



Micro-Humanity

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Аннотация

Solution: shrink the whole of humanity. An unknown path that once undertaken cannot be reversed but, although everyone keeps saying yes, are we sure that all the dangers have been taken into consideration?

Earth is overpopulated. Human beings are now too many. Years of technological progress across the board have decreed their almost exponential increase decade after decade. Any attempt made to curb growth has been in vain. Expansion into space has not delivered the desired results. Earth is exhausted and humanity on the verge of a near extinction. Thousands of hypotheses are made, thousands of solutions examined, thousands of researches are conducted and subsidized. Nothing is left out. Everything is examined. Even the most abstruse ideas and most imaginative conjectures are studied thoroughly. So, in this mess of ideas, in this swamp of thoughts the solution arises. The solution is as simple as absurd and yet apparently possible: shrinking the whole of humanity. An unknown path that once undertaken cannot be reversed but, although everyone keeps saying yes, are we sure that all the dangers have been taken into consideration?

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The story narrated in this book is the result of the author's imagination. It is therefore not autobiographical. Any reference to names, things, people who exist or existed, or to facts that really happened is purely accidental.

To my parents and my family.

Look at the small things because one day you'll turn back and you'll understand they were big.

Jim Morrison

Small things are responsible for big changes.

Paulo Coelho.

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Many thanks to you, who are reading these words.

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CHAPTER 1 – WHY IT HAPPENED

Year 2323.

The year when everything changed.

The year of awareness.

The year of the great decision.

The year when — perhaps for the first time since modern man existed — the whole of humankind agreed on what to do, and not only in principle but in fact as well.

The year of no return.

The year of rebirth.

The year of a new era not only for us but for earth itself and

its inhabitants.

A decision dictated neither by altruism nor by some dazzling general epiphany but, rather — in a much simpler way — linked to a series of failures with which the whole human race had finally been forced to deal.

At the beginning of the millennium, everything had seemed possible: space travels, colonies on other planets, teleportation, robots featuring almost human intelligence, and more, much more. Those were the years when all branches of science made great leaps forward. Years that rightly portended a bright future. There were some challenges, of course, but nothing unbeatable.

However, reality was that humankind had to face many more obstacles than expected. Space travels became more frequent, comfortable, and technological but not faster, at least not significantly, not enough to go beyond Mars in a reasonable amount of time. Not fast enough to develop colonies.

Colonies, indeed, proved to be too expensive, unsafe, and failed to develop self-sufficiency. Not for a large number of people, at least, not on Mars, much less on the Moon, which needed constant supplies from the Earth.

Hibernation technique — or cryostats — had not succeeded in delivering the desired results yet and was still too risky.

The idea of space colonies orbiting around Earth had to be dismissed after having realized that our body was made neither for space and weightlessness nor for artificial gravity in the long run.

It was as if both our human nature and Earth with its available resources were firmly opposing to human expansion in space with all their might.

At the same time, however, Earth seemed unable to support the nearly twenty billions human beings trampling on it. An exorbitant and constantly increasing number both due to failure of birth control policies and to medical progress, which had dramatically increased life expectancy and allowed a part of the world population to peacefully surpass 120 years of age.

Among all the hopes of the beginning of the millennium one had actually come true in addition to the medical one: robots — even if their intelligence did not even come close to the human one yet despite techno-biological progress. It was only thanks to them that humankind survived. They tirelessly produced enough food for everyone, cleaned and improved air, helped the elderly, took care of the sick and of the children, carried out the most unpleasant but necessary tasks, recycled — in short, they allowed humankind to concentrate on what was considered truly important.

Nevertheless, despite their diffusion and technical and aesthetic development, robots could not learn like a child, think like a man, and develop emotions yet, thus they could not really aspire to arise to the status of a fully sentient creature with its own personality and cognitive peculiarities. They could simulate this very well, yes, and many went on debating — in an endless discussion — about how our brain could actually be compared to

nothing more than a very efficient computer. Such people were always in contrast with those who claimed that, on the other hand, an artificial thing was always going to be artificial and that it had nothing to do with the birth, evolution, and development typical of life. Moreover, despite everything robots knew or could show, they were actually never going to emancipate themselves from the source code by which they had been programmed, without saying that a machine, by definition, could be tampered with. Of course, the answer was that also humans have their source code as well — called DNA — and that history showed over and over again how many times people had been subdued, subjugated, deceived, and persuaded by madmen in different eras. Then came the inevitable free will, the imprinting, and finally the concepts on which the debate ran aground: the ability to spontaneously imagine, to daydream, and the capability to have faith.

The fact was that humankind was standing on the brink of the abyss in that fateful 2323 and for the first time everyone — indeed everyone — realized that something was to be done. Population was too large. The space too little. Food was insufficient. Drinking water was in short supply. The terrestrial ecosystem was about to raise the white flag.

Everyone agreed. Something was to be done. Although humankind seemed united for the first time, the problem was that no one was able to propose an adequate solution to the problem.

Thus, all the brightest and most renowned scientists and all the

living Nobel laureates gathered in the most advanced research center ever built and located in the center of Sardinia in order to ensure privacy, solitude, and security.

CHAPTER 2 – HOW IT HAPPENED

Such minds — the brightest minds of the time — studied, experimented, hypothesized, discussed for more than three years without coming to a solution and the more time passed, the more the alliance of the world's nations got strained, a victim of panic and selfishness.

When the fifth year of research was hit and an enormous amount of money had been spent, not only results could not be seen yet, but the scientists themselves began to give up and, one after the other, abandoned the project because of stress and pressure.

It was in that year, in perhaps the darkest moment, when everything seemed doomed to fail, that an unknown scientist — employed by a multinational transport company — sent his idea and project together with a simple sentence: “We need more space, but Earth is the only place we can dispose of and, if we take up too much space then, why don't we just try to take up less space?”

The unknown scientist was summoned to explain his idea. He showed up before the brightest minds in the world with a simple yet effective molecular modulator, on which he had been working for years in order to reduce packages, containers and their contents so that it was possible to transport more of them

in one go.

The modulator he presented was already half-working, in the sense that it acted on matter, reducing the space among atoms, neutrons, neutrinos, and so on, thus making things smaller, but unfortunately he hadn't managed to reverse the process yet.

The scientists observed with interest but without too much enthusiasm for a not-so-original idea until Pikelell — that was the man's name — pointed his modulator on a sheep shrinking it to be not bigger than a bean in less than a second.

Everyone watched the little animal looking around and panicking, starting to run wildly in all directions and a triumphant Pikelell exclaimed "We do not need more space if we can make the space we have become a thousand times bigger for us!"

Scientists started thinking and it all made sense. The population of Rome could be entirely contained in the Colosseum. Megacities such as New York, Tokyo, London, Paris, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and others could house their population in one of their skyscrapers over 500 meters high. Each floor — less than two men tall — was going to be as tall as 350, if not more. A single cow was about to satisfy thousands of people, agricultural areas that today fed tens of thousands were going to feed millions but, more importantly, a liter of water — that was now not enough for a single person — was going to quench hundreds of people.

There was the problem of the irreversibility of the process but everyone, scientists at the head, decided that it was currently

of secondary importance. In less than a few weeks everyone — scientists, governments, and nations — agreed. It had to be done.

In the following years everything was aimed at the transition. Everything, that was going to be needed by humanity once shrunk, was mass produced. Priority was given to technology. Building microscopic computers and processors was nothing new, but designing screens of the necessary size, for example, was a novelty. The world 3D printers began to churn out all sorts of goods such as furniture, supplies, and so on. The buildings, that were going to contain the new humanity, were identified and adapted to contain adequate and comfortable homes for everyone. Technicians automated existing factories and plants as much as possible so that they could be controlled remotely as the new human dimensions were going to make it at least difficult to use some things or machineries or means of transport such as huge container ships and airplanes.

Economists and sociologists delighted in making calculations and forecasts and it was clear that, a few days after the transformation, hunger in the world was going to be defeated, the constant need for new land to build on was about to disappear, natural resources were going to be such and abundant that disparities among states were about to be eliminated in a short time and this — together with the technological sharing that was taking place — was going to make each current State self-sufficient in everything.

This caused some reverse emigration never experienced

before: migrants from the poorest regions of the world went back home and so did the refugees, since they were basically going to have the same things both in the country where they lived — or where they wanted to go — and in their homeland. After the transformation, nations were going to keep multi-ethnicity but multiculturalism was about to largely disappear.

The military made sure that they had very close control over existing weapons and — since each nation was going to have the ability to completely annihilate the population of entire states using just a couple of ‘normal’ conventional missiles, which all of them had — they were also reassured that peace was going to be extremely long-lasting if not eternal, as it would be supported by the mutual threat of total destruction.

Thousands of Molecular Interspace Modulators — also known as MIMs — were built and placed on as many satellites ready to be launched in geostationary orbit around Earth and everything seemed to go smoothly until Pikelell and the other scientists realized that they could not simply send the MIMs in orbit and shoot or they were going to merely shrink everything and everyone in equal measure and nothing would change. Actually, Earth would probably be thrown out of its orbit into the grip of other celestial bodies’ gravitational force, most likely ending up crashing into the Moon or being consumed by the Sun.

The solution was provided by a killer belonging to the United Mafianghetorra — also known as MACU — a major criminal organization. He sent Pikelell an envelope containing a bullet and

a few words “I take a target’s hair, place it in the bullet then I just have to shoot in the air: the bullet will find its prey, easy isn’t it?”. The idea was simple but great. All they needed was to use the same DNA targeting system as the killer.

Pikelell and the scientists began modifying MIMs, collecting and mapping DNA of all citizens. This necessity caused protests to rise for the first time. Privacy was invoked. Privacy was contrasted with the survival of a species and perhaps of an entire planet, their planet, and — as far as it was known — the only one where they could live and thrive. The debate lasted a long time and was not an easy one but, in the end, the spirit of survival prevailed. Only a small group of a few thousand people in the end refused to give their DNA. They were invited to move to an island, lost in the middle of the sea, thousands of miles from any mainland. Moreover, they were stripped of all modern technology so that their privacy — which they deemed so important — would not risk being violated.

The mapping was indeed faster than expected as the scientists were secretly told that almost all the world governments had already been listing newborns’ DNA for at least two generations — some even for three. Once the genetic mapping was over — a fact that drastically brought crime down — the MIMs were launched into orbit. Dozens of launches in record time ensured full coverage.

When finally tiny apartments and the rest of the plans were completed, everyone gathered as close as possible to their new

homes and waited for the big moment. A moment of great emotion. A moment of joy and pain and fear and anticipation. Everyone looked up. There was a blinding flash. A deafening roar. Unnatural pressure forced everyone to the ground and an instant later humanity had been changed forever. Shrunken and ready for a fresh start. A beginning full of possibilities where everyone could aspire to be what they really wanted to be, where there was no hunger in the world, where medicines were enough for everyone, where water was no longer a problem, where energy and electric power was not going to be ever rationed again, where peace among states was about to reign at least for decades, and more.

Everything looked so perfect that many people thought that they must have done something wrong, but found nothing wrong. Nature was quickly regaining abandoned areas and was not a threat: Animals were driven away by ultrasounds, electromagnetic fields, shields, and — in any case — weapons were always there. The ones belonging to the ‘giants’ era’, as they now used to say when referring to the pre-abundance or pre-shrinking age.

Wealth was everywhere and work — as it was intended before the great little step of human evolution — was no longer the same. Actually, every citizen was called to work only a couple of months a year; apart from this, everyone could devote themselves to what made them happy without any social pressure. Even lying around drinking beer all day and not lifting a finger was

considered a worthy occupation if it contributed to the happiness of the individual as long as it did not harm anyone else. There were also people who decided to work all their lives or for years in a row and this too was fine. The very foundations of society had been changed both by abundance and by easy access to everything.

The riskiest and only truly necessary jobs were maintenance of infrastructure, power plants, farms, and stock farms from the giants' era, that were now completely automated and run by robots. Such robots allowed the new micro-humanity to live the new way, so they had to be maintained and what they produced had to be collected. This was why everyone — with no exceptions — was educated and instructed so that every member of society knew how to face and solve almost any technological or mechanical problem that could arise.

It was a sort of golden age of everything that sublimated the soul and human creativity — both artistic and technological — and the icing on the cake was that human impact on Earth had diminished and its ecosystem was self-healing really incredibly fast because of this. Biodiversity regained strength and vigor until it even resumed an evolution that human supremacy had seemed to have blocked and aborted forever.

CHAPTER 3 – SURPRISE

Everything was fine. Not perfect, of course. Perfection does not belong to humanity but mankind had never been closer to it at that time.

Until a strange thing happened. Something that nobody had expected. Something that changed everything forever and turned hope and joy into terror and fear.

It all started on a very normal late spring day in the refunded city of Angkor Wat. Two maintenance teams had been called by observers and sent together with a platoon of soldiers to check for strange reports detected by the instruments from the nearby power plant. Little more than extraordinary maintenance. Two teams of ten maintainers and a platoon of forty soldiers. Everything absolutely normal.

The maintenance teams boarded their transport drone, the soldiers theirs and the convoy was further escorted by four more defense drones. Standard procedure. Nothing abnormal. The journey was uneventful. A couple of birds were driven away using the eagle call — a day's work, it always happened. When they arrived at the plant, they landed on the roof. From the roof, the maintainers and the soldiers went to the control room. There, they identified the source of the abnormal signal. The maintainers thought it was the usual mouse gnawing wires. A team of maintainers and half the platoon of soldiers were sent to fix everything. Weapons were set up on ultrasound for mice. As always, mice were easily chased away, wires repaired, sprinkled with a brand new miraculous mice-chaser substance (they were the ones that caused the most damage) and they all went back to Angkor Wat. Everything was all right.

As soon as they returned, however, they were called back by

the observers: the problem had reappeared immediately after their homecoming. They promptly left again, as per protocol.

Back at the plant, they observed that the problem was no longer caused by mice but by ants. Myriad of ants that had gathered around the wires that they had just repaired. These ants behaved in a strange way. Never before had there been ants that had shown an interest in electrical wires. At least not in such a compulsive way.

Soldiers armed themselves with specially designed (and successfully tested) pheromones throwers that were going to divert the ants far away, thus giving the Maintainers time to do their job. This time it did not work. For some reason, the ants seemed much more interested in the wires than in the powerful pheromones that had been just sprayed.

The Sergeant Commissar in command decided to change tactics by ordering his men to take up Greek fire: a very powerful acid that ignited in contact with the air and that promised to consume any living thing it touched in a few seconds. Burning ants running away were also going to burn the traces of pheromones left behind by the insects themselves, cutting the path that the others followed to get there.

The soldiers went down inside the plant and began to shower the ants in acid from an elevated position. The insects immediately caught fire and began to move convulsively in all directions, as expected. The smell of burnt ant pervaded the structure. Thick, acrid smoke rose. The soldiers continued their

work until they finished the stocks in the cylinders and calmly waited for the result. Many of them had done it before and only a couple of new recruits were looking forward to the result. A result that baffled both soldiers and Sergeant Commissar. The ants had not run away, dispersing but seemed to have anchored even more to the wires until they had died.

The alarm went off in the soldiers' helmets and visors. Ants approaching. Greek fire was over. Pheromones were ineffective. The Sergeant Commissar took up the automatic rifle and ordered to retreat. He had already dealt with ants before and knew all too well that they could get the better of some of them but not of all the approaching swarm.

At the same time, the hysterical voice of the maintenance workers shouted desperately that the wire had been melted and that the flow of power towards the city had almost been interrupted. If they did not do anything, the power reserves of the city were not going to be enough, not even for a week.

The Sergeant Commissar considered a heroic deed. He turned around. He saw the ants and escaped. He ran faster than he had ever done in his life but the ants were faster. His men were mowed one by one. When he reached the maintenance workers, he found them torn to pieces and their bodies at the mercy of other ants that were already taking them away to feed their colony. Somehow, the Sergeant Commissar managed to get on the only still intact drone as the ants were also raging against them. Such a behavior had never been seen before since drones

were not food for them.

The Sergeant Commissar went back to Angkor Wat to report and raise the alarm. They thought him to be the cause of what was happening, because of his order to use Greek fire, so he was immediately tried by the martial court and sentenced to death.

Two battalions were sent to the station to solve the situation but none of them ever came back. The ants were too many, too resistant, did not know fear, and did not care dying.

Meanwhile, worrying reports from explorers talked about swarms and swarms of those insects: they seemed to be converging towards the city.

Drones loaded with almost all the reserves of synthetic pheromones were sent to trace a path impregnated with such substance that would drive them far away, to the territory of a large termite nest so that the two breeds of insects would decimate each other. A tactic that had always worked.

However — believe it or not — it was not the ants that followed that track but the termites.

The high command of the city thought this was positive. Ants and termites were still going to come into contact and so the war between the two types of insects — that had been going on for millions of years — was about to continue. Maybe a little closer to the city gates than they had hoped for, but better than being attacked by that horde of ants.

The yellow alarm was lifted and everyone resumed their lives, happy that their leaders had solved the situation.

Nature, however, is unpredictable and has a thousand ways to amaze us such as ants and termites marching together side by side without touching each other as if an absurd, improbable alliance had been declared between them.

The following day, power ran out. The emergency generators came on and were going to be enough for three days at most. Every citizen, who had served as a military, was called back. All the others were given the order to evacuate. Transport drones were stormed by panicked crowds. The spirit of survival caused scenes of cruelty that had not been witnessed for decades. It was soon clear that transport drones were not enough. Solidarity and spirit of brotherhood perished at the mercy of selfishness. In the end, only slightly less than a quarter of the population managed to embark.

The drones rose like a swarm of large insects. This drew flocks of predatory birds of all kinds that targeted them. All the assault drones were sent to protect the transport ones as well as the guns of the giants era were pointed towards the sky shooting down the birds of prey. The transport drones — also protected by the defense weapons of the nearby airport — managed to reach it and from there to get on one of the huge giants' planes reaching safety in Phnom Penh.

Those who remained in Angkor Wat had no other choice but fighting. The ancient and huge weapons were aimed at the approaching swarms but the ants were mostly jumped into the air and not killed by their large calibers that could not stop their

advance. In due course, the ants arrived and the first line of defense was swept away almost immediately. The defenders of the first line fought to the end and each of them killed at least a dozen ants and more, but the latter were so many that they eventually won.

Ants and termites seemed unstoppable, overwhelming every block and each barricade they were faced with, and after not even a day of battle the few survivors were crammed into the tower of the southern district, the only one defended by flamethrowers, the sole weapon of the giants' era that seemed to be truly effective.

Ants and termites went on attacking despite everything, but just when the gas and gasoline reserves that supported the flames of the flamethrowers were about to run out, the insect tsunami stopped. An unexpected joy began to spread among the ranks of the survivors. Some expressed it almost hysterically, others — more cautious and superstitious — dared not give it a voice. A wise choice as a slight hum anticipated the dragonflies' arrival.

In a few moments, they took away, torn, and threw down from the tower the defenders who were outside or lurking in the windows. Some of them entered through such windows, wreaking havoc of many humans before being shot down.

The defenders closed the windows and sealed them using steel bulkheads, thus trapping themselves inside the tower. They sent the umpteenth requests for help via radio in the hope that aid from the capital could arrive in time when the tower shook and

ants began to emerge from under it. Resistance was futile and extermination was absolute.

That was the beginning of the Cambodian Syndrome — also, and more commonly, called Gea's Revenge — that is, an inexplicable but continuous attack on humankind by insects. It had started with ants but soon many other species of insects had come together in this absurd war and, from that first time in Angkor Wat, their attacks had quickly multiplied, spreading wildly all over the globe.

Insects — and this was an even stranger and crazier thing — not only attacked human settlements but also automated systems which humankind depended upon, such as farms, power plants, plantations and they did so by cutting wires or penetrating inside robots, corroding their circuits.

Many did not resign to the lack of answers for such attacks and pursued and often made up hypotheses — of which unfortunately they were persuaded — such as plots by other states, or by some sect, or by some secret order that had developed a technology capable of controlling insects, or even the long hand of the aliens who, now that we had shrunk, no longer saw any use in us, and so on.

Actually, by that time, the only sure thing — besides the scientific and war effort of all humanity in search of a way to stop these continuous attacks — was the certainty that everyone was going to be attacked sooner or later.

To date, more than three hundred years after the big small

step, the most affected states had been India, China with the whole Far East, as well as Indonesia and Australia and in that part of the world only Japan seemed a port more or less secure. Africa had also been devastated, Southern Europe was suffering more than northern Europe. The real tragedy, however, had taken place on the American continent: South and Central America had been completely overwhelmed and humankind entirely swept away from those lands.

Many, indeed almost all the fugitives from such lands had taken refuge in Texas, in Last Flame, perhaps the last stronghold against the advance of the insects that came from the south, destroying every human settlement in their path.

Last Flame had been built, or rather moved, in the middle of the country's last oil plant and all its defenses were based on it. Eight ditches had been dug around the city where oil burned nonstop. Dozens of oil-powered flamethrowers had been placed between one ditch and another. Every citizen capable of holding a flamethrower had been equipped with it and, for months now, ammunition factories had been operating at full speed as well as those making respirators and gas masks. Yes, because — although virtually impregnable — Last Flame had a problem created exactly by what protected it: the toxicity of the fumes exhaled by oil.

CHAPTER 4 – THE PRESENT

“Hey Mexico, put your mask on if you do not want to die young!” Jenny scolded him.

Pedro looked up at her, who was trying to see beyond the curtain of flames and smoke in front of them using her binoculars “I’m Brazilian, not Mexican!” he replied, tired of repeating it every single time.

Jenny shrugged “Always Latin America it is!” she put her binoculars away and sat down, frustrated “And yet they should already be here!” she complained “Scouts spotted them two days ago.”

Pedro shook his head “I would not be so impatient for ants to arrive, you know?”

Jenny smiled maliciously “I want to see them burn, hear the crunch of their exoskeletons and smell their burnt flesh!”

Pedro shook his head dejectedly.

She looked at him in amazement “You should want the same more than everybody else, right? Don’t you want revenge?”

He sighed “It wasn’t the ants.”

“Really? And who?”

“Not who but what!”

Jenny nodded embarrassed “You are right, sorry, we must not give a sentient dignity to insects by speaking of them as if they were our equals.” She recited by heart.

Pedro nodded “It was mosquitoes! Endless swarms of mosquitoes that attacked us in our sleep, our guards were looking at the ground, we were all terrified by ants and spiders, but our end was deemed by mosquitoes.” He paused drinking a long sip of water: telling that story still troubled him “Mosquitoes had

never been interested in us until then, never ever just one person had been injured that far, but, for some crazy reason, that night they decided that the moment of revenge had come.”

“Revenge?” snorted Jenny.

Pedro nodded gravely “Yes, revenge, I think they are taking revenge.”

“What for?” Jenny retorted trying to contain her perhaps too contemptuous voice out of respect “For the thousands of years when we mercilessly crushed them while they sucked our blood?”

Pedro shrugged “What do I know!” he snapped “There must be a reason for the destruction and devastation they brought!” He picked up a stone from the ground throwing it forcefully “A few hours, can you imagine it? They just needed a few hours to wreak havoc on the city and kill almost everyone with their stingers.” The memory made him shiver “If you were lucky they killed you by drying you up in less than a second, but if they just hurt you, you died all the same in less than ten seconds, but in a much more horrible and painful way: their poison made their victims swell until they literally exploded. Being forced to witness that so many times was horrible.”

Jenny, who usually never lacked words and was used to always having the last one, this time was left speechless.

Pedro had turned pale at the memory of what he had witnessed — he began to nervously scan the sky. Suddenly, he was shaken by an uncontrollable tremor and grabbed her shoulders forcefully “We think we are too intelligent or, better, we think they are

more stupid than they really are, they are coming, they will find a way, they will kill us all!”

Jenny first hit him with a knee in his stomach and then slapped him so hard his head turned and he tumbled to the ground “Calm down soldier!” She shouted at him staring at him with a stern martial look “This is Last Flame! We will not fall! Never! Got it?”

Pedro, red-faced in shame, crawled away holing up in a corner “They will come!” He whispered.

She took two long steps forward kicking him behind a thigh “Shut up, you coward!” She furiously warned him “One more word and I’m sending you out to scout out there!”

Pedro fell silent without daring to even breathe in order not to make any noise.

A few hours later Jenny’s wishes came true.

Ants arrived.

Thousands stormed the inflamed oil ditch.

None passed unscathed and the few who succeeded — trampling on the corpses of their sisters — were too burnt and intoxicated to continue for more than ten steps.

Last Flame was resisting.

The siege went on for days.

For weeks.

The ants were joined by spiders and centipedes, but they too failed to pass. Last Flame inhabitants observed, intimidated by their seemingly endless number, yet proud that their city was

holding the siege.

Meanwhile, the attention of the insects had also turned to other settlements that — not being so protected and prepared as Last Flame — fell under their cruel pincers and this did nothing but increase the population of refugees flocking to the city.

The rumor of Last Flame's heroic resistance had spread throughout North America and many came from all over the former United States to contribute. After more than a year of continuous siege, the population and soldiers were practically more than doubled.

The insects had tried everything, but ants, spiders, centipedes, and others had failed to break through. From the sky, wasps and bees fell to the ground intoxicated by the fumes of oil and were killed by the soldiers. Even swarms of thousands of mosquitoes and flies tried to attack them with the same result and Pedro finally had his longed for — as well as unexpected — revenge. Last Flame was impregnable.

“We will hold out!” Jenny rejoiced while burning the eyes of a dying fly enjoying the distinctive sound — a gloomy ‘plop’ — they made when they exploded.

Beside her, Pedro lingered in breaking the stinger of a mosquito — now charred at his feet — into several parts “We killed a lot of them!” he exulted elated.

The two of them were completely taken by the unstoppable frenzy given by the awareness of winning a battle that everyone thought lost and that was how all the inhabitants of Last Flame

felt.

After six more months, the insects had crossed the first burning oil ditch by extinguishing the flames using the corpses of tens and tens of thousands of them.

Jenny exulted observing them through her binoculars “Those fools will get auto-exterminated! Let them all burn! Damn!”

After the second year of siege, Last Flame recorded that chemical fumes had claimed almost more victims than the insects. Neither masks nor underground shelters seemed enough to protect the weakest of health among whom, unfortunately, there were many children. The situation was such that the city committee ordered all children under fourteen to be denied permission to leave the shelters.

The third year of siege passed without shakings. Insects went on assaulting the city but with much less force and frequency than the previous years — both from the ground and from the air. It was almost as if they smelled death, since, unfortunately, Last Flame was becoming this: an impregnable fortress that killed those it defended.

At the end of the fourth year it was clear that staying meant succumbing to the toxicity of the resources that protected them, yet nobody wanted to leave and go away as suggested by health workers. Nobody wanted to abandon the safety of the fire walls and the sky constantly covered by a blanket of stinking black smoke. Nobody wanted nor dared also because Last Flame had lost contact with all the nearby communities and cities over a

few thousand kilometers and this could only mean that such communities and cities no longer existed.

The closest city was New Tawa — in the territory that was once Canada — but it was more than five thousand kilometers from Last Flame. This was no small problem since there were only two ways to safely reach New Tawa.

The first one was using one of the giants' era planes, but — in order to do so — it was necessary to reach the airport which was a couple of kilometers beyond Last Flame's first defensive ditch and, even if someone could reach it, nobody knew what they were going to find.

The second one was using the only heavy transport drone left capable of traveling such a distance. The fact, however, was that this drone could carry no more than three thousand people and Last Flame counted millions: so many had arrived so quickly that, by then, no one knew how many were surviving within its walls of perpetual fire.

“Sometimes I think it would be better to try our luck and get to the airport.” Pedro complained as he was watching the toxic fumes rise towards the dark sky.

Jenny sighed: sometimes Pedro's defeatism exasperated her beyond the limit.

He went on lowering his gaze “Better than staying here waiting for certain death from this unhealthy air.”

Jenny sighed again but said nothing. She knew that Pedro was basically right, but she was not ready to accept it yet and, above

all, she did not want the man's plaintive nature to infect the rest of her men "Get back Corporal!" she ordered in her authoritative voice, whispering threateningly "Keep such opinions to yourself, the last thing I want is to have discouraged soldiers at my commands, got it?"

Pedro straightened his back "At your command Captain." He answered in a martial voice even though his gaze was clearly saying "You know I'm right."

Jenny let him be "Ready for the patrol!" She ordered and the twenty soldiers under her command got up, took their machine guns, grenade launchers, and flamethrowers and followed her. They were trusted men and women of whom she was proud — they would follow her anywhere and had distinguished themselves on the field several times fighting with courage and a pinch of recklessness against any threat the insects had thrown against the city, in particular when they had led the counterattack on the front line of the attack as the ticks, exploiting a forgotten ledge, were about to climb over the third ditch.

The patrol — that is the scouting along the second protective ditch — began and ended as most current patrols: quietly. And the quieter the patrols, the more nervous Jenny became.

Pedro, who knew her best, placed a hand on her shoulder "Our shift is over now, come on, let's have a drink, it will do you good, it will help you relax."

She looked at the burning ditch one last time and then nodded, following him "Someday this will all end, won't it?" she

whispered to him.

He nodded with a melancholy smile “Yes, as it started it will end, yes, it will end.”

After the usual couple of rounds of beer, they collected their stuff and headed towards the barracks —nothing more than a large pavilion crammed with bunk beds with five beds on top of each other, but they were calling it ‘home’ at the moment.

On the way, Pedro was still laughing at the bad joke that Jenny had played on the young bartender Jack who, having a terrible crush on her, accepted everything, blatant as few have ever been in the history of humanity, when she stopped abruptly.

Pedro turned again laughing “What’s up? Feeling guilty? It would be high time!” he said, laughing even louder.

She got to him with two quick strides plugging his mouth “Shut up! Listen!”

Pedro immediately fell silent and tilted his head to one side trying to listen, then shrugged.

“Don’t you hear a...” alarm sirens began to scream “strange hum?”

Pedro instinctively took his flamethrower up, looking around in alarm “What’s going on?”

Jenny pulled out her Captain binoculars pointing it towards the hum that she had heard.

Pedro pointed a finger in the same direction “That cloud seems to move against the wind.”

Jenny silently waited for the binoculars to focus and

identify what was coming towards them and then turned pale “Grasshoppers!” She whispered, petrified “Grasshoppers!” She repeated and, putting her hands in her hair, she shouted “Grasshoppers swarm! All sheltered! Run to the shelters, quickly!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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