

Leo could feel that he was falling... and falling fast. His clothes were making a lot of noise due to the air friction at almost 200 km/h. He opened his eyes and was relieved to see that the ground was still around another 3km down, but it approached quickly and he did not have much time before he had to open the parachute.

The landscape was desert-like. On the ground, Leo could identify a few roads, some green spots, and, on a hillside, a big circle with something that looked like a star in it.

Leo had only skydived once before, many years ago in New Zealand, but this time he did not have any professional instructor on his back. Fortunately, it seemed that he had an appropriate backpack and quickly found a ring with a string on which it was written in small letters: “pull to open”.

But he had no clue at what altitude he should open the parachute. He looked at his altimeter: 2200m. He took out his smart phone and searched “altitude open parachute”. Typing in these words took him more than 700m... There are times when you are really happy that such an Internet search only takes 0.19 seconds. Altimeter: 1050m. Finally, he found the number he was looking for: “800m or 2600 feet”. Which gave him another second and a half before he had to pull the string.

He enjoyed the silence of the last five minutes gliding down to a big area that was obviously the landing field. The landscape was absolutely magnificent, arid stony steppes with snowy mountains in the background and some green oases here and there.

Leo landed safely, but his heart was still beating like it had never been before. This time he really thought his last hour had come.

He gathered the parachute and started walking towards the small crowd that was waiting behind a fence to watch the skydivers land.

Then, at the far left, he noticed a gorgeous brunette, elegantly dressed in high-heels, a white mini-skirt and a black top with “LEO” undulating in white text above her decent-sized chest.

He tried to dismiss the coincidence by telling himself that it must be the girl's astrological sign and had no connection with his own name. But he had read somewhere about serendipitous encounters and gathered the courage to go up and talk to her, especially that she seemed to be looking his way all the time.

As he approached, she started to smile even more and before he had time to utter a word, she said: “Welcome to Adrenaland, Leo. I am Leandra, your girlfriend.”

Those few words were followed by a warm and passionate kiss, as Leo had seldom experienced before.

Leo quickly started to understand the forewarnings and promises so often repeated by Professor Dimenport before his departure. These allowed him to react in a more relaxed way to all the amazing things that were currently happening to him.

Nevertheless, Leo was still under shock from this “arrival”, and Leandra, who could sense that, told him: “Take it easy, Leo.”

“What do you mean, easy? I almost died,” he answered.

“No, you did not. The parachute would have opened automatically if you had not done it on time. And even if it had not, your clothes have an in-built anti-gravitational technology that is activated when necessary, so you would have landed smoothly in any case.”

Leandra took him by the hand and led him out to the parking lot. Strangely, there seemed to be almost only sports cars and camels. Leandra's transport means was a Porsche, but a model he had never seen before. Its colour was white, which made sense, thought Leo, in a desert climate like this. It was sunny, not a single cloud on the horizon, and the temperature was very agreeable, not too hot.

As they came up to the car, he noticed that it was unlocked.

“Don't you need to lock your car here in Adrenaland?”

She looked at him with a smile, aware that there was a lot she would need to explain to him.

“It locks automatically as soon as I move a few meters away from it, and in the same way it can feel when I approach again. The principle is similar to the automatic sliding doors at the entrance of many stores, except that it only opens to the owner of the car when the in-built sensors recognize either their voice, face, smell or way of moving.”

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Verity woke up by the train loudspeaker announcing: *“In a few minutes, the train will arrive in Shoparadise. This is the end station. We kindly ask everyone to step off here.”*

As the train entered the station, Verity could see two brightly coloured parrots sitting on top of a big sign on which it was written *SHOPARADISE*, with a star in the middle of the “O”.

She noticed the dense vegetation everywhere, although it was the centre of the city. It seemed like all the buildings were built in stone. It reminded Verity of some ancient ruins as she had seen quite a few during her travels to Central America and Asia. But these were not ruins, instead they were magnificent solid stone buildings in various styles, where people lived, worked and enjoyed themselves.

As she walked down the train platform, she heard a deep voice behind her saying: “Welcome to Shoparadise, Verity.” She turned around and was immediately turned on by the muscular tall man standing next to the platform pillar. She could feel the self-confidence exuding from him.

She wondered why he was talking to her, and how he knew her name, but that question would soon be elucidated: he came close to her, and said: “I am Tirvey, your boyfriend. Did you have a good journey?”

As he said that, he took her slowly but firmly around her lower back and neck and gave her one of these kisses she had only read about in her romance novels.

Verity was glad she remembered what Professor Dimenport had told her before she left, so that she could let herself go to the wonderful happenings.

Tirvey took her by the hand, they walked for a while and ended up at a river with rapid white waters flowing a dozen meters below.

“The *Café Rebosch* is just on the other side.”

“Sure, but how are we going to get there?” wondered Verity as she could not see any bridge in the vicinity.

“Relax,” said Tirvey, walked up to a tree, got hold of a liana, then told Verity in an assuring tone: “Hold onto me.”

She did and they swung their way across the deadly waters.

With beating hearts, they arrived at *Café Rebosch* which was one of the most well-known tearooms in Shoparadise. The place was magic: at the entrance, they had chocolates and various sorts of cakes nicely displayed on different tables and behind the counter. And there were flowers everywhere: even in the ceiling. It was the most colourful and romantic café Verity had ever been to. They had an open fire at the back of the place, and they sat down on a sofa next to it.

They got to know each other over a hot chocolate, found out that they both were the oldest child out of three and that they had had very similar upbringings and some common experiences they both could relate to. Tirvey was funny and made her feel very strong emotions as he told her some wonderful stories. After a while he said:

“OK, I will let you go shopping now and we can meet at the *Ranwor Piano Bar* at 7.04PM.”

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Leandra slowly drove out from the skydive compound and sped up on the highway. She put on the stereo and turned up the volume to a level that Leo hoped was a maximum.

♪ *Dreaming* – Måns Zelmerlöv

Leo could not believe his eyes: she accelerated like crazy and the speedometer was quickly over 250 km/h. She slalomed between other cars and also had to give way to some others behind her, who obviously thought she was moving too slowly.

For Leo, this was an amazing blend of the craziest Hollywood movie, a car race video game and a German Autobahn. And his girlfriend seemed more skilled than the best Formula One or Indy Car driver he had ever seen.

“Leandra, do you always drive like that?”

“Of course, it is fun and a great way to fill up on the adrenaline that gives us our vital energy here in Adrenaland. Do you want to try?”

“Yes, but wait, isn't this dangerous? Where did you get these driving skills?”

“Don't worry. There is a pit stop with a great bar a few kilometres down the road. Let us stop there and have a few beers then I can explain more to you before you take the wheel.”

“What, you drink and drive too?”

“That makes the driving even more fun!”

“But that's even more dangerous.”

Leandra smiled at him with glimmer in her eyes: “Relax. Different rules apply in dreams.”

It was hard for Leo to fully take in the beautiful landscapes that were evolving at great speed outside the window. They were first driving through a big arid plain, and then they approached a snow-capped mountain range with sandstone villages at its foot. The highway

went into a huge canyon and came out in a sand desert at the other end. That's where the pit stop was.

Leandra saw that Leo was observing the camels that walked on a road parallel to the highway, so she told him: "Yes, it would have taken us two days to cover the same distance with them. It's a totally different experience that I want you to try with me some day."

Leo knew what she meant, as he had taken a camel tour in Rajasthan a few years earlier. There is a kind of peacefulness you get in the middle of the desert that you hardly get anywhere else.

Leo's heart was still beating in overdrive as they sat down at a shaded table on the roof terrace, overlooking the highway, with the mountain on the left and desert everywhere else.

"How come that the cars make so little noise, even at high speed?"

"The engines run on an optimal mix of water and electricity. And our engineers have found a way to recycle the noise that comes out of the car. Finally, the asphalt is absorbing any residual friction sounds from the tires."

"I guess your engineers know stuff that ours do not?"

"Well, yours already have most of the knowledge necessary, they just need to fit the puzzle together by learning to think more clearly and creatively. It is actually not the technology that your scientists need to understand better, it is rather how the creative process works, so that they can consistently make new inventions and innovations."

The beer was one of the most refreshing Leo had ever drunk. Leandra saw him enjoying it and told him that they charge the beer with small doses of electricity, which gives people an additional positive energy next to the normal effects of alcohol.

The beer, combined with the electric kiss Leandra just gave him, made Leo feel as if floating on a cloud.

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Verity went off to discover the heart of Shoparadise that lies on the same side of the river as the train station: *Riccalut*, a huge, circular, Coliseum-like building with a garden and a small lake in the middle. This time, to get back on the other side of town, she had walked a bit downstream and found a beautiful stone bridge that helped her cross without fearing for her life.

The inside of the building had columned alleys so that people could look down at the garden on one side and see the shop windows on the other side.

With its seven levels and 396 shops, restaurants, entertainment centres, cafés, bars, fitness, and much more, it was the most amazing complex Verity had ever seen. On the top floor, there was a great view of the rest of the city and the jungle all around.

She especially liked a Chinese-inspired fashion store with beautiful Asian furniture and interior design. In one corner of the store, there was a cute tearoom where traditionally clothed Chinese waiters poured tea from funny teapots whose necks were at least half a meter long.

The clothes were either traditional Chinese style or Western style with beautiful calligraphy, sometimes in small discrete characters, sometimes in bigger fonts.

Even though she herself could read Chinese, Verity asked the storekeeper how people could know the meaning of all these characters.

“You just download the camera-based translation application to your smart phone, to find the meaning of a character you see here in the store. Or you go to our website where you can browse a whole *chictionary* of Chinese characters and order your own customized piece of fashion that will be ready for you within an hour.”

Sometimes, women are easy to convince, and Verity bought a tee shirt with the corresponding character of her name on it.

真理

“Do you want to take it with you, or do you want us to deliver it?” asked the shopkeeper.

Verity thought it would be more practical if they delivered it. Then she realized that she was in a dream and probably had to skip that tee-shirt altogether. Still, she said:

“Delivery would be great. But I’m not sure you can deliver to where I live.”

“Should be easy, we do IDD’s.”

“IDD’s?”

“*Interdimensional Deliveries*. What is your name and address?”

“Verity Blesse, Winner Building, 11 Wong Nai Chung Road, Happy Valley, Hong Kong.”

“Yes, and what’s the IDRN number?”

“You mean the postcode? Hong Kong does not have any postcode numbers.”

“No, the *Interdimensional Routing Number*.”

“Not sure of the IDRN. Can’t you just send it to Planet Earth – in the Solar System?”

“Planet Earth exists in many dimensions, and to find you, we need the IDRN.”

“But...”

“Young lady, if you don’t know where you live, how are we supposed to be able to deliver a package to you?”

Verity was very confused and a little sad to have to skip that tee-shirt. She had never thought about which dimension she lived in. Maybe Professor Dimenport understood and could explain that IDRN stuff because it was clearly beyond her mental grasp.

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“OK, now I want to hear more about your crazy driving” said Leo, “how come I have not seen any accidents, it must be quite frequent given the way you guys drive here?”

“Well, think for a moment, Leo. There are only two possibilities: either we are all super humans with amazing driving abilities... or we get some technological help.”

“Tell me more.”

“The good news is that it is the latter which means that you will be able to drive as crazy too. Next to the better-performing steering, acceleration and breaking technologies than in your dimension, our cars are guided by an advanced time- and GPS-technology which keeps track of all the cars on the roads and makes sure that no two cars end up in the same space at the same time, which equals accident, or that no car hits obstacles on the side of the road.”

Although it must have been quite complex to build such a system, Leo could perfectly imagine the feasibility of such a technology, as the theory made perfect sense.

Leandra continued: “In other words, cars are programmed to take over the driving as soon as the driver is about to make an error. Let us say that you drive towards a curve on a cliff road that can only be taken at a maximum of 197 km/h due to the Laws of Physics. Well, then the car will only let you accelerate to that speed so you will not have to worry about going over the edge.

In the same way, if you are on a collision course with another car, the wheel will turn itself to avoid the car, or break automatically to avoid any collision.”

“Ingenious,” said Leo.

“Well, it’s actually like riding a camel: he will bring you home if you fall asleep, and will refuse to walk into a ditch even if you tell him to do so.”

“I get it: your technology is so advanced that it has found ways to counter any possible human driving errors.”

“Indeed, and this is why you are allowed to drive drunk as well!”

“Cool...”

Leo and Leandra had a few more drinks, getting to know each other better and enjoying the silent races in front of them, with amazing landscapes behind the highway.

Then they went back to the car, and Leo took over the commands. What an acceleration: he clearly felt pushed back against the seat. Nice feeling, he thought. Adrenaline certainly kicked in, as he approached 300 km/h on an empty straight stretch of the highway. Then traffic got denser, the highway slightly curved and Leo had to concentrate fully and started to sweat, as this was way beyond how he was used to drive.

Leandra had been observing everything and told him:

“OK, Leo, now let us try something. So far, you have been driving great, now you have to put all your faith into our technology. Try and accelerate more than you know you should in the next curve.”

Leo, obviously worried about their safety and damaging the beautiful car and the beautiful lady, was not too eager of trying any stunts, but he trusted Leandra and accelerated more than he should have. Wow... he could feel the car taking over, not letting him drive off the road and instead negotiating the curve at an optimal speed, like on rails. Then he tried to drive up behind another car, coming up at huge speed and the car smoothly turned the wheel automatically and broke slightly at the same time to avoid a collision.

So now Leo could drive more relaxed... and still get some huge adrenaline kick.

Once he had calmed down, Leo could pay more attention to the dashboard and he asked Leandra:

“And what is this kind of news ticker?”

“It shows important personal messages to the driver.”

“Then maybe I should pay attention to it?”

“Yes.”

The ticker on the dashboard read:

**When the northern southern hemisphere clock of the Mitchell Library shows
a quarter to ten, the hour hand will point towards the Crystal of Beauty.**

“Not sure what is meant by that,” said Leandra.

“I actually think I know what it is about,” said Leo, “but it is going to be tricky to decipher.”

Then Leandra put a hand on his thigh and said: “Don’t worry about that now... there is one more thing you need to know about the cars here in Adrenaland: when you do not feel like driving for fun any longer, you just tell the car the destination you want to go to and it switches from *Manual Auto Drive* (MAD) into *Full Automatic Chauffeuring* (FAC), so that you can take a nap, watch a movie, or have some other kind of funny business in the backseat.”

Leandra's hand started to get more convincing, and as soon as Leo told the car “home”, he could feel it taking over the driving. Then the seats turned 180°... the windows blackened and Leandra was quickly all over him...

“You have two wishes left, Leo,” said Professor Dimenport.

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Verity only had time to get a partial glimpse of the *Riccalut* shopping-heaven during her afternoon in Shoparadise.

Fashion on one level, food on another, interior design on a third one, various special stores on yet another floor... and the level where she spent most time was filled with bookshops: 56 different small bookshops: some only sold comics, some travel books, some short stories, cooking, history, technology, fantasy, erotica, photography, children's books, novels...

And there was a 19th Century bookshop, where Verity sat down for a while and skimmed through an old Jules Verne book, *From the Earth to the Moon*. Sitting in this bookstore where she felt like traveling back in time with the mahogany bookshelves and leather club sofas, she laughed to herself thinking that even in Jules Verne's wildest dreams, he could never have imagined something like Shoparadise.

Suddenly, a bold phrase in the book jumped at Verity’s attention:

A crystal is buried a ship’s length from the ship on higher ground.

“Wait,” thought Verity, “I don’t remember this being part of the original text.” And with her photo reading skills, she was quite confident about her memory. She read the text again, then realized that in this world anything is possible, and this text could be one of those hints that Professor Dimenport mentioned before her departure.

She put back the book on the shelf and then saw a few people queuing in front of a machine with a screen on it in one corner of the store and asked herself what that could be.

She asked the owner, an old man who looked like he had been reading books for 200 years, what this machine did.

“Very simple, it is a 3D-printer that can print any book that has ever been written.

Obviously, we cannot store everything in our little shop, so we help our customers find what they look for on the Internet and a few minutes later, they have their physical book. On top of that, the machine recycles old books, so when clients have finished reading a book, they bring it back, and the machine spits out a new one with a discount.”

It was now time for Verity to go and join Tirvey at the *Ranwor*, which was not far away, but she had to cross the river again. This time she gathered the courage to use the liana to cross, which also saved her some time as she did not want to be late. She liked to respect other people by being on time. The river was not very large, but its white waters were flowing by at a big speed and you could hear it from many places in Shoparadise. Verity loved the colourful parrots, monkeys and other wildlife everywhere, even in the town centre. She watched how the monkeys used the lianas, so she aped them and slung herself over the river again.

Verity arrived right on time at the piano bar. Tirvey was already waiting for her. The place was enthralling: an exceptionally talented young woman with a powerful voice was entertaining the crowd.

♪ *And Now... Ladies and Gentlemen – Patricia Kaas*

Verity was sitting in Tirvey's strong arms and they both enjoyed the champagne-based house specialty drink. Verity knew that song and thought the singer really looked like Patricia Kaas.

“It’s not a cover song,” said Tirvey.

“What do you mean?” asked Verity, now unsure if it was actually Patricia herself standing on the stage in front of them.

“Why would you want a fake when you can get the original? In dreams, everything is possible.”

After a good hour, Tirvey said to Verity: “You must be fairly hungry by now, I have a surprise for you.”

They left the *Ranwor* and walked through a park, along an alley with tiny small street lamps. In the park they could hear all kinds of jungle birds and other animals; the place was really alive. They crossed the river further upstream on a wooden hanging bridge, and Verity could sense the coolness of the water flowing in strong currents under her. On the other side, they came up to a stone pyramid. The entrance of the “surprise”, the *Rellek* restaurant, was situated at the top of this pyramid with candles on the steps the whole way up.

When they entered the pyramid, there was just an elevator, that took them down far below ground surface and they stepped out in a wonderful arched room that looked like it could have been an old wine cellar. Not a single artificial light, candles everywhere, white napkins and beautifully decorated tables.

The dream went on: the evening with Tirvey was magical beyond words, he made her feel so good that she wanted it to go on forever. After the dinner, he suggested they go back to his place for a last “drink”.

Tirvey closed the door of his apartment, and quickly took strong hold of Verity and gave her yet another ocean of emotions. She wondered if any girl could have resisted him... she felt his strong body against hers, he kissed her neck...

“That was your first wish, Verity. Only two left.” said Professor Dimenport.

Part 2 Pact

Geneva, Switzerland, 8 July 1992

Boss's parents had a big house with a huge garden. With his friends, he had built a cosy hut in an old tree in the southwest corner of the garden.

The great thing with this wooden hideaway was that it was concealed by the leaves of other trees in summertime and his parents could not see anything, even if they were sitting outside on the terrace in front of the house.

The small house in the tree had one fairly big room and was hanging more than two meters above ground so that, once the ladder was withdrawn, it was difficult, even for an adult, to get up in the hut.

A very kind Portuguese carpenter, who helped Boss's parents in their house from time to time, had taught Boss how to build a roof in such a way that water would not leak in. Thus, they could use the hut even when it was raining.

It took Boss and five of his friends the whole summer of 1990 to build it.

The year after, they dug up the whole garden to lay an electric cable to install a mini-fridge and lights for the evenings when they decided to stay late in the hut or even spend the night there when the weather was warm enough.

At the same time, they also laid a small cable to install an intercom system so that Boss's mother could call when lunch or dinner was ready or when it was time to go to bed.

On top of that, his friend Webbo, a tech wiz, had helped link an answering machine to the intercom so that they could screen his mother's calls when she tried to get hold of them at inappropriate times.

Boss and his friends could probably just have used walkie-talkies, but this was more fun and kept them busy for a big part of the summer 1991. Furthermore, Verity had read about the potential risks of radio waves, so that was another good argument in favour of the intercom line.

They had also been able to lift up a sofa into the hut, one that a neighbour was about to throw away. This had been a tricky endeavour, even if they had been six of them at the task.

And they had found various kinds of cushions that they spread all over the floor and made the hut a very comfortable place to be in.

They had also put on the walls some posters they liked. In one corner, next to the mini-fridge, they also had a small cabinet where they stored some food that did not need to be refrigerated.

And they even had a small balcony on which they put some grains and nuts to feed the happy birds and squirrels that came to visit them regularly.

Last, but not least, Modella had insisted that they get a small stereo where they listened to the radio or played cassettes she had recorded for them.

On it, she often played one of her favourite songs that described their mindset, elusive to their parents and other adults.

♪ *Det gåtfulla folket – Olle Adolphson & Beppe Wolgers*

So, having spent the last two summers building and enhancing the hut, this year was the first year when they could fully relax and enjoy their creation.

It was the beginning of the summer holidays and Boss's parents had gone away for a fortnight to some friends in England, leaving him alone with his four years older brother, Bert, who wouldn't be a nuisance as he was playing video games the whole day in the basement of the house with his friend Trebbo.

So, Boss invited his five friends who all happened to be around, and he knew they could have a lot of fun together during the next 14 days without any adult interference.

Although they did not fully realize it, these years in the hut would be the best they would have in a very long time.

They actually came to the hut as often as possible to escape the boring life at school and the negative world that surrounded them in their respective homes.

Although they all came from very different backgrounds, this sad feeling united them and made them strong.

They? Six kids.

Boss Pibolodari, 11 years and almost 8 months old.

Verity Blesse, 10 years and 4 months.

Webbo Maraj, exactly one year younger than Boss.

Richie da Sousa, 9 months older than Webbo.

Modella d'Allema had just turned 10.

And Leo Berger would celebrate his 11th birthday in a month.

They called themselves *The Grooters*, as they all had Global ROOTs:

Webbo had an Indian father and a Kenyan mother.

Modella got her blonde hair from her Swedish mother and her brown eyes from her Argentinian father.

Leo's parents were both American, but his grandparents emigrated from different countries: Ireland, Germany, Holland and Russia. The mix turned out blond with blue grey eyes.

Richie's father was from Brazil, and his mother from Finland. Guess who gave him dark blue eyes and who his brown hair?

Verity's mother was from Japan, her father half French, half Chinese.

Boss's father was Swiss, his mother from England, and he had ancestors from Italy.

The Grooters felt good being with each other, as they had this emotional bond of belonging to nowhere, somewhere and everywhere at the same time.

The reader would argue correctly that such international backgrounds are nothing uncommon in Geneva, with all its multinational businesses and international organizations like the United Nations or the Red Cross.

But the Grooters had two more things in common. One of them was that they all had some kind of unique power that appeared natural to them, but as none of their classmates in school, nor any adults seemed to have them, they got mobbed or just felt misunderstood and lonely. Their friends were actively making fun of them and adults were just dismissing their behaviour as “child imagination”, or “ghost stories”.

Richie had the ability to see into the near future. This actually saved his and his parents' lives once when he warned them from a possible car accident. He did not understand why people were so interested in watching the lottery drawings on television – he always knew what numbers were coming out. How boring, he thought.

Webbo had the capacity to see live happenings at remote places. So, he could always sense what his parents or friends were doing. “Right now, my father is having lunch with a new colleague and just ordered a pizza *capricciosa* at *Da Paolo*’s.” He has busted people more than once lying about what they had done or where they had been. Obviously, people with low integrity did not like Webbo.

Verity was not only an enthusiastic reader, she also had the ability to remember anything she had seen printed. This is why her friends at school nicknamed her the not very beautifying term ‘Cyclops’ because she was like a living encyclopedia. Verity’s teachers were also annoyed because she frequently pointed out inaccuracies in their teachings. Recently, she also got hold of a photo reading course, which enabled her to fine-tune her photographic memory. She is now not only able to remember everything that she reads, but has also learned to read extremely fast, ‘photographing’ a whole book in a matter of minutes.

Modella, on her side, had the capacity to see and communicate with dead people. She often talked to her grandmother who passed away three years ago. Her parents forced her to go and see a psychiatrist, but he was not able to ‘help’ her. Most adults were just too close-minded or just afraid of admitting the possibility of her abilities. She did not understand why they got so overly sad when their loved ones passed away. For Modella, the relationship continues, but just a little differently. Of all the Grooters, she was suffering the most from the incredulity of adults and mobbing of other children.

Boss, on his side, had the ability to read people’s minds. He had access to a fascinating and scary world, but one that explained people’s behaviour quite accurately. From most adults’ and normal children’s perspective, Boss was the most annoying of them all, because they could never hide anything from him. Too bad his parents dismissed his ability, as it would have saved them many headaches recruiting the right colleagues at work. Like for Webbo, people with low integrity were very irritated by Boss’ capabilities.

Leo had a much more practical ability, the one to teleport himself physically from a place to another. He scared his parents the first few times he went playing with his friends without leaving his bedroom. The school attendant still does not understand how Leo is able to get into the building in the mornings before he has unlocked it. Lastly, this capacity serves him well to “climb” up into the hut in Boss’s garden.

It seems like the Grooters’ unique abilities can be traced back to some kind of shock or trauma that happened to each one of them in earlier childhood.

Leo thinks his teleportation capacity is linked to the fact that there was a terrible thunderstorm during the night he was born.

Verity had fallen from a tree at three.

At four, Richie had to live with his parents on the streets for four months as his father lost his frustrating job.

When Modella was five, a friend of hers from kindergarten was killed by a forty-ton truck in front of her feet.

At six, Webbo was sexually abused by a sick uncle.

And Boss was involved in a severe car accident at the age of seven.

Finally, one more thing sealed their friendships: the fact that their parents' relationships were not very good.

Again, the reader would be right in saying that there is unfortunately nothing uncommon with disharmonious relationships. But due to their special abilities, the Grooters were much more sensitive than normal kids, and therefore suffered far more every time their parents shouted at each other. Or at them.

To summarize everything, the absolutely unique emotional bond between the Grooters was due to the fact that they were suffering threefold:

First, they suffered from the fact that they did not feel totally at home anywhere, be it in Geneva or in their respective countries of origin.

Secondly, due to their strange abilities, which tended to scare away others or just had them laugh at the Grooters.

Third, they suffered both directly and indirectly from their parents' quarrels and unhappiness. Lately, the parents' situation and negativity at home had worsened for some of them and Boss decided that they must do something about it.

So, he called in a crisis meeting with all six Grooters. And there they were, six kids in a hut in a magnificent tree, trying to help the adult world.

"OK, any ideas of where we can start?" launched Boss.

They all remained silent for a while, then Modella finally broke the silence: "What if each one of us tries to first explain the main reason they think their parents' relationship is failing?"

"Great idea" all exclaimed almost simultaneously.

Then Richie followed straight away:

"In my case, it is fairly obvious, my parents always quarrel about money matters. And my mom often repeats that we cannot afford this, or afford that. And she yells at my father that he should bring home more money..."

Verity followed:

“I also think I know why my parents are not getting along very well: Because I feel that they do not really love each other enough. My mum once told me she only married dad because he had a good job and could provide for the family.”

“And what about you, Boss?” asked Richie, “your parents seem to have everything they need to be happy: a big house, nice cars, a chalet in the mountains, and a summer house in Southern France. And you often go to exotic places on vacation.”

“Yes, on that side we are very fortunate,” answered Boss, “but my parents are not happy. And the only reason I can see is that they do not like their jobs, although they get very well paid, especially dad.”

“Is it not fun to be a banker?” asked Modella.

“Well, the only thing I can say is that he often complains about his irritating boss and his incompetent employees. And he is always tired when he comes home. Also, my mom does not seem to get along with her colleagues and finds her job boring.”

“It sounds like job dissatisfaction is probably behind both your parents’ issues, Boss,” said Richie.

“Yes,” said Boss, “it looks like we have three good reasons so far, to explain our parents’ unhappiness: **money problems, lack of love and job dissatisfaction.**”

“In my case, it is clear too,” Leo continued, “dad takes coke and both my parents drink and smoke too much, especially mum.”

“I also drink a coke from time to time, when my parents don’t see me,” said Modella.

“Not the drink, the drug,” explained Verity who had read a book about various drugs and their effects.

“What? Coke? How do you know that?” asked Webbo.

“I overheard my aunt and uncle mentioning it when they were over at our place last time.”

“But, isn't your father a lawyer, Leo?”

“Yes...”

“And what about your parents, Modella?” continued Boss.

“I am not really sure. My mum seems to eat a lot more lately; she is actually very fat now. Do you think that could be linked to her temperament swings?”

“That could very well be,” said Verity, “and your father?”

“He totally lacks energy. Grandma told me once that he was depressive or something like that. Not sure really what the causes are and where he is heading. The doctors have given him a lot of different pills, but it only seems to get worse.”

Verity intervened again:

“Let me guess... they do not do any sports?”

“You are right,” answered Modella.

Verity continued: “It looks like some health issues. In your mother's case it is poor physical health, and your father has issues with his mental health. I read an interesting article the other day stating that there could be a link between the mental and the physical health. So maybe we can just sum up your parents' problems with “health”?”

“Great, then we have two more reasons: **addictions** and **health**.” summarized Boss “Your turn now, Webbo.”

“I don't know.”

“What, you don't know? There must be some kind of signs.” said Leo “I know adults are good at hiding things they do not want us to know, but there are always signs.”

Leo was a great observer, and he often came up with some genius ideas just based on things he had observed, be it a process to improve or a device that could be made better or used for new purposes.

“I don't know,” repeated Webbo “but for some reason my mom is nagging my dad all the time, for small insignificant details. And I really do not understand why she makes such a big deal out of these things.”

“Hmm... What could that tell us?” asked Boss looking at the other four. They did not seem to have much of a clue either.

Then Webbo added: “The only thing that comes to mind that I overheard the other night when they thought I was asleep, is something about my mother complaining that she “needs more, she is not satisfied”. Not sure what she means by that.”

“**Sex!**” exclaimed Verity, “I read somewhere about the importance of sex to release tensions that build up from modern-day stress. I am not really sure how all this works in detail, but maybe your father is not able to help your mother release enough tension.”

“I wonder why most adults are so secretive about everything around sex,” said Modella, “if it is good, why don't they talk more about it? And if it's bad, why don't they tell us why?”

“Perfect,” finalised Boss, “it looks like we have six different reasons for the problematic behaviours of our parents. Now, where do we go from here? Does anyone of you have an idea how we can help them?”

Silence.

“There must be something that we can do,” said Richie, for whom nothing was impossible. But even he had to admit that he was also fairly lost in this case.

Then he continued: “Any problem can be solved, even if you do not have a clue at the beginning. That actually makes the challenge more interesting. You see, we have cars and planes and computers, but human adults are more complex than that...”

“So, what do we do? Anything we can start with? Where shall we search for answers?” asked Modella.

Then Richie, refusing to give up, came up with an idea: “Let us make a pact: to do whatever we can to break the vicious circle of adults' unhappy lives and relationships.”

All the Grooters thought this was a great idea.

“We need to have a written pact,” said Leo.

All agreed, so Modella and Boss ran back to the house to gather some pens and paper.

Leo, whose father was a lawyer, and who had seen many documents at home, helped to structure the pact.

PACT between the Grooters

We, the Grooters, commit ourselves to do whatever it takes to help our parents improve their unhappy lives and relationships.

We have found the following probable reasons for their unhappiness:

Money problems: Richie's parents

Lack of genuine love: Verity's parents

Job dissatisfaction: Boss's parents

Drugs and addictions: Leo's parents

Health problems: Modella's parents

Sexuality problems: Webbo's parents.

We will do everything in our power to go to the root of our parents' problems. As long as we live, we will search for solutions to help them as well as other people with similar issues, and we will share our findings with each other.

Done in six original copies.

Geneva, Wednesday, July 8th, 1992

THE GROOTERS

Webbo Verity Richie Modella Leo Boss

Modella, who loved her parents, added: “Let us not be too hard with adults: they do their best with the limited knowledge that they were given.”

Yes, said all, and Verity fished out a quote from her incredible memory bank: “*Forgive them for they know not what they do.*”

“Well, I think most adults are not stupid, it just seems like something blocks them from doing the things that would make them really happy,” said Webbo.

“Agreed,” said Boss, “and that’s what our Pact is all about: to find out what hinders adults from living more fulfilling and happy lives.”

“Yes,” confirmed The Grooters in unison.

After this interlude of seriousness, Modella turned on the stereo in the hut.

♪ *Enfants de tous pays – Enrico Macias*

The Grooters had a lot of fun together that summer, not knowing that most of them would soon have to move away from Geneva.

Buenos Aires, Argentina, early October 2017

Mr. Pong was mesmerized by the beauty of the show that was taking place on the scene just a few meters in front of the dining table where he was sitting.

The tango dancers exuded a mix of grace, elegance and overt sexuality at the same time. They were beautifully dressed and you could feel the electricity in the air emanating from the closeness between the hyper-feminine woman and the very masculine man. Vertical lovemaking to each other and to the music.

♪ *Balkanski Tango – Đorđe Balašević*

This wonderful tango show made Mr. Pong almost forget the beauty sitting next to him with whom he had just shared a succulent typical Argentinian dinner with a piece of meat so tender that it could be cut with a spoon, accompanied of course, by a genuine Malbec from the Mendoza region at the foot of the Andes in the western part of the country.

Towards the end of the dinner, Mr. Pong had asked:

“So where do you know Richie from?”

Knowing that Mr. Pong was coming to Buenos Aires for business meetings, Richie had asked Modella if she could entertain him one evening. He was not only a very important business contact, but also a dear friend of his. As it was Mr. Pong’s first visit to Argentina, Modella decided to take him to one of the most prestigious tango shows in the capital.

“We grew up together in Geneva, in Switzerland.”

“Aha,” said Mr. Pong, nodding in a very typical Chinese way.

Two years after the Grooters had made their Pact, Modella’s father got a job at a telecom corporation in the United States, and the whole family moved to New Jersey when she was twelve.

For some reason, Modella got caught in the unhealthy American lifestyle and by the time she finished high school, she had gained so much weight that the scale showed almost the double of what it should have. And the scale in question was unfortunately functioning correctly.

One day she woke up, looked herself honestly in the mirror and told herself: “This is not me.” She realized she had hit the rock-bottom of beauty and self-confidence, and it couldn’t get much worse.

Somehow, she was able to get hold of her Swedish determination and said out loud:

“I am Modella Stella d’Allema and I am going to prove to the world that one can go from being obese and ugly to becoming healthy, slim and beautiful.”

Except some weight, she thought she had nothing to lose, so she might as well shoot for the stars: the goal she set herself was crystal clear: two years later, at the age of twenty, to become a model.

Modella loved personal challenges. Simple common sense of healthy nutrition and exercise helped her shed many pounds, but she wanted to take her weight loss one step further and tried the Grooters approach: to find the root of her weight problems, instead of just treating the symptoms.

So, she started to read a lot of books, not only on weight loss, but also on general health, beauty and wellbeing. She found some gems of information here and there that would help her get on the right track and find her own solutions.

It took Modella an additional year to reach her goal, but at 21 she had signed with one of the bigger model agencies in Manhattan. Modella definitively stands out on the catwalk with her rare combination of brown eyes and natural blonde hair.

In retrospect, she found that the determining factors to her success were threefold.

First, the mission she had set herself put her life back on track and gave her the necessary energy to follow through the inevitable ups and downs of such a journey.

Second, the love and sex that she received from her caring boyfriend at that time helped her build a positive self-image.

Third, and this probably made the difference between success and failure, she put a paper in her fridge with the inscription: “*Are you REALLY hungry, or just bored?*” That note in the fridge actually incited her to start doing fun, non-boring stuff, and she thinks those positive activities also helped her lose weight, and gain self-confidence.

Thus, by working on the roots of her weight problems – a missing goal in life and a lack of affection – Modella was able to not only reach a healthy weight level, but also maintain it ever since. After New York, she worked for two years as a model in Milan. However, catwalks have their limits, she got bored again and was constantly quarrelling with her employers as she stood her ground, because she wanted to smile in front of the public and cameras. So, despite all that profession’s perks, she ditched her job, moved back to the United States to study architecture at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. So, Modella went from being a model, to building models.

And, after only two years of working in an architecture office in Florida, she moved to Buenos Aires, to be closer to her father's family.

As she got to know him a little during the dinner, Modella could sense that Mr. Pong was a person with good intentions. Being an industrialist from Shanghai, he had helped create many jobs not only for his compatriots, but also for a lot of other people working for his various companies around the world.

So, she felt comfortable enough to tell him the story about forming the Grooters together with her friends, among them Richie. Modella also told Mr. Pong about the Pact they had made at that time.

“And have you since then been able to gather the clues necessary to fulfill the Pact?” asked the industrialist.

“Only a few,” responded Modella, thinking about how her own weight success had helped her mother as well, but not to the extent she had wished, “Of course additional twenty-five years of life experience has taught us a lot of things, but we still haven't reached a point where we can give people consistent and reliable advice on how to solve their life and relationship issues.”

“Don't give up, Modella, and continue to gather as much information as you can that you think can help your parents and others.”

“Would you have any life advice to share?”

“I know a thing or two from life experience,” said Pong, “but I suggest that you meet Fuconcius, an old wise man living in the *Emei Shan* mountain region in the Sichuan province in western China. He knows much more than me.”

“Do you have his address?”

“No. But he shouldn't be difficult to find: he is around 110 years old and lives in a monastery not too far from Leshan. When you are there, just ask some local villagers, most of them know about him. The best is to fly into Chengdu, then take the bus to Leshan, the place with the giant Buddha next to the river.”

Modella had never heard of Leshan, but remembers Verity mentioning that she had been on vacation to Chengdu to visit the Panda Research Centre, which was like a zoo for pandas only.

“I have fourteen days vacations later in October, and nothing planned. *Xie xie*, Mr. Pong,” said Modella, proud of being able to place the only word she knew in Mandarin. During a boring long-haul flight over some ocean a few years ago, she had learned how to say “thank you” in a hundred languages – a list that has served her well as she likes to travel.

“You are welcome, Modella,” said Mr. Pong, “I am sure Richie will keep me up-to-date about the insights you get from this amazing centenarian.”

“Yes, we always keep each other abreast about any valuable information that can help us fulfill our Pact.”

Sichuan, China, late October 2017

Fortunately, Modella had been to China before, but she still had difficulties to accommodate to all the people everywhere and was glad to go to the slightly less populated mountain region two hours South-West of Chengdu.

As most people in this remote area did not speak English, Modella was happy to have downloaded the *VRT* application on her smart phone before she left. The *Voice Recognition Translator* was a recently developed application that was great to understand and get understood, but the technology was far from perfect, which sometimes led to some hilarious misinterpretations of the device’s proposed translations.

As she arrived in Leshan, Modella was able to get some information about Fuconcius from an ambulant merchant selling drinks to the people happily queuing up to see the 70m-tall Buddha.

Out of the *VRT* came:

“*You go need to Emeishan town.*”

“*Xie xie,*” said Modella underlining her extensive one-word Mandarin knowledge with an even broader smile, but a genuine one, being positively understood in all languages and cultures.

Modella then took a taxi to Emeishan town where she found a group of women sitting on a park bench, and she asked them through the *VRT* where she could find Fuconcius.

“*Two walk hours here from it is you Fuconcius find,*” was the answer.

Modella talked into the *VRT* again: “*Maybe you know a guide that can take me to him?*”

Again, the women laughed out loud as they heard the *VRT* translation. Modella concluded that if the translation into Chinese was as funny as it was into English, the ladies had a good reason to laugh.

“*To Fuconcius guide you cousin mine Zebedee name his,*” said the woman who had talked earlier. She made a sign to Modella to wait and she quickly walked away.

And ten minutes later, she returned with a man who looked like he was in his early forties.

The man talked into the *VRT* and the following came out: “*Problem no, guide you I Fuconcius to 100 RMB pay you me.*”

Modella thought that was a good deal, and off they went.

The *Heilongjiang Plank Way*, as the trail was called, was magnificent: it was not a tropical jungle, but the forest was luxuriant with such intense green colours, as Modella had never seen before. They walked through the *Joking Monkey Zone*, probably named so after funny interactions between some tourists and their first cousins.

The monkeys living in this area, macaques, although not winning any cuteness awards, were entertaining to watch. Modella saw plenty of them along the way.

A little further up the trail, a fluorescent green-coloured snake crossed her path. Zebedee could see that it made her uncomfortable, but he was used to this reaction from tourists, so he told her through the *VRT*:

“*This why reason is most visitors this zone past come back never.*”

Modella turned pale, but then Zebedee gave her a tap on the back and the blonde girl finally understood that it was just a joke. Apparently, it was not only the monkeys who were joking here, she thought, relieved but a little annoyed at her own naivety.

An hour later, they arrived at a small settlement, just a few huts, and Modella concluded that the monastery must be fairly close now.

After Zebedee had talked for a while with one of the locals, he came back to Modella with a worried expression on his face:

“*Monastery lives where Fuconcius only 20 away minutes is. But problem: Fuconcius sick very is.*”

Modella knew it was never a good sign when an old person got really sick, and she just hoped that he would be fit enough so that he could talk to her.

They continued to walk for fifteen minutes until they came to the foot of steep and long stairs.

“*It here is,*” said the grammatically challenged *VRT*.

Yes and no, thought Modella looking up the endless stairs disappearing into the mist.

It must have been over a thousand steps. Modella lost count half way, but did a rough guesstimate when she arrived breathless at the top. Zebedee didn’t even sweat when they arrived and Modella told herself that maybe the people were immune to gravity in this region.

Anyway, amazed at how fit Zebedee was, she asked him about his age:

“*Only fifty-eight age me am,*” came out of the *VRT*. Mountain air keeps young indeed.

Zebedee talked to a middle-aged monk at the entrance of the small monastery perched on a rock with beautiful forest landscapes all around. The monk was talking in a very low tone.

Modella understood why, when the *VRT* spit out:

“Fuconcius been coma in three days for now.”

She felt like a big weight in her chest after these news, and asked Zebedee:

“So, what do we do now? All this way for nothing.”

Zebedee/*VRT*: *“You stay can days a few. Good fortune you then Fuconcius up wake. Room sleep plus food yes here.”*

“Xie xie, Zebedee. Then I stay here for a few days in the hope that Fuconcius will regain consciousness. You can go home now, I will find my way back alone.”

Modella gave him RMB 200 and Zebedee left with a big smile of gratitude.

A while later, as it started to get dark, Modella had dinner with all the monks and a few other tourists who also spent the night in this fantastic place.

She woke up refreshed the day after. She knew that this was by far the most amazing place where she had ever spent a night. Despite the morning fog, she could feel how the mountain air filled her with energy and she was not surprised to hear that some people here lived to a very old age. She hoped that this *mysterious myst* would clear before she left so that she could see more of this stunning landscape.

She was glad she had brought a book with her as there was not much to do in the monastery except for the morning Tai Chi exercises led by one of the older monks.

So, she read *Wild Swans*, an exceptional book about three generations of women living in Communist China under Mao. It was a very real and a very sad story about this huge country. Modella would never see China and the Chinese with the same eyes again.

On the second day, one of the older monks came to Modella and told her in broken English:

“Fuconcius died this morning.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Modella, already knowing this, as Fuconcius had visited her a few moments earlier to say that he was busy sorting out his death right now, but would come back tomorrow for a longer chat.

She did not want to let the other monks know about her ability to talk to the dead, so she just said:

“Too sad I came all this way for nothing. But it is so beautiful here, I would like to stay another day or two.”

“No problem,” said the monk, “enjoy the fresh mountain air and calmness here.”

“*Xie, xie!*”

In the afternoon of the third day, Modella was sitting and reading her book on a small balcony of the monastery overlooking the wonderful green valley. The fog had now cleared.

Suddenly, she heard a voice next to her. Or rather, she could feel a presence, and she knew it was Fuconcius. He did not talk to her with words as we know it, but rather communicated with feelings and emotions on a telepathic level.

She was used to this, not only with her grandparents, but also with old friends and acquaintances that had passed away in the last twenty years.

For someone with Modella’s abilities, it was actually easier to communicate with the deceased Fuconcius, than it would have been if he had been alive, because he did not speak English and it is not convenient to hold a longer conversation with the VRT.

The telepathic discussion went on as follows:

“Thank you for taking the time and come and talk to me,” said Modella.

“I have all the time in the world right now,” replied Fuconcius.

“Mr. Pong suggested I talk to you regarding a complex problem: I need to better understand what blocks people from living healthy and happy lives.”

“Ah, Mr. Pong, I remember him. Many years ago. A good man. So why do you want to find solutions for this?”

Modella told him about the Grooters and the Pact they had made as kids.

“Ah! A true Chinese puzzle, or *casse-tête chinois* as the French would call it. You’ve come to the right address.”

Modella laughed at the old man’s humour. She had noticed that humour was often a common denominator among centenarians.

“So, you think you will find a solution where all others have failed?”

“Thanks to our combined superpowers, we have a competitive advantage. Doesn’t mean it’s going to be a walk in the park.”

“Well, I have spent most of my long life, almost 112 years, to ponder those questions. Hopefully some of my insights will be able to help you.”

“Thank you,” said Modella, “I am very grateful for this.”

“There are quite a few things that you need to understand when it comes to “bad” things that happen to people, for example your parents,” continued Fuconcius, “some people would claim it’s the Devil’s work, other say it’s the system, others say it’s communism, others say it’s capitalism... I prefer to reframe the situation and say that when bad things like that happen, it means you are not on the right path, *dào*. An easy analogy could be a wall. If a wall is in your way, don’t curse it, it doesn’t help to call it evil. Instead, look for a door or archway that takes you through the wall to where you want to go.”

“Put like that, it sounds quite easy.”

“I wish it were. But it is not. Identifying the wall is the easy part. Finding the door is the tricky part. Just look at our Great Wall of China: there are far more wall bricks than openings. But you can get past the wall.”

“Any practical suggestions?”

“The solution is different for every problem. However, there are two main categories of things that will help you get through to the other side.”

“And what are they?” Modella could feel that she was up for some powerful wisdom.

“The first is knowledge. So, if you know where the door or opening is, you go there instead of banging your head against the wall. Or, put differently, knowledge can be seen as a form of key or password. If you don’t have the key, it’s very hard to get in. But with the right key, it’s easy as.”

Modella laughed at Fuconcius’ humour, thinking about a Kiwi friend of hers who always said ‘easy as’. It is not unlikely that Fuconcius had met some New Zealand traveller during his 112-year journey.

“That makes sense,” she said.

Fuconcius continued: “Yes, and I want to underline the importance of this analogy again. Knowledge can be the difference between life and death. Let’s say you’re out in a snow storm. You come up to a house but don’t have the key to go into the house. Then you may die outside. That’s how important the right knowledge can be.”

“And what about the second category?”

“The second category is creativity. Back to the Great Wall example: if there are no existing doors, how do you get through?”

“I don’t know.”

“There are always alternatives. You can walk around the wall, for example. Admittedly, this would mean a lot of walking in the case of the Great Wall. Or you could dynamite the wall. However, that’s less elegant and you may get UNESCO and a billion Chinese on your back. So, the easiest of all is simply to fly over the wall.”

“Fly? You mean with an airplane or helicopter?”

“No, fly like a bird, or Superwoman.”

Modella’s limiting beliefs dismissed that last solution instantly. However, she still felt wiser from Fuconcius’ words.

“Thanks for all these ideas.”

The ghost continued: “Now, remember that there is a close link between knowledge and creativity. The more knowledge you have, the more creative mental associations you will be able to make. So, in a first phase, I would recommend that you and your Grooters friends do whatever you can to gather as much knowledge as possible, with the hope of coming up with creative solutions to help your parents, and humanity. This is very important, and you do not have a lot of time.”

“What do you mean, we do not have a lot of time?”

“Two, maximum three years.”

“What will happen then?”

“Unless you or someone else comes up with a solution, there is a very big likelihood that a worldwide pandemic will spread, with unimaginable suffering.”

“Thank you for your warning. On a practical level, what would you suggest that we do now as a first next step?”

“As I mentioned, knowledge is the starting point. So, my recommendation is that you gather with your Grooters friends, brainstorm with each other and do research until you find the solutions you’re after.”

“OK.”

“That being said, there is something that could improve your odds even further.”

“And what is that?”

“A secret weapon against dark forces.”

“A secret weapon? And what does it look like?”

“No one has ever seen it, but if the legend is true, then this weapon will help a group of pure-intentioned warriors to save the planet.”

“You think that could be us, the Grooters?”

“Maybe.”

“So where do I find this special weapon?”

“Not on a supermarket shelf,” joked the wise ghost.

Modella laughed again.

“I wouldn’t really expect that either.”

Fuconcius continued: “I do not know any details about it, but there is one person who might be able to help you further.”

“Who is that?”

“She is a shaman and her name is Goldilocks Dove. You should be able to find her somewhere in the South-Western United States.”

“Thank you so much, Fuconcius,”

“You are welcome. I could spend a deathtime talking to a lovely lady like you, but right now I think that the most important thing is that you get the ball rolling and activate the Grooters’ combined powers. Anyhow, feel free to contact me again, should you get stuck or have specific questions that you think I may be able to answer.”

“Thank you Fuconcius,” said Modella, “and now that you are dead, that makes it easier for me to reach you, and I do not need to travel to China to talk to you.”

“Good luck, Modella,” were Fuconcius’ last words.

Straight after her conversation with Fuconcius, Modella went to her room, packed and left the monastery.

As soon as she came down closer to Emeishan town, where the mobile network coverage was sufficient, she sat down on a bench and e-mailed a summary of her discussion with Fuconcius to her Grooters friends.

As Modella knew she may not come back to this part of the world for a while, she took the opportunity to spend another few days in Chengdu, visiting the Panda Centre she had so much looked forward to see. Except maybe some dog puppies, she had never met such cute animals before. She spent a whole afternoon in this very unique zoo.

Then she attended a great Sichuan opera show with traditional costumes, tea pots, dolls, and, like Fuconcius, a lot of humour, something she felt was a scarce resource, and not only in China. Modella particularly enjoyed the hand shadow puppets. They really made her laugh.

Once all the Grooters had woken up in their respective time zones and read Modella’s message, they e-mailed each other back and forth whereafter Boss suggested that Webbo and

Richie go and find Goldilocks Dove, as they both live on the American continent, north of the equator.

Richie called Webbo:

“Hi Webbo, what’s up?”

“Up and down these days, I have an annoying client right now...”

“Then just fire him.”

“But I am the only one who can help him,” retorted Webbo.

“You need to set your own rules.”

“You think I can do that?”

“If you want to keep your sanity, you need to do it. You can start with letting your client know that you need to take a few days off. Where do you think we shall start looking for Goldilocks?”

“Tricky. I cannot locate her with remote viewing for the moment, as I have not met her and do not have any photograph of her.”

“Yes,” added Richie, “and you will not find her in the white pages either, as we only know her shamanic name.”

“Maybe we can contact a shaman or some American Indian association?”

“Good idea, Webbo, I’ll have my assistant work on this. She is used to locate people, even much sought-after VIPs, so this should not be a big issue for her. I get back to you as soon as I have some more information about our dove.”

Two hours and twelve minutes later, Webbo’s mobile rang again.

“Hi Richie!”

“Hi again Webbo, so even my charming and over-efficient assistant Christella was not able to fully locate Goldilocks, but she found out the name of another shaman who would probably be able to help us. He has no phone, so we need to go and find him.”

“Where is he?”

“Pahrump, Nevada.”

“Never heard of.”

“In the middle of nowhere, about sixty miles equidistant from Death Valley in the west and Las Vegas in the east.”

“OK,” said Webbo, “so if I jump into my car now, I can pick you up at Las Vegas airport in a few hours’ time – it should take you approximately the same amount of time to fly in from the east coast, as me to drive from San Francisco.”

“Good idea, Webbo,” said Richie, “I’ll call my pilots straight away and have them get ready for take-off.”