streams of smoke began rising from the floor, twisting and intertwining like a tangle of serpents. The smoke thickened, emitting a strong, unpleasant odor. The Summoner began to dance, rhythmically tapping his tail and saying:

"Who hides from our sight,
Who dwells in the haze,
Come forth to the light,
I'll lift up the veil."

He repeated this quatrain several times, quickening the tempo. Suddenly stopping, he knelt, extending his arms toward the thickening smoke.

"I see him! Open your eyes and bow to the great ancestor!"

A noise and the sound of kneeling Hilarts echoed.

I looked at the smoke, trying to discern any silhouette, but my eyes began to water from the thickening smoke, and my nose was clogged from the sharp stench emanating from it. I involuntarily started rubbing my eyes with my fists. The Summoner's sudden shout made me jump.

"Alien!" he cried. "Which hand did you use to touch our Ancestor? Answer!"

I stopped rubbing my eyes and looked at the palm of my right hand, remembering the inquisitive Curious, carefully eating the cookie from my hand. Perhaps thinking about him made me smile, because the Spirit Summoner immediately began to loudly protest:

"He is laughing! He mocks our Ancestor! Death to him! Death to the Alien!"

He hopped from foot to foot, slapping his tail on the hides covering the floor, shaking his arms outstretched toward me. The smoke cleared, and I could now see his maliciously gleaming black eyes peering from beneath his leather cap. The reddish feathers on his face quivered in rhythm with his movements, emphasizing his outrage. His call was taken up by all the Hilarts present, who enthusiastically shouted:

"Death to the Alien!"

One of the hunters standing near me grabbed me tightly, pinning my arms behind my back. Strangely, I was not overcome by fear; on the contrary, this threatening situation caused me to gather my thoughts. I needed to act, not just silently wait for rescue. After all, I didn't know what obstacles the Pteryxes hurrying to help me might have to overcome. My

attention was drawn to the bag of smoke powder hanging from the Summoner's neck.

"By killing me, you will lose the hand that touched your Ancestor!" I shouted, trying to break free from the strong grip of the Hilart holding me. "And that's even more powerful than the stone egg kept in the Temple of the Pteryxes!"

"Release him!" Krabun ordered. "Let's first get the details. Speak, Summoner, which spirits told you this story about our Ancestor?"

The Hilart holding me reluctantly let go, giving me a slight shove in the back.

"Oh, great and most cunning Krabun!" In the silence that followed, the Summoner's voice sounded particularly deep. "The Bonesetter, loyal to us, told me this story, passing it on exactly as the Alien recounted it. He also supplied me with a special herb that kills the scent of the hairless monkey so as not to offend the feelings of our Ancestor."

At the mention of the name of the Bonesetter, I tensed up. After he found out that his son, my friend Kurkin the Third, was in good health, his attitude toward his current position among the Hilarts had sharply changed. Oh, there was a reason he told that story about my meeting with Curious in the Cretaceous period to the Master of Spirits. And he even supplied him with a strongly scented herbal mix. For sure, this smell would overpower everything.

I'm not sure in what exact sequence these thoughts flashed through my mind, but they filled me with the conviction that all

of this was part of the plan for my liberation. It gave me a sense of inner confidence.

Krabun approached me, noisily sniffing above my ear.

"Indeed, I only smell it up close. This gives me an idea."

He returned to his throne and sat down thoughtfully.

Suddenly, he burst into laughter, slapping his knee.

"Pitiful cunning Pteryxes! We use this powder from the Bonebsetter to infiltrate their territory. Ha-ha, Pteryx' powder against Pteryxes self! And no one will smell us! Ha-ha!"

His laughter was joined by the other hunters, who thumped their tails in rhythm.

"Oh! How great I am in my plans! And we don't need the Alien anymore! Execute him, and cut off his hand to dry it. So be it!"

"The great Krabun has spoken!" the Summoner said solemnly. "I propose we do this righteous deed right after the Council. After all, we have more great deeds ahead of us, don't we, the Cunniest One?"

I didn't want to dwell on the reasons for such hatred against me; instead, a plan began to form in my head—somewhat risky, but what did I have to lose?

I had already gathered the courage to start putting it into action when Krabun spoke again:

"Have we tracked Ravkan on his way to Tramar? I want to execute him at the same time as this unworthy monkey, to humiliate him once and for all."

"I'll call Ugrar right now," the Summoner said, bowing low. He was already about to leave the hut when I sprang into the

middle of the room, bowing low toward Krabun.

"Oh, great and most cunning Krabun!" I addressed him. "I have gratefully experienced your hospitality. Now I beg you to allow me to perform my death dance. Your generosity will be remembered in the world of Spirits!"

The astonishment on his face was replaced by a wide grin. Without waiting for his response, I began to jump, raising and lowering my arms, humming something unintelligible. With broad jumps, still facing the throne, I gradually approached the Spirit Summoner under the unstoppable laughter of the Hilarts. When I was next to him, I quickly grabbed the strap of the bag hanging from his neck and darted out of the hut, scattering the powder around me and creating a smoke screen. I ran as fast as I could, not turning, heading toward the borders of this inhospitable territory. Behind me, I heard footsteps and cries, and gunshots rang out. "Don't ever look below. Don't ever look below " I repeated to myself. I still can't explain where I found the strength to scatter the guards standing near the Main Hut. Most likely, the element of surprise played its part here. Just before the last row of dwellings, with the Hilart women sitting at the doorsteps, the powder in the Summoner's bag ran out, and I threw it aside, continuing to run.

"Here, Alien!" I suddenly heard. Looking back, I saw a Pteryx slave to my left, peeking out from behind a ram that was calmly grazing near the entrance to the forest. Without slowing down, I veered in that direction, noting some brown paste on the slave's head. He ran toward me, and, lifting me up, placed me on his shoulders and, with long leaps, raced toward the forest. A

strong unpleasant odor emanating from his head hit me in the nose. I think I was starting to guess its origin.

We ran through the forest until the Pteryx carrying me suddenly stopped, hiding behind a large tree. He lowered me to the ground, urging me to crouch.

"It smells like Hilarts," he said. "Better to wait it out."

I hadn't heard anything yet, but I trusted the Pteryx's sense of smell.

A few minutes later, footsteps and voices reached our ears.

"Go on, Ravkan, why have you stopped?" someone growled. I cautiously peeked out from behind the tree. The disgraced Krabun's guard was walking between two menacingly armed Hilarts. His toga was stained with dirt and torn in places, and a bald spot on his shoulder revealed where feathers had been ripped out.

"Are you waiting for help from the warriors of Tramar, traitor? We've been watching you for a long time, and now we've caught you red-handed," one of the Hilarts shoved a rifle into Ravkan's back, but he didn't move, sniffing the air.

"I can't figure out what it smells like," he muttered to himself.

"It smells like your fear," his guard responded. "Go forward!" He shoved Ravkan again.

Suddenly, gunshots rang out, causing them to duck their heads.

"The Alien's running! The Alien's running!" cries rang out, followed by the sound of footsteps and the roar of engines. I felt the communicator on my belt vibrate. Ducking my head, I shakily unfastened it, opened it, and held it to my ear.

"We see you," I heard Kurkin the Third's familiar whisper.
"Stay where you are, don't move."

The connection was cut off. I quickly folded the communicator, turning it into a brooch, and quietly whispered to the Pteryx who had bent down near me:

"They found us. We must wait."

He squeezed my hand and whispered back:

"My name is Kleus, three years in slavery. I was a shepherd."

"My name is Kris," I replied. "And where are the other slaves?"

"The Bonesetter coated us all with this smelly mixture. We all scattered. I was about to run, but I saw you."

I was about to express my gratitude to him when suddenly smoke grenades rained down around us, filling the air with the now-familiar sharp, unpleasant odor that overpowered all others. The smoke clouded my eyes, forcing me to lower my head. I covered my mouth with my hand, trying to suppress a cough that might give us away.

"What is this? We're surrounded!" a loud, agitated Hilart's voice rang out.

At the same time, numerous gunshots were fired wildly in all directions. Right above us, a branch cracked, hit by a bullet.

"Where's Ravkan? Ravkan, traitor, stop, I'll shoot!"

"These are the warriors of Travan! Raise the alarm!"

Someone loudly beat a drum, and in response, drums from the area we had left began to echo, accompanied by war cries. A hand gripped my shoulder, and I heard a whisper:

"It's me, Kuadron, don't make noise."

Kuadron lifted me onto his shoulders and immediately rushed deeper into the forest. Looking back, I noticed Kleus' figure following us in the dissipating smoke.

We didn't have to run far. Though the term "we" doesn't quite fit in this situation, as I was riding on Kuadron's shoulders. On the other hand, I wouldn't have been able to keep up with the fast Pteryx.

When we reached two all-terrain vehicles with carriages, Kuadron tossed me into one of them, mounting the other vehicle.

"Hurry, get on!" he nodded at Kleus, who was following us. The all-terrain vehicle engines roared to life, carrying us deeper into the forest. With my heart swelling with joy, I watched Kurkin the Third skillfully drive his vehicle. Feeling my gaze, he smiled without taking his eyes off the road.

"Well, Kris, didn't expect you to have such energy!" he said. "We were already discussing the attack plan, and here you come, rushing through the smoke! I saw it all through the binoculars. Well done!"

I felt pleased by his praise, and I was indeed proud of myself for escaping from the Main Hut full of hostile Hilart warriors.

"Kleus got me to the forest," I said.

"Was he a slave there?" Kurkin asked, lowering his voice for some reason.

"Three whole years," I replied."

Kurkin fell silent, thoughtfully shaking his head. I had many questions I wanted to ask him, but I didn't dare, not wanting to distract him from the road.

He took out his communicator and called someone, steering the all-terrain vehicle with one hand.

"We're approaching. Kris is with me," he reported. He then listened carefully to the unseen interlocutor, nodding his head. "Got it, we'll try to break through from the other side."

He folded the communicator and clipped it back onto his belt.

"The warriors of Tramar are trying to surround Cleartown, many of the approaches are blocked. They're heading for the Institute of Time, they must have found out about you and your world. Didn't know they had informants among us, too."

"It's Ravkan," I said. "One of Krabun's close associates, he was his personal bodyguard."

"He was, yes, and now he's gone. And his slaves scattered, the Bonesetter is hunting them down to bring them to us." Kurkin's voice sounded almost nonchalant, which didn't quite match the seriousness of the situation. In the distance, I could hear gunshots and the clanging of metal. I instinctively ducked my head, feeling the rising fear. I glanced around looking for Kuadron's vehicle, but I didn't see it.

"I don't see Kuadron," I said.

"Don't worry about him, he knows what he's doing," Kurkin replied. "He and I are on the same team now," he said proudly, raising his black nose. "We're coordinating our actions, that's how!"

We were approaching Cleartown, crossing an open area covered with tall grass.

"Kris, there's a box of smoke grenades under your feet, throw them in all directions, don't hold back!"

On both sides, vehicles with open tops were racing toward us, filled to the brim with wild-looking, armed Hilarts. Wasting no time, I grabbed several grenades from the box, throwing them in both directions from us and ahead of our movement. Along with the smoke, we were enveloped in a strong acidic smell, which I was slowly getting used to.

"Oh, Grandma's feather-growing ointment!" Kurkin said. "She's been cooking it all night with her friends from the Club. It was my idea!"

"Great idea!" I shouted, drowning out the noise, the source of which was hidden in the smoke. "It covers any smell!"

"Keep throwing grenades, and hold on tight!" Kurkin shouted in reply. "We'll stop suddenly."

We raced across the field, surrounded by smoke and the smell of Grandma's feather-growing remedy. Suddenly, an euphoria took hold of me, triggered by the realization that I was no longer a prisoner of Krabun.

Right near us, the screech of brakes and the crash of colliding vehicles rang out.

"Smoke! I can't see anything! My nose is clogged!" an enraged growl hit my ears, drowning out the groans and curses of other Hilarts.

"Grandma didn't work in vain," Kurkin said with satisfaction as our vehicle rammed a metal fence, scraping it with a screech.

Several Pteryxes bounced aside, pointing with their hands in the direction we should go. Turning right, we came to a sudden stop in front of a large white building. Kurkin jumped out of the vehicle, grabbed my hand, and quickly led me inside.

"These are our neighbors, the Kiblis. They've opened an underground passage for us leading to the Temple," he explained on the run.

We rushed into the building, heading for the underground tunnel. I already knew how it worked, so I jumped into the wagon standing on the rails without asking questions. Kurkin the Third jumped into the driver's cab, and we were off. Strangely, one question kept bothering me: does Kurkin the Third know that the Bonesetter is his father, Kurkin the Second? I understood that the question was irrelevant in this situation, and I would probably not have time to find out. And yes, about time—I had to return. Because of me, chaos had emerged in the well-ordered world of the Pteryxes, bringing unpredictable consequences. But on the other hand, how I didn't want to part with Kurkin the Third!

My conflicting thoughts were interrupted by a loud explosion that shook the tunnel just as we were approaching the entrance to the Temple. Small stones rained down on me, and a large white cloud, accompanied by a loud rumble, was approaching from behind. It moved faster than our wagon and quickly reached us, completely enveloping us.

I could barely see anything in the dust cloud, only the dim yellow light from the lamps along the tunnel walls breaking through. I held onto the seat I was sitting on tightly, the wind from our rapid movement whipping around me. Suddenly, a loud metallic screech was heard, and the wagon I was in jolted sharply and stopped. I was thrown forward and had difficulty straightening up. Kurkin the Third's voice called for me to jump out of the wagon and move ahead.

"The rails are blocked!" he shouted at me. "We'll have to go on foot!"

I jumped out of the wagon, almost twisting my ankle on one of the stones scattered around. The dust was slowly dissipating, revealing the damaged walls of the tunnel, cracked from the explosion, threatening to collapse. Ahead, I saw the silhouette of Kurkin, reaching out his hands toward me.

"Come on, Kris, run faster!" he urged me.

From somewhere behind me, warlike shouts rang out:

"I see them! Stop, Alien!"

"Hilarts!" I shouted. "They're in the tunnel!"

Tripping, I ran several meters, closing the distance between me and my friend Kurkin. He grabbed my hand and pulled me forward. Shots rang out behind us, echoing loudly.

"Don't be afraid," Kurkin said, panting from the run. "They want you alive, they're just trying to scare you."

The tunnel's walls trembled with the impact of the shots, ready to crumble. We dashed down a side path, strewn with stones, as threatening cries from the Hilarts chasing us grew louder.

Our run seemed like an eternity; I sprinted, jumping high, not paying attention to the sharp stones cutting into the soles of my feet, trying to keep up with the fast-moving Kurkin, who didn't let go of my hand.

"We're at the Temple entrance!" Kurkin shouted in my ear, yanking me closer. He desperately tried to open the metal door, trying to push it aside. I joined him, pushing with all my strength.

"The door's probably jammed from the explosion," Kurkin yelled in my ear.

The Hilart shouts were getting closer, and we couldn't open the door.

"You won't escape, Alien," came a voice right next to my ear, filling me with horror.

I gripped Kurkin tightly, trying to kick away the Hilart, who had firmly grasped my shoulder.

"That's it, Pteryx, you're finished," growled the menacing Hilart with a sneer, baring his powerful fangs. "We can manage without you," his wild laughter echoed through the narrow tunnel, bouncing back multiple times.

I turned my head toward Kurkin, who was desperately trying to push the imposing Hilart away from us, who hadn't budged an inch. With a confident grin, the Hilarts shoved Kurkin aside with his right hand, still gripping me by the shoulder with his left. Leaning sideways against the door and grunting, he finally moved the heavy metal door, revealing a narrow passage into the Temple.

"Is it really over?" flashed through my mind.

In slow motion, I watched the cracks on the damaged walls of the tunnel expanding from the explosion.

"Krabun's coming!" suddenly shouted Kurkin.

The Hilart holding me turned around, and Kurkin managed to jump high, aiming his powerful legs at his chest, skillfully maneuvering his long tail.

"That's what 'jumpnasium' means," I thought.

The Hilart lost his balance, and Kurkin and I quickly ran into the Temple, hearing the crashing sounds of the collapsing tunnel walls and the curses of the Hylart crushed by falling rocks behind us.

Without stopping, we passed through the door with the inscription:

"Beginning and the end
Have merged in endless flow.
Go where the hearts ascend,
Don't ever look below"

Yes, "Beginning and End have merged in endless flow." After all, I had to return to the beginning to put an end to the chaos in the world of the Pteryxes that I had grown fond of.

Kurkin placed his hand on my shoulder, pulling me from my thoughts.

"We need to hurry, Kris," he said quietly. Then, after a pause, he added, "Friend," turning his head away and sniffing.

With a decisive movement, he opened the door leading to the other rooms of the Temple of the Beginning of All Beginnings. We ran through a room with a stone egg under a glass cover, and, speeding along rows of benches, we burst out onto the

street. Kuadron was waiting for us at the entrance in his all-terrain vehicle.

"Krabun is breaking into the city. The Hilarts of Tramar are blowing up all the underground tunnels leading to the Temple," he explained as we drove toward the Institute of Time. "Some of Tramar's fighters are already approaching here. Kleus has joined the defense."

My heart clenched at the sight of the empty square. It was getting dark, but the streetlights weren't turning on. From the nearby streets, the sounds of battle reached us, accompanied by gunfire and muffled shouts.

I covered my face with my hands. "What have I done, what have I done?" I whispered in despair.

Kurkin the Third squeezed my shoulder, bringing his head close to mine.

"It was nice to meet you, Kris," he said. "But now's not the time to moan!"

Kuadron's all-terrain vehicle screeched to a halt at the tall building of the Institute of Time.

"Third floor for you, Doctor is waiting!" he shouted. "I'll stay at the entrance!"

We ran into the building, heading for the staircase with high, wide steps.

Kurkin the Third put his arm around my waist to keep me from falling behind. In hindsight, I noted that despite all the trials I had gone through in the past hours in the world of the Pteryxes, I didn't feel tired and almost kept up with Kurkin,

leaping up the steps of the staircase. Occasionally, he would toss me ahead, without losing his pace.

Upon reaching the third floor, we rushed toward an open door visible at the end of a wide corridor. Even during this crazy race, I felt regret that I would soon have to leave the world of the Pteryxes. But my regret didn't last long, as shouts came from the direction of the staircase:

"Stop, Alien, stop!"

With a couple more jumps, we reached the door leading to the room with the time machine.

"It's time, friend." Kurkin's voice trembled with excitement, and he tightly pulled me to him. A sharp scent of his grandmother's feather-growing mixture hit my nose. Through the corridor, a huge red Hilart was coming toward us with big leaps, shouting as he ran:

"Alien! Stop! I'm coming with you!"

Kurkin practically threw me to the middle of the room where I had first appeared in the world of the Pteryxes. On the floor, there was a neatly folded invisibility cloak. I had just enough time to see Kurkin and Kuadron trying to hold back the Hilarts who had arrived, and the frightened face of Doctor Kurio, holding onto the lever of the time machine.

"I'll fix it!" I shouted. "I'll do it properly!"

"I'll do it properly," I whispered to myself, looking at the fern trees surrounding me. I took a deep breath, smelling the wet grass and cucumbers. A container with my provisions and sample tubes was pressing against my side. My heart was pounding wildly, echoing in my ears. I had to take several deep

breaths to calm down. It was still hard to comprehend that I had returned to the Cretaceous period, at the very beginning of my journey. And indeed, beginning and the end have merged in endless flow." This time, I would do everything properly. And I would return to my world, where there are no Pteryxes and Hilarts. The thought made me somewhat sad, but I decided to push aside the sentimentality and focus on my mission.

I had to remove my large toga to wear my invisibility cloak. I changed, glancing at my dirty bare feet. Apparently, I had lost my sandals while fleeing from the Hilarts and hadn't even noticed it. Carefully unfastening my communicator from the toga, I hid it in the inner pocket of my cloak, feeling for my marker. I wasn't too eager to part with my toga, still soaked with the smell of the feather-growing herbal mixture, made using Kurkin the Third's grandmother's special recipe. But I had to get rid of it. I hid it under one of the surrounding reed trees, covering it with fallen branches and leaves, confident that by the time I returned to my time, millions of years later, no trace of it would remain. In my heart, I knew that I would also have to get rid of the Kartis communicator, but I convinced myself that it wouldn't cause any harm. After all, it wasn't connected to the Cretaceous period, and in my time, it would just be a beautiful brooch.

I was sending soil samples and dried leaves back to my time without influencing the course of events. Having reassured myself in this way, I opened the container and made sure its contents were untouched. Seeing a packet of cookies lying on top, I began to wait for Curious' arrival, listening to the sounds

around me. Soon, I heard the rustling of an approaching animal. I pulled the hood of my cloak over my head, awaiting its arrival. When I saw its cute curious face, covered in soft feathers, I barely held myself back from picking it up. It didn't yet know that very soon, it would perish, becoming a link in the chain of events that led to the creation of our world as we know it. These thoughts didn't bring me optimism; on the contrary, they overwhelmed me with an immense sadness. However, I had to focus on the mission assigned to me by my boss, Otto Schneider. After all, that was why I was here.

I didn't notice when, after eating the cookies, Curious disappeared from the forest. I just automatically repeated the actions I had once performed in this era of dinosaurs. Namely, I headed toward the exit of the fern forest. I wasn't planning to run like last time, trying to catch up with the fleeing Curious. But out of habit from the Pteryxes, I sprinted through the trees, pulling my wheeled container by its strap. Once again facing the prehistoric landscape stretched before me, I suddenly stopped, examining the reddish dry soil and a group of Ginkgo trees in the distance. I sniffed the air and smelled a more pronounced aroma of giant oregano. Strangely, I even felt pleased to be here again, 100 million years before my birth. Only the thought of poor Curious prevented me from fully enjoying the scene.

Involuntarily sighing, I walked back a few meters under the shade of the fern trees and sat under one of them, eagerly awaiting Curious' second appearance near my container.

I had already taken one packet of cookies out of the container, opened it, and, pulling a couple of pieces out, squeezed them in my hand, listening carefully for the rustling that would signal its approach.

I remembered that during our second meeting, I hadn't been wearing my invisibility cloak because I had been checking it for potential damage. Since I had decided to do everything properly this time, I chose to repeat my actions by removing the cloak and carefully laying it out on my lap.

When the rustling of the approaching Curious was heard, I slightly extended my hand, with the cookies in it, in anticipation of his arrival. With my heart racing, I noticed his cute, elongated face peeking out from behind the nearby trunk of a giant fern. At first, he froze in surprise when he saw me with my hand extended toward him, but then he sniffed the air, moving his little black nose. I remained perfectly still, not wanting to scare him off.

I felt his moist touch on my palm. Preparing his DNA sample for sending to my future, I felt like a traitor to Curious, condemning him to a quick death in the jaws of the terrible bird *Harpactognathus*.

No, no, I needed to rid myself of emotional attachment to this cute creature. After all, I'm an experienced time traveler, and I am well aware of the code of conduct for my profession. Besides, I'm not very social in life, preferring to analyze various situations on my own. I needed to start thinking neutrally.

I put on my undamaged invisibility cloak and filled its pockets with the items necessary for my task, not forgetting the water bottle and a packet of cookies.

Leaving the container among the fern trees, I headed toward the fragrant giant oregano, fully concealed by my protective cloak. On the way there, I tried to reason calmly, trying to organize my thoughts. I decided to figure out for myself when my emotional attachment to the prehistoric Pteryx was born, which caused me to interfere in the course of events, disrupting the balance. It must have started the moment I named him Curious.

Actually, I named him so only after his second appearance next to me. I'm not mistaken; I have an excellent memory. Yes, that's right, at that moment, I remembered Robinson Crusoe, who named his suddenly acquired friend Friday. But I had no idea which day of the week it was, so I based the name on his character trait—curiosity. So, technically, before that, he didn't have a name.

Although by the time of my second appearance here, in the era of dinosaurs and many other prehistoric creatures unknown to science, I already knew from the beginning that he was Curious.

Perhaps I should just pretend that this cute, soft-feathered Pteryx has nothing to do with me, that it is simply a part of the local fauna. And logically speaking, he indeed has nothing to do with me, having vanished from the Earth a many million years before I appeared. If it weren't for the ambitious plans of my direct boss, Otto Schneider, who decided to open a new

paleontology department in our museum, I wouldn't have ended up here.

My somewhat tangled thoughts were interrupted by a giant dragonfly, stubbornly trying to fly across my face. I felt the breeze from its rapid wingbeats, the transparent blue wings brushing the air. I nearly lost my balance and almost fell. I waved my arms to swat away the pesky insects, flying toward the strong spicy scent of the giant oregano.

I didn't even notice how I ended up so close to it. The enormous flowers, releasing a cloying sweet aroma, resembled large mouths ready to devour the foolish insects drawn to its deception.

Just like last time, I picked up a couple of wilted petals from the ground, intending to send them to my time for analysis using the marker. Of course, I didn't forget to label the test tubes with "Origanum Giganticus Carnivorus" – "Giant Carnivorous Oregano" – a name that seemed very fitting for it. Repeating the route I had taken before, I found myself under a Ginkgo tree, where I had once peacefully dozed off, admiring the prehistoric landscape. Gone was my former carelessness. I could not shake the thought of poor Curious, condemned to die under the claws of the terrifying carnivorous bird *Harpactognathus*.

Sighing sadly, I tilted my head back, holding the bottle of water toward the thick foliage above my head.

"Hey, Kris, don't be afraid," I whispered. "Doctor Kurio will take you back home soon."

At the mention of Doctor Kurio's name, a quiet cooing, almost like the whimpering of a child, came from above. Slowly, a dark hand, covered in reddish fur, appeared. I noticed with satisfaction a broken nail on the index finger. My phenomenal memory hadn't failed me this time too.

Quickly snatching the bottle from my hand, the arm disappeared.

I remained sitting under the tree, pondering the sad fate of Curious, whom I didn't even have the right to save. I had promised my friends-pteryxes that I would do everything properly to avoid plunging their world into chaos again. But what about poor Curious? He was the ancestor of two species, the Pteryxes and the Hilarts. And they are so different! What a prolific little thing! Well, he would have been prolific if he had survived. But Kris—the primate of Kurio—is sitting on the tree above me, and that's a fact.

Could the reason be me? I was the one who got lost in worlds, holding on to the tail of Curious, while Iris—the primate—was running after me, crying plaintively, trying to snatch the water bottle from me. Why is he shouting so loudly? The Hilarts will hear. His loud cries turned into a threatening growl coming from somewhere above.

I suddenly woke up and immediately flattened myself under the tree, hiding beneath the invisibility cloak, concealing myself from the sharp eyes of the giant monstrous birds flying by. I waited for them to pass overhead, casting huge shadows. My heartbeat quickened as I began mentally mourning the unfortunate inquisitive Curious. Tears rolled from my eyes,

perhaps the result of fatigue and the tension from the events I had recently experienced.

At first, I decided to falter and remain in my shelter, leaving Curious to his fate, but then I decided, just as I did last time, to crawl toward the feasting flying dinosaurs. The ancestor of Doctor Kurio and my friend Kurkin the Third deserved a proper farewell.

I now realize, in hindsight, that these thoughts of mine sounded somewhat pompous, but that's exactly what I thought. Having made this decision, I pulled the marker from my inner pocket, keeping it ready, and crawled toward the bushes, past the giant oregano, to the remains of the prehistoric animal, over which the *Harpactognathus* were scavenging. I tried to breathe through my nose, already knowing from experience that it would be very difficult to crawl with my nose pinched. The smell of decaying meat was becoming unbearable. Finally, I reached the spot. Hidden behind green branches and wrapped in my cloak, I didn't attract the attention of the hungry predators. I knew what I had to do. Specifically, I needed to secretly drag one of the gnawed bones toward me and disappear with it into my time and my world. This time, I would do it properly. But first, I would wait for the appearance of the cute, innocent Curious. He shouldn't be alone in the last moments of his life.

Internally, I was already prepared for what would happen, but his heartrending cries cut into my heart. Unexpectedly, I shouted loudly, causing the terrifying *Harpactognathus* to stir, filling the air with their horrible hoarse clucks and loudly flapping their giant black wings. The claws holding Curious loosened.

Without thinking, I grabbed him by the tail, simultaneously swiping the marker across my arm and squinting my eyes. The awful smell of rotting meat disappeared, and the loud cries of the pteryx I had pulled from beneath the predator's claws suddenly stopped. Still holding him tightly by the tail, I opened my eyes, my heart pounding, fearing I'd end up back in the Institute of Time of Doctor Kurio. To my relief, I saw Otto Schneider. For some reason, he looked very pale. Clutching his chest, he quietly exhaled, "Oh, oh."

I immediately realized that, under my invisibility cloak, I was simply invisible, and, most likely, the sudden appearance of this strange creature had startled him. Curious, seeing the unexpected change in surroundings, decided to play dead, lying on the floor with his eyes shut. I released his tail, and he flipped onto his back, raising his paws, perhaps deciding that this would make his act more convincing.

I pulled back my hood and, in as cheerful a voice as I could muster, said:

"Glad to be back, Mr. Schneider. I pulled this pteryx out from under the claws of a *Harpactognathus* that was about to eat him. So, his absence in the Cretaceous period is programmed and logical."

Instead of responding, Otto Schneider extended his hand toward me, speaking in a trembling voice:

"There was just a jumping monkey with a water bottle, very similar to you. Then it turned into this feathered cat. Oh, oh," he added with a sigh.

For a few moments, we silently looked at each other. Gradually, my boss regained his composure. He took a deep breath and asked:

“So what do we do with this Ignatus now?”

“This is *Pteryx Curiosus* – the Curious Pteryx. The *Harpactognathus* was going to eat him. I could keep him for a while,” I timidly suggested.

Otto Schneider examined the Pteryx with curiosity, who was still lying on the floor with his paws up.

“*Couriosus*, you say. Hmm. Is he known to science?”

I shook my head in the negative. His interest gave me some confidence.

“Still unknown,” I answered. “I could, of course, wait until he’s nothing but gnawed bones, but now we have a whole specimen, which would be a major achievement for science. We can later explain that we managed to clone him,” I said enthusiastically, improvising.

Otto Schneider squinted thoughtfully:

“Well, yes, cloning would be an explanation for his appearance with us. I can just imagine the long faces of our competitors!”

He chuckled to himself. Curious, who had been pretending to be dead until then, opened his eyes, rolled onto his stomach, and, stretching out his little face, began sniffing. Seeing the familiar container standing a meter away from Otto Schneider, he squealed and, in one leap, reached it. Sitting on his hind legs, he began scratching the lid with his front paws, trying to open it.

“No, Kris, with those strong legs and long tail, he’ll wreck your whole apartment,” my boss said with some admiration. “I’ll take him to my country house; he can live there in nature.”

I felt relieved because, acting impulsively to save Curious, I hadn’t considered the consequences. In my small apartment, he would indeed feel cramped. And my cat, Watson, certainly wouldn’t be happy about it. I felt a sense of joy and satisfaction with myself because I had managed to save Curious and not disrupt the balance of events. After all, I had really returned to my time and my world.

“Uh, Kris, you can go change now. You smell like ancient dinosaurs. Not a pleasant smell, in my opinion. And I’ll give you three days to submit a detailed written report.”

“There are cookies in the container,” I said. “Maybe he’s hungry.”

“Go, go,” Otto Schneider waved at me, simultaneously flipping open the container lid. His previous bewilderment was replaced with businesslike efficiency. I knew this look of his—when he was calculating his next move.

With a sense of duty fulfilled, I headed to the shower area, where I found my neatly folded clothes. This was my second shower of the day, after the bucket of water poured over me during my captivity with the Hilarts. How long ago and far away that felt! “Don’t ever look below,” I whispered to myself for some reason.

After taking a disinfecting shower and changing, I pulled the communicator from my cloak’s inner pocket and transferred it to my pants pocket. Perhaps there won’t be a heart-to-heart talk

with Otto Schneider after this “business trip.” Which is probably for the best, as it’s time for me to go home.

I was completely lost in my thoughts on the way home, still deeply affected by the events I had just experienced. Having developed the habit of running from pteryxes, I dashed ahead, only coming to my senses after I knocked a few pedestrians off their feet as they crossed the street on a green light. I apologized under their disgruntled gazes and tried to switch to a normal pace, making an effort not to run again.

Passing by the central square, where I liked to walk during my free time, I decided to pause for a moment, to calm down and gather my thoughts. The memories were still too fresh, preventing me from realizing that they were behind me and, in fact, would never happen. Or would it be more accurate to say, never *happened*?

The rain started, and I lifted my head, letting the cool drops fall on my face.

"Smile in any weather," that's how Kurkin the Third commented on the drawing on his roof. This memory warmed my soul.

The rain grew stronger, but I stood there, smiling widely. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a few passersby who quickly ran by with their umbrellas open, casting suspicious glances at me.

The square quickly emptied, and I decided to head for the nearest free bench, located under a sprawling tree whose thick foliage could provide good shelter from the rain.

I jumped high and ran toward it, sitting down with pleasure and leaning back against the backrest. Before my mental gaze, the landscape of the Cretaceous period, which I had recently admired, appeared. I stretched out my nose and sniffed: it smelled like wet grass. All that was missing was the scent of cucumbers and the aroma of the giant, voracious oregano. Memories flashed in my head, each landscape replaced by the next, one face following another. But one face—Kurkin the Third's face—stood out, pushing all the others into the background.

I remembered our first meeting and our subsequent conversations, during which he won my heart with his sincerity and directness. With him, I experienced simple joys, available only in carefree childhood, perhaps.

And I was also a witness to how, due to circumstances, he grew up and matured within a few days. Without hesitation, following the call of his heart, he risked himself to rescue me from the captivity of the Hilarts.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I thought about how Kurkin the Third didn't even suspect my existence and would never know about it. I would never again see Doctor Kurio and his sweet wife Lada, or the brave Kuadrone with his team. And I would never have the chance to thank Kartis for the communicator he gave me.

I became deeply upset thinking about all this. But then I came to my senses, remembering my Watson, who must have been hungry by now. Moreover, I needed to get rid of these pessimistic thoughts, which are a sign of selfishness. After all, I

had seen another world and participated in incredible events. I gained friends and understood the true meaning of “mutual assistance” and “mutual trust.” I would keep my memories as a precious treasure, more valuable than all other material treasures combined. To do this, I would need to go home and start writing them down, without missing a single detail. Perhaps the time will come when I decide to share my records, and their future readers will find the events that happened to me as inspiring as I find them.

Having made this decision, I jumped off the now-wet bench and ran toward the subway, smiling as I remembered how I had dreamed of resting on the couch after all those runs with pteryxes.

At home, I found my cat Watson hungry. I felt a little guilty, as I had rarely thought of him in recent days. As compensation, I gave him an extra portion of his favorite cat treat: sliced raw chicken. For some inexplicable reason, I was glad that Kurkin the Third wouldn't see this.

Perhaps I shouldn't mention that I deeply miss the world of friendly pteryxes and my new friends. Kris the primate must already be with his family at Doctor Kurio and Lada's place. And they will never know of my existence. Kurkin the Third will never show me his “adual illustration” to explain the structure of their society. I am the only one who knows about the recent events. Only for me, it is a reality, the details of which I have recorded. I don't want to spoil the impression of my adventures with sad reflections or descriptions of my sorrow that I will never meet

Kurkin the Third again. I just know that he exists. And that is enough.

Speaking of Curious, Otto Schneider decided to name him after himself, so now he is officially called “Otto.” All the newspaper headlines are full of photographs of the two “Ottos.” My boss tirelessly gives interviews, praising his team members who managed to extract DNA samples from the fossilized remains for cloning *Pteryx Couriosus*. I’ve been allowed to visit “Otto-Curious” next weekend. This will be the first time I meet my boss Otto Schneider in an informal setting, at his country house. I will definitely bring a pack of cookies with me. After all, it was the cookie packaging that started my acquaintance with the pteryxes.

With that, I conclude the description of my most amazing business trip.

Beginning and the end

Have merged in endless flow.

Go where the hearts ascend,

Don't ever look below.”

Kris remained lost in thought for a while, absently stroking his cat Watson, who was lying next to him on the couch. Then he approached the desk by the window and opened one of its drawers. Pulling out a large round brooch, he returned to the couch and sat down, carefully examining it. Pressing an inconspicuous button on its side, he transformed it into a communicator. Running his fingers over the lower part of it, he murmured softly, “Let’s choose the first number, as the main

one.” He then held it up to his ear and kept it there for a while. Sighing deeply, he transformed it back into a brooch and gently placed it on the table next to the computer.

Outside, the rain was falling, just as heavily as when he was held captive by the Hilarts.

He tried to imagine the moment of Kris-the-primate’s return to Doctor Kurio. He clearly remembered the words Doctor Kurio had spoken to his beloved pet, who had mistakenly found himself in the age of dinosaurs during the Cretaceous period: “We’ve got you back, Kris, good boy.” That’s exactly how he had said it—Kris’s excellent memory had never failed him. This time, however, Doctor Kurio and his team wouldn’t have to deal with the chewed-up bone that Kris had waved around when he made his unexpected appearance in the world of pteryxes. At the thought of this, a faint smile appeared on Kris’s face, and in his head, the soothing voice of Doctor Kurio seemed to echo.

* * *

“We’ve got you back, Kris, good boy,” Doctor Kurio tried to say calmly, hiding his worry. It was his carelessness that had caused innocent Kris to end up in such a distant past, hoping to meet his parent.

He turned to him, extending his arms. Kris dropped the water bottle and, with joyful cries, rushed toward Doctor Kurio for a tight hug.

Surprised, Doctor Kurio watched the bottle roll away with water spilling out of it. His worry for Kris gave way to deep confusion. Firstly, Kris had been sent back a hundred million

years without any water container—he had nothing with him at all. Secondly, such plastic bottles had long been out of production, and they certainly weren't that small.

He carefully pushed Kris away from him, observing him closely.

“What did you see, my boy?” he asked, repeating the question with gestures.

Kris suddenly smiled brightly, patting his chest with his fists. Then, using sign language, he explained:

“I saw daddy. He gave me water.”

He tried to pronounce the word “daddy,” repeating “da, da,” while pointing to the nearly empty plastic bottle.

Doctor Kurio opened his mouth in astonishment, nervously tapping his tail on the floor. Two staff members in white coats, who were also on the “launch pad” on the third floor of the Institute of Time, approached them. The pteryx' faces, surrounding Kris, showed a mixture of confusion and fear. This is what happens when something inexplicable appears—something that shouldn't exist. This “something” was the plastic bottle that had appeared with Kris from the unimaginably distant past.

In the ensuing silence, the soft tapping of excited pteryx' tails on the floor could be heard. Their anxiety passed onto Kris, who didn't understand the cause.

He anxiously whined, “Gu-gu-gu,” stretching his lips and gesturing:

“Daddy good. Gave water. Kris home, I home.”

Doctor Kurio decided to pull himself together. It seemed they

had a problem, and in order to solve it, he needed to calm down first.

“Take the bottle for analysis,” he instructed his staff. “We’ll go home with Kris, to an environment he’s familiar with.”

He quickly exited the room, hopping as he headed to his office. Kris followed behind, skipping and pushing himself along with his strong, long arms.

From the office, they went straight to the elevator, which was located behind a large round desk.

In the elevator, Kris, with a pleading expression, gestured to Doctor Kurio:

“Kris scared. Home with you good.”

After that, he wrapped his right arm around Doctor Kurio and trustingly placed his head on his shoulder. Doctor Kurio stroked his long, dark fingers over the reddish fur growing on Kris’s head.

“It’s okay, you’re back, don’t be scared.”

The entire drive home, Kris sat quietly in the car next to Doctor Kurio, pressed against the window, watching pedestrians in long togas rushing under umbrellas to escape the rain. Meanwhile, Doctor Kurio had a strange feeling that he had driven through these rain-soaked streets before, with Kris beside him. He nervously shifted in his seat, scrunching his small, slightly pinkish black nose. He had really been through a lot today, which must have triggered the feeling of déjà vu. It also didn’t help that Kris had told him about meeting “daddy.” But someone had given him that bottle of water.

Doctor Kurio shook his head, causing his usually neatly

styled gray feathers to become more disheveled. He decided to leave the questioning for later. Excessive fussing had never been helpful. And he would have Lada speak to Kris; after all, he tended to get too anxious. He'd focus on gathering and processing the information. Tomorrow morning, he'd return to the Institute of Time to coordinate his team's work. He was particularly interested in possible fingerprints on the mysterious water bottle. Their presence could help, if not solve the puzzle, at least bring him closer to understanding it.

Doctor Kurio drove the car almost automatically, deeply immersed in his thoughts. As he entered his territory, for some reason, he directed the car straight toward Kris's cabin. A cat was sitting by the entrance, clearly waiting for its owner. The image of the cat sitting by the cabin seemed very familiar to him. With a pounding heart, he watched as Kris quickly jumped out of the car and bounded toward it.

Doctor Kurio rubbed his eyes and shook his head. He needed to rest immediately. Drink some warm sakita prepared by Lada, tell her what had happened, and share his strange feelings. She would surely have an explanation. She had often asked him not to overwork and to take more time off.

Thoughts of Lada calmed him a little. Glancing at Kris, who was crouching and hugging his cat, he drove up the driveway leading to the large, beautiful house with a round roof. He was relieved that the territory was empty, as most of the residents were in their clubs, preparing for the Hunting Festival. Doctor Kurio didn't want anyone to see him in such a disoriented state. At home, Lada greeted him, her concern evident as she gazed

into his eyes.

“Something happened, Kurio?” she asked, hugging him.

“How was your trip to the Cretaceous period?”

“Oh, Lada, I have so much to tell you. But first, make me some sakita.”

A bit worried, Lada followed him upstairs to the living room. As they sat comfortably at the table, filled with fruit bowls, she began to ask her husband about the events of the day.

The next morning, Doctor Kurio went to the Institute of Time, leaving Kris in Lada’s care. She promised to ask Kris in detail about his time in the prehistoric period. Of course, there were a few reproaches from her side for not keeping a closer eye on their beloved pet.

“We’re lucky he was returned safe and sound. Just imagine what could have happened to him there, among those ancient monsters!” she told Doctor Kurio, wrapping her arms around her head and nervously waving her tail.

“Dear, he’s with us now, talking to his cat. You know how beneficial that is for him,” Doctor Kurio reassured her. “Besides, he’s now under your care. What could be better for him after all the stress he’s been through?”

In the following days, Kris spent much of his time with Lada, repeatedly telling her about his meeting with his "daddy," using sign language. Doctor Kurio, meanwhile, was lost in his work at the Institute, returning home very late when Lada was already asleep. Therefore, after piecing together the fragmented accounts from Kris, Lada decided to go to the Institute herself, not waiting for her husband’s late return and not trusting the

communicator. What troubled her most about the whole situation was that the suddenly appearing "daddy" had called their Kris by name and handed him a bottle of water, without even trying to find him in the thick foliage of the tree. He had also mentioned the name of her husband, Doctor Kurio. Lada had asked Kris many questions, gently and patiently, trying not to tire him. And everything had unfolded just as Kris had told her. It seemed unlikely that he could have invented all this.

There was also another detail that bothered her. She had a vivid mental image of Kris's "daddy," as if he were standing right before her. He looked very similar to their domestic primate, but smaller and hairless. For some reason, she felt a strange sympathy for him.

Lada had never complained about lacking imagination, but never had her visions been so vivid, so real. She could even describe the sound of his voice and his smile. But why? What else had Doctor Kurio told her that evening after Kris returned from the Cretaceous period? Of course, his feelings of déjà vu—his sense that certain events had already happened. They had brushed it off as fatigue and stress. But now, her inner voice suggested there was more to it. A faint glimmer of a hunch stirred in her mind, but it didn't yet make sense. Getting into her car, Lada drove toward the gates, stopping briefly at the little house with Kris painted on the roof. In the yard, Kurkin the Third was crouched, chatting endearingly with a pair of chickens, who clucked trustfully by his side.

“Good morning, Kurkin!” Lada called out as she lowered the side window.

Kurkin was by her side in two hops, grinning broadly and waving his tail in greeting.

“Can’t do without me, huh, Lada? What can I do for you?” he asked.

“I’m leaving Kris in your care. Please watch over him until I get back in the evening,” she added with a smile.

Kurkin straightened up, lifting his little black nose. He ran his hand over the ruffled feathers on his head and replied with a satisfied grin:

“You can always count on me. See you in the evening!” With that, he bounded off toward Kris’s cabin, hopping high with enthusiasm.

“Hey, Kris!” he called, opening the door to the cabin. Kris approached him, nodding happily, stretching his neck, and waving his arms.

“I’m responsible for you,” Kurkin the Third said, signing the same with his hands. Then, he suddenly paused, as if remembering something.

“I’ll make breakfast under our favorite tree, and then... then to our secret place?”

Kurkin’s hand, miming the “place,” froze in the air. He had a strange feeling that this had all happened before. Kris seemed upset, possibly thinking that Kurkin wasn’t eager to spend time with him. He looked into his eyes and gestured:

“Kris and Kurkin friends. Breakfast good. Play good.”

Kurkin the Third came to his senses, hugging Kris tightly and

holding him close. Then, he gently pulled him away by the shoulders to gesture:

“Kris, you’re my best friend! I’m so happy to spend time with you!”

In response, Kris leapt high and stretched his wide lips into a grin, showing his strong white teeth.

They hopped happily toward the meadow, ready to start a wonderful day of play and heartfelt talks. Only occasionally did Kurkin go quiet, imagining a changed Kris, hairless. And then, unexpectedly, he started telling him the legend of Karakai, the ancient hunter who taught the pteryxes to love animals.

Kurkin felt a little uneasy about all of this. He decided to talk to his grandmother, who was known for her sound judgment. She even made her own feather-growth ointment. Surely, she would have an explanation for this. Or perhaps she knew a remedy for this strange feeling.

After escorting Kris to Doctor Kurio’s house and safely handing him over to Lada, Kurkin hurried home, hoping to find his grandmother there.

Sitting on his bed in his room, he stared at a map of the city of Cleartown, for some reason imagining he was explaining its layout to Kris using the map as a visual aid. No, something was wrong with his head. He buried his face in the pillow, overwhelmed by the possibility that he was not well. Thankfully, his grandmother arrived soon after. Seeing her beloved grandson so upset, she began to ask him about the cause of his distress. As he explained, she began to feel a strange sensation herself. The feeling that her grandson had really

already experienced all of this, and somehow she knew about it. Why did she know this? she wondered. After all, she was a very rational and pragmatic pteryx. Something was happening that didn't make sense. And whenever something unclear happened on their Territory, it was time to talk to Lada. Having made her decision and calmed her grandson, Kurkin the Third, she unfastened her brooch-communicator from her belt, a gesture she reserved only for emergencies. Dialing the appropriate number, she spoke into it:

“Lada, this is Livadia. We need to meet urgently. Kurkin and I... well, we're having strange sensations...”

It seemed that Lada interrupted her on the other end, for Grandmother Livadia pressed the receiver to her ear, listening with her mouth slightly agape, anxiously wagging her tail, from which a few feathers detached, softly landing on the floor. Kurkin the Third, with his ear pressed to the other side of the receiver, tried to make out what Lada was saying. Finally, transforming the communicator back into a round brooch, the grandmother sat on the bed, resting her tail across her lap and holding it tightly with both hands. Kurkin the Third sat beside her, turning his head toward her.

Grandmother Livadia leaned close to his ear, hidden beneath ruffled feathers, and, for some reason, whispered:

“Lada immediately understood the sensations I was talking about. It's as though everything had already happened, but just slightly differently. It's called 'davůže.' She says tomorrow we need to go to the Institute of Time. With her. Can you believe that?”

Kurkin the Third nodded meaningfully, swaying his feet in his worn sandals.

“I knew I wasn’t crazy, it’s just... well, it’s a feeling I have. A very important feeling! And it’s something connected to time, I think.”

“Why do you think that?” his grandmother asked with curiosity.

“Because they’ve never invited us to the Institute of Time before, and now Lada herself is taking us,” Kurkin replied thoughtfully.

Grandmother Livadia smiled contentedly, causing the feathers on her round face to stir.

“Well, my dear, it looks like we’re essential to this after all!”

Pleased with themselves, they lay down to sleep, tired from the long day.

Doctor Kurio stood by the window in his office, gazing at the rain-washed streets. The raindrops slid down the windowpane, forming exclamation marks. The doctor thought that question marks would be more fitting, as over the past few days, a multitude of unanswered questions had piled up. There were theories, but how could he test them?

Just minutes ago, his most trusted colleagues, Karam and Kurvil, had left his office. Doctor Kurio greatly valued them for their loyalty and logical minds. The conclusions they had arrived at were so unbelievable that they practically begged for a large question mark to follow them. But, on the other hand, these conclusions stirred his imagination. Could it really be possible?

He felt uneasy admitting it to himself, but he wanted to believe it desperately.

The Doctor enjoyed contemplating while standing by the window. It had even become a habit for him. Now, as he gazed at the cityscape, its outlines blurred by the rain, he tried to reconstruct the sequence of events that had unfolded over the past few days.

If one were to reason logically, the starting point would have to be Kris's sudden appearance with a bottle of water of unknown origin. Fingerprints, similar to those of primates, were found on it.

Doctor Kurio took great pride in his creation—the Institute of Time, which he had turned into a full-fledged multidisciplinary research center. It was essential for analyzing animal remains and ancient artifacts discovered during time travels. His specialists had even determined that the prints belonged to an unknown species of primate, more evolved than any known to them.

From Lada's recounting of Kris's story about his meeting with his "daddy," it followed that this primate had speech, as he addressed Kris directly while offering him water. Clearly, Kris, sensing their similarity, had called him "daddy."

Now, the most intriguing points: this advanced primate knew exactly where Kris was hiding. He didn't even try to search for him in the foliage of the trees. Doctor Kurio knew full well that Kris was highly skilled at concealing himself in the trees, to the point where even an outsider would fail to find him. And another thing: this "intelligent" primate, let's call him "sapiens," had

mentioned the Doctor's name to reassure Kris. What does that suggest? It suggests that the sapiens was friendly and knew a great deal about Kris. Where could this knowledge have come from? The answer was obvious: he had already been in the Cretaceous period—and he had been here!

This was the conclusion that Karam and Kurvil had also reached after considering various versions of events. And then there was that strange feeling of *déjà vu*, something flickering like a shadow in their minds.

The unexpected arrival of Kurvil, who barged into the office without knocking, interrupted the Doctor's musings.

"Another trace of an intelligent primate!" he cried out, jumping in excitement and waving his tail. "Some Kartis unexpectedly lost his communicator—looks like it simply vanished from his belt!"

He fell silent, opening his thin black lips in a smile, waiting for the Doctor's response. But Doctor Kurio stared at him in confusion, then asked:

"So he lost it, and what...?"

Kurvil cut him off:

"That's just it! That's the point! The number of his wife's communicator popped up on the screen—someone was trying to reach her using his number!"

Doctor Kurio couldn't quite grasp the significance of this message.

"Wait, wait," Kurvil spoke rapidly, glancing into the hallway and waving at the perplexed Doctor.

“Here, Kartis!” he shouted. Then he quickly added, addressing Doctor Kurio: “Kartis and his wife are here. You’ll see for yourselves.”

A tall pteryx entered the room, followed by his wife, who held out an open communicator in her extended hand. He looked somewhat flustered, taken aback by the grandeur of the office, so his voice sounded somewhat uncertain:

“We tried to localize my communicator, and here we are, following its trail, so to speak.”

Doctor Kurio approached his wife, extending his hand.

“May I?” he said, taking the communicator from her.

Indeed, the route displayed on the screen ended here, at the Institute of Time. At the bottom of the screen, a scrolling message repeated: “Exact localization impossible.” Without saying another word, the Doctor headed for the elevator leading to the “launch pad.” Kurvil, Kartis, and his wife followed him.

In the elevator, the three of them remained silent, only the uneven tapping of their tails against the floor betrayed their nervous excitement.

At the “launch pad,” Doctor Kurio spoke as he walked toward the time machine:

“Stay clear of the center of the room, everyone. Or better yet, come closer to me.”

Kartis and his wife approached the Doctor, curiously examining the “time machine,” of which they had only heard in passing.

“We managed to tune it for the last jump into the past today, the one Kris inadvertently got caught in. We’ve blocked that frequency just in case. But I’m going to unlock it for a few seconds now. Keep an eye on the screen. My theory might be correct.”

He handed the communicator to Kartis and bent over the control panel of the “time machine,” pressing keys. Suddenly, on the screen of Kartis’s wife’s communicator, the map of Cleartown, was replaced by an entirely unfamiliar one, with a small circle on it. The message "Localization completed" appeared. The pteryxes leaning over the communicator gasped in astonishment, but the mysterious map quickly vanished, replaced by the message: "Localization impossible."

* * *

A soft hum emanating from the brooch caught the attention of the peacefully dozing Watson. Lifting his head, he saw bright blue circles radiating from the center across its surface. With a deep yawn, Watson turned onto his other side, ready to return to his favorite activity—sleeping.

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