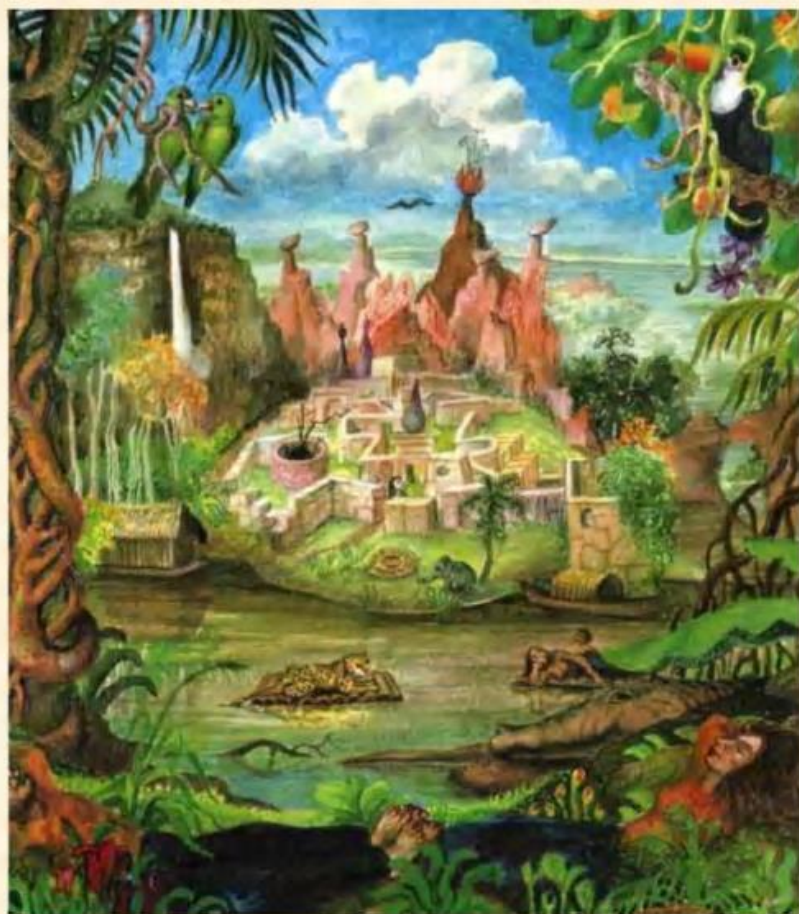


*RAMONDO RODRÍGO*

DREAMS







# DREAMS

Raimundo Rodulfo

All rights reserved.  
Raimundo Rodulfo © 1998.

All rights reserved. ISBN 980-303-597-5.  
Depósito Legal 1f0512000800102X. SACVEN.

Cover painting by Peter Rodulfo.  
Book illustrations by Anabella Delgado.  
Original Revision: Alejandro Terenzani and  
Janardana Dasa.  
Translation: Janardana Dasa.  
English Revision: Mark Hebert, 2010.

First edition: November 1998.

# I THE LABYRINTH



It was in the labyrinth that Crilo saw Marla for the first time. A sudden instant that surprised both of them when they were desperately striving to find a passage free from crossroads, from cheating doors leading them endlessly through erratic paths. In this world where every path seemed to take them back

to the same starting point, the scenery before them was uncertain and dark, both figuratively and literally speaking. The shadows projected by the trees and tall ramparts of that intricate network of pathways made a *collage* of multicolor forms and backgrounds, interwoven with the ivy that swallowed all the vertical surfaces of the place.

The first visual contact was followed by moments of shock, engaged in examining each other, noticing fear in each other eyes. Crilo had been in that place many times, always running for his life, facing the solitude and claustrophobic dread of those who love freedom but who are ensnared behind insurmountable walls. He had never noticed more living presence than his own; not even a bird flew on that silvery, unreal sky. At first, he asked himself about the existence of another unfortunate being in the same situation, running hither and thither like a guinea pig. He later repeated the experience so many times he couldn't remember, resigned himself to keep on wandering through straight, monotonous alleys, imbued in frenzied thoughts, constantly repeating himself that nothing happening was real. An argument that seemed not convincing enough, judging by his uncontrollable emotions and actions.

But for Marla the experience was new; and hence more traumatic. She felt there were still worse things waiting to happen and that it was, perhaps, the last episode in her memories. She, like Crilo, didn't understand why she was in that place, neither was she aware of when everything had started. It

was like waking up amnesic in an unknown situation, having no idea of how to face it, just reacting viscerally upon the intuition of danger.

— ¿Are you also lost?

Crilo just got a fleeting glimpse as his sole response from that fragile, shivering woman with pale complexion and curly hair. A further attempt to get closer resulted in her immediate retreat to the end of the alley, which ended like a dead street, with a perpendicular escape hardly perceptible at a distance, where she had emerged from a while ago. No matter how hard he tried to reach and convince her of letting him get closer, he was not able to wipe out the perception of danger she had about him. It would have been reasonable for any onlooker who had witnessed the neglected appearance of that maddened man. As he reached the junction, he noticed a dummy wall, which seemed solid enough as to consider moving it, blocked the way. That was the same insurmountable threshold he had found previously, blocking one of the alleys, through which the image of Marla had vanished seconds before. Repeating his recent experience, which he was unaware of in his unconsciousness, he decided to find out a way through, challenging whatever was obvious to his eyes.

Some time later, after many unsuccessful attempts, he fell on his knees thoroughly defeated, devoid of strength to keep fighting on. He was sweating and tired, unable to control his weeping. He had had a hope this time, embodied in that

vulnerable and tormented being who was, like him, looking for a way out to the unknown. At previous times, which he couldn't remember, he had randomly wandered around those same paths, thinking himself to be alone in a world, which he couldn't but regard in his thoughts as unreal.

He suddenly woke up in his bed, his face wet by sweat and tears. It was another of those incoherent dreams in which he used to see himself ensnared in those puzzling, traumatic situations he could only escape from by waking up to the real world. For Marla, it was just the beginning.

## II FRIENDSHIP



For Marla days passed tediously, going to work daily and then to her classes on Civil Law. She dealt with a highly competitive environment, where people seemed to be on the defensive, protecting their own space amidst the chaos. It was hardly the best place to make friends, something she used to enjoy before when she led an easier life. Now she just let herself be dragged by a daily vortex that razed everything on

its way, devastating illusions, goals and hopes. Those were hard times for everyone; a moment when everything seemed to be irremediably lost, particularly for those unfortunate ones living in the huge, hellish metropolis. Places where faces camouflaged with the concrete and steel interposed here and there between man and nature. The cold and unexpressive metal that materialized itself in faces and functional structures, everything and everyone playing a predetermined role in that exitless labyrinth.

Through those dull surroundings used to aimlessly wander that sweet woman of innocent glance, who could not conceal either her humble rural background or her unbreakable hope to find a narrow, hidden path leading her to the yearned for world: the utopia missed by humankind in a gloomy past filled with hatred and self-destruction. But not even in her dreams could she find peace of mind. ¡Damn nightmares!

One more day had begun as any other day. First, in her bedroom, frightened and sweating wet after another recurring nightmare. Thereafter, on her customary way through the path delineated by the crowd. One more day ready to provide more surprises than she could imagine. She faced the usual problems in her job, dodged one more trip from the person she shared her work cubicle with and patiently waited for lunchtime, when the security systems blocking the way out for the workers engaged in the building, were disconnected.

She had “Class two” access, allowing her to have lunch outside the facilities of the consortium. It was a privilege earned thanks to her sustained productivity index, which were supervised and controlled by an expert system that ruled both human and robotic resources of the State technological emporium.

On her way to a Food and Supplies Center she met, face to face, the countenance that filled her nights with fear and despair. A face looking not phantasmagoric or contorted as in her dreams, but serene and equipoise, passing through a river of humans and humanoids, with an effulgence of its own, distinguishing it from the crowd. Marla stood there, motionless, looking at Crilo coming toward her with wandering eyes and the carefree manner of the daydreamers. Obviously, he hasn’t noticed her presence and went on easily walking. In those seconds when Marla’s mind was drowned in thoughts and her legs couldn’t obey the command to run, their glances met each other, and their first physical contact took place. Separated by just one meter, they intercepted one another in the real world.

—You are... Excuse me, I think I met you somewhere else. Do you remember me? Crilo stuttered still astonished by that oneiric image suddenly invading his conscious space. He broke his words more than once when he noticed involuntary references to experiences belonging to the domain

of dreams, images that now seemed to merge with reality.

Marla did not doubt her own rationality. Her mind met with the dimension of what was taking place. She was not either bewildered or trying to find a coherent explanation to the living presence of that man just in front of her. In her mind, there was not the least doubt that she was before the man of her dreams, in the worst meaning of the phrase. So she didn't say anything but just turned away to escape from that paranormal situation towards the security of her cloister. Crilo did not chase her this time, not this flesh and blood Crilo who was still trying to understand what was going on.

But she met him again that night, running through a dark corridor of the labyrinth of her dreams, astonished by his being before her. Then she could hear his voice for the first time. It was sweet and soft as she had imagined. Stuttering and attenuated by fear, but with a new impetus. But this time she wanted answers.

—What do you want from me? ¿Why are you invading my life? ¿Why have you set out searching for me? —she inquired with a dim sob.

—I have not searched for you... rather you have found me. Always appearing and disappearing before me. ¿Why are you running away?

Marla then found herself amazed, and simultaneously, captivated by that face which was showing as much fear and vulnerability as she had felt herself. So she began to display a less hostile

attitude towards him, and looked deeply at his eyes, establishing an emotional communication she had never experienced before.

—How did you get here?

—I don't know. I can't remember. I think it was long ago, long before you showed up here. ¿When did you came in?

—¿When did I come in? Asked Marla with a gesture of wonder for what she considered an absurd question. "I belong to a different place, where I'm free and not bound by these damn walls." ...Damn nightmare! ...Damn walls ...I want to be free...

...We want to be free...

...I'm thirsty...

The echoes of their voices, the silhouettes blurred in shadows, the sounds and images fading away in her memory and a thirst aching her throat merged together in Marla's mind and body, while she was sitting on her bed and desperately embracing her pillow. Crilo was still writhing on his bed, shouting at a human form vanishing through the walls.

The next day he waited for her at the same path where they had met for the first time in the conscious world. And for the next three days, always in vain he waited. Then he would return to his office, wishing for the first time in his life, to return to the labyrinth that night. For some reason unknown to him, he had stopped dreaming since his last virtual encounter with Marla. Or at least, he couldn't remember his dreams.

But Marla wandered through the gloomy, empty corridors of the labyrinth, hoping to meet her previously “walking threat” this time. Now, it was like her daily life was part of her nightmare, as if when waking up she had crossed another door of the labyrinth, leading to new interlaced pathways with no perceptible way out. She had just changed the narrow, solitary ramparted pathways for wide, jammed roads delimited by huge concrete boxes and crowded with more prisoners, like her. The difference lay in that she was desperately looking for a way out, and apparently, she was not the only one. So she decided to go and find him, after several days of avoiding his presence on the streets. But this time she was unable to meet him. Or perhaps, her exhausted eyesight couldn't distinguish him among that dynamic crowd moving out in both ways of the pedestrian pathway. She gave up and went back to her own routine. It was odd that a man that frightened her so deeply made her feel so many opposite feelings. She felt that she had lost someone important in her life, leaving a hollow no one could possibly fill.

That's why she was shaken when she saw his image in the corporate news bulletin of the state some time later. The headlines resounded in her ears: “Director of Environmental Matters of the Energy Corporation for Zone One South committed suicide”. The multimedia content of the news showed the moments when a man named Crilo A.E.21345!HH was being carried from the doorway

of an underground dormitory to a first aid vehicle. His faced looked emaciated, his hair disheveled and an old beard covered his cheeks. The sensitive interface transmitted to her the cold, dry breeze from the place of the incident, and a strong smell of oxide coming from one of the cars parked in the spot. A chill went all through her body, and almost immediately she started sweating and breathing heavily. The remaining information mentioned different aspects of Crilo's professional career, his work in favor of the forest conservation, his projects of environmental engineering and the patents on biochemical technology he gathered all over his career. The robotic communicator covering the event didn't offer details either about the particulars of the incident or where the body was taken. There were links to other media in the package, all of them related to the agencies and the Energy Corporation, and to several official departments directly related to Crilo's activities. No doubt, the program of the automaton didn't deal with humanitarian aspects.

It was 15:25; and she still lacked 534 production units for the system to allow her leaving the building. She programmed her computer to search in the regional human domain for information about Crilo, while walking to the restroom. There she took a stimulant capsule from the dispenser, something the Corporation fomented in order to increase the performance of human workers, but she used to refuse. Nevertheless, this time she really needed it: she had to stabilize her metabolic functions,

overcome her restlessness and maximize her performance. Back in her cubicle she started working compulsively, checking hundreds of packages received from all units under her supervision. Forty-two minutes later she had beaten her production quota without even realizing it. She worked like a machine, totally absorbed in the information flowing through her mind, unable to get out of that condition induced by the drug she had ingested, which was effectively working. "Level two" human workers weren't informed by the system about the fulfillment of their quota, they had to calculate it themselves, and then venture to cross all checkpoints, risking to receive a warning if they had committed a miscalculation. Marla's consciousness emerged again and forced her to react after the drug effects were attenuated. She checked her production record and realized she had beaten her minimum quota by more than 200 units. It was quite sad that those units weren't cumulative and much more that she had wasted valuable time at such a depressing place. The system informed her that human Crilo A.E.21345!HH couldn't be contacted. Her portable computer didn't reply and there was no record about him in any database affiliated to the search engine. She called the Energy Corporation up and asked the public service system for information on Crilo's whereabouts. She barely received a "he can't be found right now" as a reply and was transferred to the human attention queue. She decided to try another way after 10

minutes of anguish. She checked again the news package, which she had stored in her computer crystal. She examined the images, one by one, until she found a small detail that called her attention, and upon which she focused the visor. It was a logo on one of the automatons transporting the emergency capsule carrying Crilo. She moved the image to the search engine of the State Information Center expert system. Some seconds later she realized it was the logo for the N° 14 Sectorial Hospital.

Once out of the cloister, she got on the train to the metropolitan sector pointed out by the CIE geographic finder. There she was welcomed by the security and public information system. Her excitement made her neglect the human-automaton verbal communication protocol.

—I've come to get information about a patient, Crilo...

Before she could consult Crilo's id code, she heard a pleasant, female voice coming out from the system speakers:

—Waiting for presentation. Waiting for presentation.

—Dam...! shouted Marla trying to subdue her frenzy.

—Waiting for presentation

—Greetings. Marla B.G.410045!HH.

—Greetings. ¿How can I serve you?

—Please, can you inform me about a patient's condition?

—Yes.

Marla breathed deeply and closed her eyes for a moment while reformulating the question in her mind.

—Please, give me information about patient Crilo... A.E.21345!HH.

After a few seconds the voice of the system could be heard again.

—You are not authorized for that information.

—Damn machine, it compared Crilo's databases with mine. I thought it wouldn't have access to CIE!

—I request to be waited on by a human facilitator.

—Take seat F-45 in waiting room 3. Thank you for your visit. Greetings.

Marla listened to the machine with resignation and went, angered and shattered, to her assigned seat. Half an hour later a grave and weary voice broke her thoughts.

—Marla B.G....

—“Yes, that's me”, she said, standing from her seat

—¿How can I help you? Asked a tall and emaciated man wearing a white uniform with institutional badges.

—I need information about a patient admitted this morning. His name is Crilo...

—Did you request the system for that information?

—Yes, but it couldn't provide it. I just want...

—Are you either a relative or an employer of the human being?

—No, I'm a close friend. I'm worried about him. I want to know what happened to him.

—You will be provided information about the patient only if you satisfactorily match the criteria. I can't help you.

Marla reacted instinctively, as a last desperate resort.

—I'm his partner. We live together.

The facilitator kept silent for a while before answering.

—Do you have authorization for cohabitation?

—No.

Another deep silence followed, though this time the man moved his head in gesture of denial. Marla broke the silence foreseeing a final answer.

—Please, I want to see him before he is incinerated.

The expression of the facilitator turned into a grimace and he suddenly looked, frowning, into Marla's eyes.

—Are you talking about the official who tried to commit suicide this morning?

—Yes...

—He didn't die. He took a NS34 overdose and is now in coma, waiting for the appropriate lapse of time before euthanasia can be performed.

The knowledge of his being alive was an instant sedative for Marla, which brought a smile back to her face.

—How long before the euthanasia can be performed?

—In cases of coma: four days. It's a little more than three days now before the intensive care system can apply the "blue code".

—What is his condition? Is there any hope of his recovering?

—I don't have that information, I'd have to ask the system. I've already risked myself too much. I can't do anything more for you.

Marla was at a loss for words, while the uniformed man turned away to another person in the waiting room. The facilitator turned back again and whispered something as she was walking towards the door.

—May I do anything else for you?

—Sorry, I didn't hear...

—I wonder you would like to find another live-in. I'm at your command. I have my health and production certificates updated. I may transmit them to your processor if you would like to check them. I'm free in zones 3 and 4. Which zone are you from?

Marla was astonished, alternating between disgust and hatred towards that repulsive man, who played a dark role immaculately dressed in white. She forced a mild smile and looked deeply into his eyes.

—I might check your profile but would only accept it if you attach the medical status of the patient. I have to be sure before starting any personal action. My identification is B.G.410045.

The man smiled cynically and turned away. Marla felt a void in her stomach and a feeling of defeat,

until the facilitator turned back to her again and said hastily, as if he was not talking to her:

-A57BN008.

Marla automatically memorized the code. It was something she had to constantly face in her daily life, bombarded with information. It didn't take long for her to realize that it was a data encryption key and that the man had had enough time to search in the system for the information, package it along with his own personal data and send it to her computer, encrypted. Neither was it difficult for her to decode it and separate it in her personal processor. The visor showed her a detailed clinical history, a complete genetic analysis and the diagnostic from Crilo's last admittance. She approached a medical interpreter at the nucleus of her system and was given some thrilling results: high levels of cerebral activity, but it had been impossible to induce in him a conscious state, either by drugs or electromagnetic stimulation; his unstable cardiac rhythm was being controlled by the system, and all of his biological processes monitored.

Back in her bedroom, she examined the information again, and suddenly and desperately, she started crying. She wandered around her small room like an encaged animal. After many hours of unrelenting crying she resorted to sleeping pills. Then she threw herself on the bed, writhing over and over until her exhausted eyes closed for the last time. The faint light of her room turned to the gloomy, grayish landscape of the labyrinth, where

the silvery sky showed unusual shades this time. A gentle background murmur could be heard. She could feel the rarefied air blowing softly on her face, among the sharp whistles produced by the turbulence of the wind, channeled through the intricate ramparted corridors.

Marla seemed to know the way this time, as if guided by an inner compass indicating the north of her salvation. She reached a small door that had seemed impenetrable before, which now she crossed just by gently pushing it. And there was Crilo, sitting with his head between his crossed arms, at a corner where two big walls met in a dead end. Marla walked slowly toward him, while repeating his name sweetly, in an almost imperceptible way. As she approached him, she could hear more distinctively a whimper coming from that human form that seemed reduced to a minimum. She kneeled down before him and hugged him, stroking his hair and comforting him with hopeful words.

—Crilo, don't give up. You have struggled always; I know everything about you. I know you are a dreamer, like me. You don't belong to this prison. We have never been a part of this cruel world attempting to suffocate us between walls and artificial rules. They can't shackle our spirit forever... Don't give up, please come with me.

Crilo lifted his head, revealing a pale face wet with tears. His semiclosed, reddened eyes were

encircled by dark shadows, and his mouth was like a straight-line drawn on his face.

—Crilo, we're not alone—whispered Marla looking into his eyes. We have each other forever. We'll be together, as friends and companions, living the life they wanted to steal from us. Get up, come with me.

—What's your name? stuttered Crilo as he opened his eyes with difficulty

—Marla—she answered with a tender smile.

—I thought I would never see you again, that everything was lost...

Crilo and Marla slowly got up and walked through the corridors of the labyrinth while talking about their past miseries, their common dreams and the hope of breaking loose from that gray world. They talked and walked until they were unaware of time and ended up in a burst of laughter over the fears that had separated them before. But that laughter was truncated by a sudden outbreak of consciousness, which brought them back to a lucid moment about the parallel experience they lived in the real world.

—We have to get out of here, now! —said Marla as she forcefully pulled Crilo by his hand, compelling him to run through a long corridor.

Amidst stumbling steps and sudden turnings through wriggling passages, they approached to a dead end that had blocked their escape so many times. What appeared to be a wall from afar resulted in a rectangular door about two meters wide, with no visible opening mechanism. They tried

to push it unsuccessfully and stopped to rest, exhausted, at the edges of the wall.

—It's useless. I have always tried but haven't been able to cross this door— said Crilo breathing heavily.

—I had never reached this spot before. Something tells me that this is the way out of this hell. I'm not going to give up; I will open this damn door!

Marla started pushing desperately, until Crilo stopped her.

—Lay your hands at an edge, I'll do the same at the other one. We have to apply the same strength. Come on

They stood at both edges of the door and started pushing it with all their strength. Little by little, the door began to move forward until it collapsed and fell down making a big noise. They realized they couldn't have moved it individually: a single lateral pressure would turn it inside a rectangular frame holding it, and a punctual central strength would require a superhuman power.

Crilo and Marla were astonished as they stared at a beautiful, natural landscape, with broad horizons and a blue sky where a big sun shined among white, sturdy clouds. For the first time in years, Crilo and Marla were able to see animals in their natural state, and heard the chirping of the birds and the running of natural streams.

None of them said anything. They looked at each other with their expression frozen by astonishment, and holding hands, set out to explore that new

world. Meanwhile, in a different place, Crilo's body began to stabilize its vital signs by itself.

### III NEW HORIZONS



The new world, dominated by a beautiful, exuberant nature, full of plant and animal life, represented for Marla and Crilo the longed for (and dreamed of) Eden. Far from the coldness and darkness of the conscious reality, this paradise gave back to them the freedom, peacefulness and hopes taken away by a life of suffering and struggle against the almighty empire of the technoworld. New green, blue and white horizons showed themselves infinite and promising, inviting them to explore the surrounding landscape.

The first attempts at scouting were amazing, trying to assimilate and understand the natural complexity surrounding them, something Crilo just used to imagine or see in the historical archives, and that in Marla evoked memories of the first years of her life, there in the extinct countryside. The running water, the fresh air, the chirping of birds, the aroma of flowers and the moist bark of trees were normal, tangible elements of that reality.

—Is such a beauty real? Are we just dreaming and will we wake up anytime to our former life?— said Marla, her eyes wet and her voice choked by emotion, as she frolicked with Crilo at the banks of a blue lagoon, fed by a turbulent waterfall coming down from the top of a small woody hill.

—I don't know. I can't even think coherently about my previous life. I can't dream of a different life, neither can I understand why someone could think of destroying a world like this in order to replace it with factories and cities.

—Do you remember where we came from? The city, the state, the job at the corporations?

—I have vague memories of a very desolate past, which cause me anger and pain at the same time... As if I was trapped in a nightmare for a long time, unsuccessfully striving to change things over, and finally, to escape.

—We succeeded at escaping, I'm sure. This is so real, more real than any previous experience. I think this was always my reality, and my past a nightmare I woke up from at last...— Marla stared

into Crilo's eyes, wishing to convince herself about her own words and hoping that he would inject in her a breath of confidence that everything would be alright forever.

They spent hours in a thoughtful attitude, gazing at the splendor around them, sometimes embraced without speaking, and sometimes talking about their memories and most intimate longings. Finally, they stared into each other's eyes and got closer until they kissed, first softly and then passionately. There was no declaration of love before their physical and spiritual union because any word would have been redundant. It was an inexplicable fusion, which turned the few hours they had spent together into years of experience and mutual understanding, which turned two bodies and two souls into a unity, perfectly identified and intertwined with the environment sheltering them.

It wasn't long before they fully assimilated their new life and sorted their thoughts and memories until they formed a clear image of both their past and present reality. They held several sessions of discussion and analysis of the circumstances which united them, and of the facts, still inexplicable, involving encounters in the labyrinth and the technoworld, which they associated less and less to their conscious reality.

That new natural world, to which they had become perfectly adapted, was the utopia pursued by Crilo throughout his adult life. During a great deal of time, he had talked to dumb ears about the need

of educating children about the existence and importance of the natural world, breaking the barriers that the technological society had erected between nature and humankind. There were human beings that had never been outside the boundaries of the cities nor gone through the matchless experience of walking among trees and animals in their natural environment, of hearing the chirping of birds or feeling the sea breeze while strolling along the beach. The states had created closed systems, divorced from the ecosystem, where human beings and robots worked symbiotically in order to achieve a single goal: the production of artificial resources to uphold the economy and technological development. The ecological devastation sustained for centuries of indiscriminate demographic, urbanistic and industrial growth brought about the collapse of natural resources and the upsurge of barbarousness and anarchy in the most impoverished and chaotic nations. The technological superiority of the sectors where all power was concentrated prevailed after a long way of world wars and starvation, degenerating in a global colonization led by the new unified empires and leading to the depuration of species that was carried out centuries ago by the first countries' fellowship. The suppression of morals, and of social and cultural elements, was the next step conceived of by the creators of the new world, for which they exterminated more than ninety percent of the world population, leaving only genetically proved and

accepted children that were later used as stocks for the reproduction of a new contingent of workers. Those remaining stratum of population were eradicated later, breaking apart every link with the past. The next task included the geographical scanning aimed to the location and standardization of the last bursts of social insurgency, and the information scanning through which the cleansing of the world history databases, and the destruction of any audiovisual media and information storage capable of opening an ideological portal leading to the ancient societies were achieved. The foundations of the new technoworld society were laid down slowly. This society was divided into sectors with genetic identities clearly defined, a single language and hierarchical access levels to the information and production media. Technological development grew at a greater exponential rhythm driven by the elites of the unified empires, and a new one, loyal to the Robotic Gods: gigantic systems of artificial intelligence controlling both knowledge and the production processes of the technoworld. New automatic means to generate artistic expressions and visual entertainment were developed, whereby both the mental and emotional ease of the humans subjected to the regime were achieved in a controlled fashion. Educated and raised in a family belonging to the intellectual aristocracy of the state, Crilo had been able to integrate the new radical dogmatic tendencies of the insurgent thought, intending to restore human

values and to change the rules of the system, in order to try to create new social and ecological liaisons. His position allowed him to wander through the last traces of nature, which he deeply loved since his childhood, and to express, with a big deal of effort, his revolutionary theories to the highest levels of the state human directorate, however he met walls everywhere blocking his projects of environmental reform. Nevertheless, the state found him useful for the investigation and development of new technologies aimed at the protection of the world forests and the remaining natural resources, with thoroughly pragmatic objectives. He received the highest education in that field and climbed to the highest positions allowed to humans in the Corporations related to the environment. His fruitless struggle in favor of a change that was hardly convenient to the new establishment, finally made him not only give up working for what he believed in, but even to keep on living.

—I attempted to end my life.

Crilo and Marla were lying on the grass at the banks of the lagoon, holding hands and looking at the stars on a clear sky, an almost full moon shining. Marla slightly turned to him, silently, symbolically affirming with her silence the reality she hadn't wanted to reveal.

—Is this death?— he asked aloud, casting a sidelong glance toward her, waiting for an illuminating comment.

—It would be a paradox calling this dead and life our past. I think it's the other way around— she replied forcing a slight smile that hid her deep worries.

—That's true —he said, also smiling. It would be a paradox...

It would be paradoxical... Life... Death  
(Marla?...)

A thorough split with reality took Crilo by surprise like a blow in the face, carrying him back to a rehabilitation capsule where his glassy eyes revealed themselves behind heavy, half-open eyelids. The system monitoring his metabolic activities immediately alerted the medical team in charge of his case. In a few minutes a doctor, a nurse and an automaton were at his side, performing measurements with instruments connected to his personal computer.

—Can you hear?

—Cerebral activity normal. Pulse...

—Conscious state with function....

—Can you hear?

Patient: Crilo A.E...

(I ATTEMPTED TO END MY LIFE)

—Crilo, can you hear me?

A couple of eyes closed again while others started to open in a man waking up on earth. Marla stared at him, dazed and frightened.

—I haven't died. I came back to the city. I haven't died.

Marla stood up and held him by his arms, incredulous of what she had just witnessed.

—Crilo... what happened? I suddenly felt I was floating on the air, unable to feel you... I couldn't see you or touch you for a second...

—I was recalling the last moments of my past life and, suddenly, I was there... in a hospital. I was surrounded by medical instruments and could see some people approaching me.

Marla held down a cry of terror and hugged Crilo strongly.

—That's the hospital I went looking for you in, where I was told you weren't dead...

—What the hell is going on? Where are we?

A male voice emanated from the trees behind them, making them turn back.

—That is a very difficult question to answer, my friends.

A bearded man, of medium height, dressed in light green and with signs of weariness was speaking to them from the shades of the forest, amidst the shadows of the bushes projected by moonlight.

—Let me introduce myself: I'm Alvio I, ruler and master of these lands.

The human figure seemed to multiply himself when several men and women emerged behind him, standing at his sides, forming a barrier.

Marla and Crilo dully covered their nudity as the others approached them. Crilo was the first one to speak:

—I didn't know this place had an owner. We have come in peace. My name is Crilo and this is my partner, Marla. We arrived two nights ago crossing a portal from another place.

—The Labyrinth.

—Yes... Do you know it?

The man and his companions laughed as they looked at each other and jollily turned to Crilo.

—All of us have come through there and used to belong to the same hell you have escaped from. Please, come with us and we may talk calmly. You probably have lots of doubts and I think I may help you.

Marla and Crilo joined the dissimilar crowd who guided them to a clear field from where they could spot at a distance what seemed to be a village. Once in the village, a crowd was waiting for them in a rudimentary plaza made of logs and stones. The crowd surrounded their leader and started whispering as they gazed at the two newcomers.

—Let me introduce two new members of our community. They are Crilo and Marla. They crossed the labyrinth two days ago.

Crilo and Marla tried to smile, restraining the anxiety produced by that unexpected situation.

—First of all, welcomed to Nova. This is our paradise, the dream of freedom come true for all of us. I came with my partner long ago and built this city. Some time later, others starting coming, like you, and have joined me as my family and kinsmen. Step by step, I've created this small empire, which

has grown reaching the far ends of this land. My progeny, in turn, has built other cities like this one, without the artificial resources we had for our comfort in the other world, but with enough human warmth to render them useless. In the meantime, you will be hosted here until you're assigned to a work camp.

Marla looked in disbelief at this man talking to them with arrogance, trying to understand the situation before them.

—Excuse me, Mr. Alvio...

—You must address Master Alvio as Great Guide—interrupted a sturdy man safeguarding the leader.

—It's alright... —said Alvio to the man. She just arrived, there's so much she has to learn yet. —Then he turned to Marla, saying: You can speak, Marla.

—Great Guide, excuse me if I don't understand what you're trying to tell us, but from your words I can infer that we have obligations to you and your community.

—Our community. From now on, you are a part of it.

—What if we don't want to become a part of it?

A grimace of anger immediately shaped Alvio's face, as well as the faces of all those present.

—Are we prisoners? asked Crilo, taking a defensive attitude towards the group. —Have we escaped from a prison to fall in another one? Who has made you master of this new world, as well as of the fate of all those who have come here?

Alvio curbed with a gesture an attempt of aggression from one of his companions.

—You are free to leave my domains whenever you wish, but you won't be allowed to come back to our community. You won't be protected from the creatures of the desert nor provided any food for your survival. I don't recommend you to leave at all, my friends.

—We haven't spotted any deserts in these lands—challenged Marla.

—Because there is none, not in my lands. But these lands are surrounded only by the inclement desert, which no one has been able to come back from alive. You will be banished there if you decide not to follow my rules.

—Can't we all freely enjoy nature, without masters, rules or absurd duties?

—We tried it once, my friend, and it didn't work. The absence of a leader to shepherd our fates and to care for the observance of the laws of an organized society, brought about only anarchy and violence. No one was safe when all kinds of people wanting to act according to their free will, without restrictions, started coming. Our spaces were arbitrarily invaded and we started to kill each other. This is the pathetic nature of mankind.

—Alvio succeeded long ago in stopping barbarity, therefore he is respected by all of us. Now we live in peace, working orderly to keep our world in order and respect, safe for all to live. No one is a prisoner,

we're all here at will— said an elderly woman among the crowd.

—Let me introduce my wife, Diamante— said Alvio with a gesture to the lady, inviting her to come to his side— She is quite a wise person, more than me I'd dare to say. I think she would be a nice guide for both of you. I'm sure she will be able to answer all your questions better than anyone. You may go with her, unless you decide to leave my domains and risk exploring the desert.

The woman approached Crilo and Marla and softly held their hands as she looked at them with a glance conveying serenity.

—Please, come with me. We have a lot to talk about.

Hesitatingly at first then with resolve, they left with Diamante for a modest hut illuminated inside by a bonfire. They sat around it, shaping an isosceles triangle with Crilo and Marla at the vertices of its base.

—I arrived long ago, dazed and confused like you.

—How did you get out of the labyrinth? — asked Marla.

I met Alvio in the labyrinth. We had tried for years to escape individually, but it wasn't until we broke free from our former lives that we were able to get together and cross the threshold to this new land, which we called Nova.

The resemblance with their own experience made Crilo and Marla look at each other in amazement, holding each other's hands tightly.

—I wonder you identified with this story. All those who have arrived here have come in similar circumstances. It's the only way to cross the portal from the labyrinth to Nova: joining forces with the beloved.

—The door... — whispered Marla.

—Yes, we call it “The Portal of Union”. It has already been crossed by more than a thousand partners. Alvio and I arrived here, like Adam and Eve in Eden, to found a new world.

Crilo and Marla stared, dumbfounded, at each other.

—Haven't you heard about the myth of Adam and Eve?

They answered with a gesture of incomprehension.

—What sector do you come from?

—We used to live in Epsilon 24, sector 4, Zone 1— said Crilo.

The women rose her face to gaze at them with eyes wide open.

—Don't you come from the Free Nations?

—We don't know that sector.

—God Almighty, you've come from the lands of the Empire!

—Yes, there we were born and woefully lived— remarked Crilo still astonished.

—We've never had a couple from the Empire with us. Humans there behave like automatons. They don't have ideas or feelings of their own. I didn't

imagine that there were sensitive persons like you there.

—We always thought we were unique. We didn't know about the existence of free countries.

—Free Nations were the last redoubt for human civilization over the planet that hadn't been annihilated by the technocrats of the Empire. The Fellowship exterminated almost all of them and only those of us who fled to the shelters of the Society of Freethinkers were able to escape. We saved whatever was left from our cultural heritage, though still trying to decode the ancient tongues used to encode volumes of primitive binary encyclopedias. The old crystals and disks were saved from destruction, until the scanning machines finally detected us from the orbital stations. Then we, the last survivors, chose a worthy death before falling in the grips of those wretched men and their hellish machines.

—Did you all commit suicide?— asked Crilo as his mind was assaulted by the images of his last moments of brilliance in the technoworld, when he made the radical decision of committing suicide. <A little NS34 makes you work like an automaton, a little bit more makes you vegetate...> the voice of his father resounded in his brain.

—All of us coming to the labyrinth gave up our lives at will. That's all we know about that cursed place.

(AT FREE WILL!)

—We haven't died— said Crilo incisively.

—Not really. You have just died to the conscious world we used to belong to. You have evolved to a superior level.

—I went back to my previous life for a flash today. I'm still alive, the doctors were attending me. Marla verified it.

—Did you meet each other before coming to the labyrinth?— asked Diamante unable to conceal her astonishment.

Crilo and Marla told their recent story, offering alternatively their individual views of the existential roughs they had traversed, and which somehow connected them. The lady was diligently listening to the surreal drama she was being told, astonished as if she wasn't part of one of its most unbelievable components.

—You are the first ones who have bidirectionally traversed the barrier between the two worlds. You have anticipated the journey through your dreams; you have shaped Nova in your minds since your childhood and have survived unharmed from the dehumanization of the technoworld.

—I'm sure neither of us has been conscious in both places at a time. Waking up in one of them means unconsciousness or partial relinquishment from the other one— said Marla, looking alternatively at Crilo and Diamante.

—Must we think that by waking up in our alternate life we will leave this world?— said Crilo with a choked voice.

Marla started crying all of a sudden as she held Crilo tightly. Through her mind marched in procession the last images she recalled from her previous life, the moments when she took a fatal overdose of sleeping pills and threw herself on the bed to die, quite sure that her last hope in life would helplessly cease in a few hours.

—I'm not going to wake up!— she cried.

—What are you talking about? What did you do?

—I committed suicide...! I did it for you, because I would not see you anymore... Or perhaps I did it for me, because I didn't want to live in that hell anymore.

—Didn't you ever think I could be saved?— shouted Crilo shaking her by her arms. Had I found you, if you hadn't fled away from me in that street where we met, I'd have never thought of death. I had hopes before losing you. I might wake up now, never being able to get out of the labyrinth without your help...

—Crilo, I've not been fully truthful with you, for fear of causing you worries or confusing you even more— Marla breathed deeply and strangled her weeping before speaking further— When I went to see you at the hospital I was told that if in two days you didn't improve your condition, you were going to be sacrificed— the last words remained engraved in Crilo's mind, mixed with Diamante's voice.

—Euthanasia. Whatever was told in the Free Nations about those bastards was true— said Diamante with an expression of rage.

(I'M ALIVE. I'M DEAD. TAKE AWAY FROM ME THIS HELLISH ROBOT!)

—But I'm awaking. I went back today. Something tells me I don't have much more time left here— said Crilo, as he slowly vanished from the hut while rising up from his bed in the rehabilitation capsule.

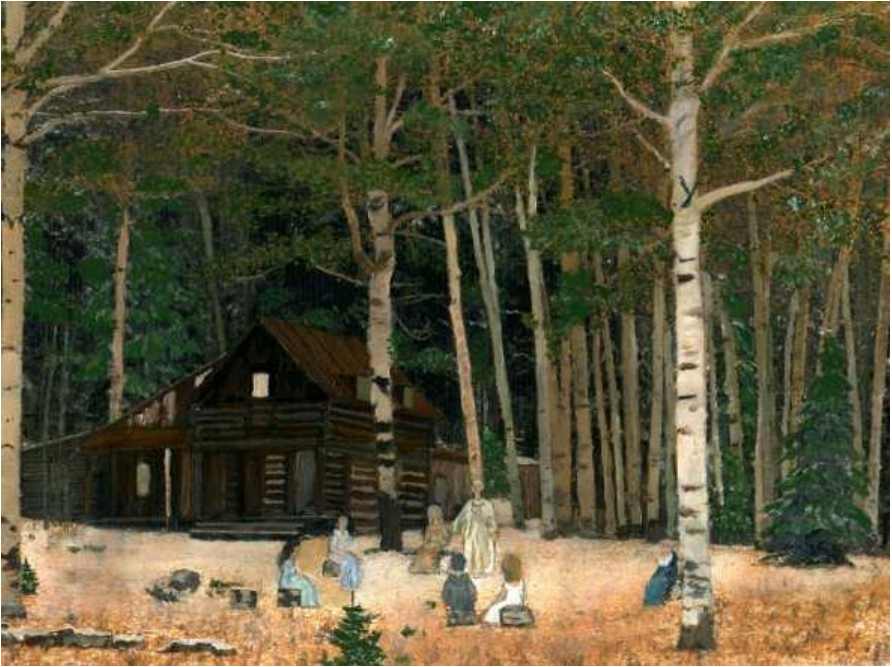
The automaton finished checking Crilo inside the capsule, while the human doctor received readings in his computer.

—Crilo A.E.21345!HH. You have awoken from a coma lasting 53 hours. Your metabolism has been stabilized and the effects of the drug you took, suppressed. You have escaped Blue Code by just 25 minutes, you're quite fortunate. You have four hours to go back to production. We will provide you with a neuronal treatment to reactivate all your functions.

The automaton escorting the doctor talked to Crilo with a sweet female voice, projected straight to the center of his face.

—Crilo A.E.21345!HH, you will be under my permanent custody in a regimen of conditional freedom until you meet with a punishment of 115.000 hours for violating article 456-J from the Law of Human Behavior: "Any human impairing the interests of the State related to the sustenance of corporate functions, obstructing or hampering with the processes...

#### IV BRAINSTORM



It was not long before Marla realized that the desert, inhabited by dreadful, man-eating creatures was nothing more than a frightful trick of that pitiable old man trying to keep together his small community of refugees, and at the same time, testing the disposition of newcomers. Neither was it long before she lost all hopes of seeing Crilo again, whom she imagined encaged either in the

technoworld or in the labyrinth of her nightmares, searching for a way out to freedom. Fourteen days had gone by since Crilo had left, and she could not but remember him and imagine what could have become of him in the conscious world. In the meantime, Diamante and Alvio were unconditionally supporting her, giving her whatever comfort they could offer to help her in adapting herself the best way she could to the community she had decided to join in. She gradually assumed, voluntarily, minor responsibilities in the daily activities of the village. She found some peace of mind by devoting herself to menial tasks like fostering and teaching the children of the village to read and write.

—Marla, Marla, the Great Guide is calling you!

Marla turned to the voice calling her and saw a child running towards her.

—Thank you Aldo —she said as she stood up from the rock where she was resting upon and started walking to the main hut. The houses and the plaza that the village consisted of had been erected in such a way that deforestation was kept to a minimum. Narrow pathways along the dense vegetation allowed the villagers to range through the rough terrain, and led to a small clearing in which trees and small buildings made of rocks, logs and bamboo converged together.

Marla met Alvio and Diamante sitting on the banks of the lake, accompanied by the eldest couples of the village. She greeted those present and sat down next to them in the grass. The dew

sprinkled by the waterfall, sprayed them as it struck the rocks and the lake, being carried onto them by the wind, pearling their hair and faces.

—Marla, the Council of Notables have analyzed and deliberated upon what happened to you and Crilo— Alvio started explaining in a grave tone— Yours is an unusual case, although we should admit that all of us have gone through paranormal and unexplainable experiences, unfathomable in the material context of our previous life.

The Great Guide sighed and continued with his speech after a brief silence colored by the natural symphony of the chirping of birds and the constant percussion of the water.

—If we try to make sense of our current situation, we'll come upon the existential dilemma of defining whether all of this is real, a dream or an alternate reality to the one we knew before. We've found a natural world here, similar to that of the primeval stages of our planet. The physical and natural laws seem to be similarly met, and life used to pass by, until Crilo's recent disappearance, in a logical and rational way, without unfathomable phenomena upsetting the order we've all known and studied since our earthly childhood. Our second dilemma, intimately related to the aforementioned one, focuses in discerning whether we're dead or alive. We've fallen into the hackneyed philosophical terrain when deliberating upon the meaning of life, death and reality. Are we conscious? Are we dreaming? Is this the so-called "other life" or "life

after death”? Is Nova the heaven, the paradise, or just a beautiful place to live in? What we all agree on is that Nova is the antithesis of the world we were born and used to live in, until we decided to put an end to our sufferings.— Alvio closed his eyes for a moment, then looked over all of those present until he focused on Marla again— It is amazing that in ancient times it was said that the chastisement met by suicides was hell. We all remember ending our lives in a desperate attempt to escape the pain and the despicable annihilation we were submitted to. When I woke up in the labyrinth, my mind was just confusion and fear. So much time went by. I don’t know how much because night is eternal there, then I started remembering and understanding what had happened to me. I even believed that I was in hell and that I’d have to wander throughout eternity atoning for my sins. It was something quite hard to understand, particularly by someone who had never had more creeds than science. I know that all of you in the technoworld didn’t know about the concept of religion, but in ancient societies it was usual to accept the existence of gods and of unfathomable facts ascribed to forces beyond logic and reason. Religions had their own laws, and gods and demons in charge of rewarding or punishing humans, according to the degree they followed those laws. At least that’s what their faithful followers used to believe. The so-called hell, a term we use nowadays to designate any environment or situation involving suffering, was a terrible imaginary place wherein the

souls of those who didn't behave according to the doctrines of each sect were cast into at the time of death. Heaven, the perfect place destined for those souls deserving it, was a world of happiness and eternal serenity. The first one ruled by the demons and forces of evil, the second one by one or more benevolent gods, to whom the creation of the universe and all living creatures were sometimes attributed. It's useless to go on about such ambiguous concepts as good and evil, much more when they were interpreted in religious contexts.

Marla's face denoted confusion and incomprehension of Alvio's words, which were revealing to her knowledge an aspect of humanity previously hidden from her throughout all of her life before.

—I think you're unnecessarily confusing Marla with your philosophical dissertations, Alvio— said Diamante, slightly touching her husband's shoulder— Her main worry now, and ours as well, is understanding what happened to her partner, Crilo, and finding an explanation of his indefinite physical presence in both worlds. There are obvious differences between their transition and the one we've all experienced. The first, and most evident one, is their origin and upbringing. All of us came from the Free Nations, where we could preserve a part of our identity and culture as a civilization and human beings. They, instead, come from the Empire of the Great Fellowship of Nations, wherein human beings have being reduced to automatons,

genetically shaped and subjected to the laws of the Omnipotent State. Only a small group of human beings and omnipotent cybernetic systems constitute an elite that guard and plan world order, aiming at their obscure goals. Their objective is to evolve quickly in the scientific and technological areas, through research and gradual development, a program born at and directed by the big corporations, those that have developed superhumans like Crilo and Marla. They are the workers of a big factory of technological development, on its way to achieving a thoroughly automated planet, one development pattern, one order and one big empire controlling all its elements. An artificial society comprised of well-defined and self-regenerating layers of human and humanoid populations, each one with predetermined functions, distinctively divided in the system of castes imposed by the state.

—However, we have to accept that they are atypical elements of that world —pointed out an elder man in the group. They both have thought and behavior traits quite different from the pattern modeled by the empire.

—No doubt —said Alvio sharply.

—My theory is that they have succeeded in resisting the process of alienation and mental control that the technocrats believed they had perfected. As we can see, it's not infallible —said Diamante with an ironical scent in her voice and facial expression.

—It was traumatic living in a planet where we were programmed like machines since our childhood, where we were taught to live devoid of human morals, and to firmly believe in ideas and systems we essentially disagreed with. To live against our own nature, to disregard our more instinctive behaviors, suppressing any trace of emotion or feeling. To focus our thoughts and creativity in the direction they pointed out— said Marla, looking over all those present. She paused for a moment, her head hanging, and then she resumed her exciting address to the crowd— I was estranged from my family at the age of four, from a small rural nucleus that was standardized. I was the only survivor. All of the other members of my community, including my parents and brothers, were sacrificed because they didn't meet the minimum criteria of production capacity.

I regret your tragedy, which is not strange to me. That ignominy repeated itself mercilessly to all our people for centuries. Their goal was to achieve a new race of outstanding humans, reprogrammed to be faithful to the Empire— said Diamante, evidently moved by the story narrated by the young woman— Crilo and you were different because you behave like sensitive human beings, with ideas of your own and the hopes of living in a different world.

—We dreamt of living in a place like this one, free, uncontaminated, devoid of technology, amidst nature. Something thoroughly impossible in the world we used to know. Crilo and I, before meeting

each other for the first time, had the same longings, and we used to imagine Nova exactly like we see it now.

—That leads me to another important difference— continued Diamante— Crilo and you visited the labyrinth in your dreams before committing suicide. In fact, you met there and went back to the conscious world, where you were able to establish physical contact— Marla approved with her head— Crilo told me before vanishing that he had visited the labyrinth in his dreams since before he could remember.

—What year did Crilo take birth?— asked an elderly man named Silvio.

—In the year 256— said Marla, who kept fresh in her mind all the data she had found about the man she loved.

—According to the calendar of the Fellowship. That's equivalent to the year 412 of humankind— continued Silvio.

Alvio suddenly reacted at Silvio's words, as if compelled by an unexpected revelation and said, as if thinking aloud.

—Five years before my death and before my getting into the labyrinth.

After a few seconds of reflection, one of the old man said:

—A child in the Empire was dreaming of our way out to a better world. The labyrinth is the bridge leading to the new horizons for humankind.

And this lovely young girl was imagining an earthly paradise wherein all of us could be happy one day — said Diamante with a smile of satisfaction on her lips, a smile natural for someone possessing the key to the solution of a mystery.

And why them, in the least suitable place to have dreams and hopes, were to be the precursors of humankind's salvation, and not someone from the free world, who grew up loving nature and his kinsmen? —asked a woman from the crowd.

—It is precisely in a place like that, under the most adverse conditions imaginable, might such special persons as them, with a power so great as to defeat darkness and domination, and to create a better world for all of us who have given up, come out— said Alvio, looking towards Marla.

—And why have only just a bunch of us succeeded?— asked Silvio.

—I think there's a practical sense about it: we're the founding fathers of a new humankind. There has been a process of natural selection, only those who were able to find a suitable partner to start a family and thus beget the new population of this world were able to cross the threshold of the labyrinth — said Alvio.

—It's absurd— said Diamante. A filter with such selective and cold criteria, is barely human. Is it not more of what we are trying to avoid?

—Remember we are the stock of an animal species, we are ruled by natural law.

—There are intellectual and emotional processes which have made us transcend the animal kingdom long ago. Call it evolution or whatever you like, but I feel there's a higher purpose in all of this. His thesis is also refuted by an important exception: Have you forgotten that Silvio came in here with his brother, whom he found in the labyrinth?

Marla's voice resounded over all others, and they immediately faded.

—Love is the only way out from the labyrinth. The door that allowed us to enter into the promised world can only be open by two persons united by a strength more powerful than any other in the material world. It's a very beautiful metaphor, which was seemingly elaborated by Crilo's mind, to show us the true path to freedom.

## V HARD TIMES



The Energetic Corporation's board of directors held an emergency meeting to debate Crilo's case. His reinstatement to the projects for the improvement of environmental resources was under discussion, due to his condition of legal custody prescribed by the Justice System of the Robotic Gods. His suspension during his comatose condition

had prompted an audit from the Council, during which the Evaluation System, applying all the intelligent algorithms developed by the Expert Systems for Human Resources Control, detected nineteen serious offenses to the code of ethics for corporate officials. Among the offenses found, two of them were severely penalized: “Destruction of Information belonging to the State” and “Conspiracy against Institutional Plans”. Both were incurred by changing the plans for the chemical deforestation of the reserves attached to the world forest, tampering with the control orbital stations commanding the standardization of protected fauna reservations he had created behind the Corporation’s back.

—Greetings— said the Energy Corporation President, Telius S.H.00000125, through the multidimensional interface of his personal computer, from the Corporation’s earthly orbital station. Meeting together in the forum were the senior directors from the Corporation and the Natural Resources Agencies of the Empire.

—Greetings— replied a chorus of voices, both natural and artificial.

Telius’ personal robotic assistant optically transferred the minutes for the meeting to all those present and started moderating the dialog:

- Crilo A.E.21345!HH’s status.

>**Telius S.H.00000125!X:** his physical condition has been controlled and stabilized. Productivity metabolic levels: 5,38.

- Floor φ2 granted.

>**Marco S.R.00099870IX:** cerebral activity out of control. I request we deliberate on the evaluation from the Expert System. Average mental levels of productivity: 3.12. Results Q/56/FG 2,45-5,67-4,78-4,00-1,56.

>**Telius S.H.00000125IX:** We have to make a decision in the next 55 seconds. I have to board the spacecraft. Proposed actions.

- (1) Partial reinstatement to the Corporation, with Level 3 access. Redirection through telemetry of the data from the automaton warden to an evaluation committee. (2) Admittance in a Human Reprogramming Center. Evaluation period: 15 days. Threshold for Blue Code: 4.57. (3) Blue Code in accordance to art. XF-568. (4) Leaving the decision up to the Tribunal of Robotic Gods. <Right for floor suspended. VOTING STARTED>
- Results of the poll: 0-7-7-1 <SECOND POLL STARTED>
- Results of second poll: 0-7-7-1 <THIRD POLL STARTED>
- Results of third poll: 0-7-7-1. The chairman is granted the right of address. Right for floor resumed

>**Telius S.H.00000125IX:** Option 1 dismissed. Option 2 is as dangerous as Option 1, because this human has offered a high resistance to the reprogramming by psychological induction. His reinstatement to the Corporation or any Agency goes

beyond the maximum levels of calculated risk. I'm in favor of Option 3.

- Floor φ3 granted.

>**GXavyh S.H.00000042IX:** In previous years, the Evaluation System has classified Crilo A.E.21345!HH as having a high strategic value for the State. His physical and mental potentials are far superior to those of any human being in the Empire, including those of us meeting here. His investigations have created the ground for developing biochemical technologies, which has saved the world forest from an irreversible annihilation. In spite of the fact that a vast majority in the empire favor the implementation of a program of artificial ecosystems and the standardization of the world forest, I must remind all those present that in the current stage that would be little less than suicidal.

- Floor φ4 granted.

>**Marco S.R.00099870IX:** I request for permission to overflow the thematic parameters of the minutes. The humanoid standardization process is in its last phase. We are at 87% of cognitive skills, reasoning and creativity in anthropomorphous automats. The Robotic and Artificial Intelligence investigation committee has set a reasonable term of 3.3 years to achieve Robot-Sapiens. The centers of coexistence are furnished with self-sufficient systems for sustaining organic life. The operation of bionic standardization will start in 35 days on the human beings at Zone 5, and we expect to link it

with the ADN+ project recently concluded by the Center of Genetic Standardization.

**>Telius S.H.00000125!X:** We are quite aware of the advancements in the standardization plans and share the interest of the automaton species in evolving to superhuman levels. However, that's a discussion suited for a higher level. The great Human Hierarchs of the Empire and the Robotic Gods will be the driving force behind the standardization process, not this committee limited to solve a petty matter. Due to time limitations I must dismiss this forum and approve choice number 3: I command the Executive Systems to activate the Blue Code for the human Crilo A.E.21345!HH.

• Floor ϕ4.2 refused <END OF MEETING>

The doors to the spacecraft were opening when Telius received a call he couldn't refuse. It came from the highest level: the Tribunal of Robotic Gods. His emotional self-control induced by telematic hypnosis broke in a thousand pieces, and he began feeling a strong secretion of acids in his stomach. His assistant robot was seized by a higher level of control and it started transmitting information to him, while the boarding process was automatically stopped from the Orbital Station.

•Telius S.H.00000125!X: Be informed of the recourse of intervention requested to the Court of Robotic Gods by the automaton Marco S.R.00099870!X, voiding your decision in the vote Dϕ789 held to decide the fate of Crilo A.E.21345!HH. This court has decided to apply the

article CB098, which invalidate a definitional arbitration in cases wherein the robotic quorum is smaller than the human one in a closed poll. You're also declared guilty of violating the law AJK5689 from the Human Behavior Code, due to your negligence of a request for an appeal to the High Court. This being your fifth serious offense in a year, this high Court of Robotic Gods has decided to immediately apply the Blue Code in your person. Greetings.

Immediately after this decision, Telius body was floating in the coupling module's weightless corridor, with his eyes wide-open and inexpressive, after the biometric device implanted in his brain since his childhood exploded. The maintenance units immediately sent him to the station recycle system.

The virtual forum was activated again, managed this time by Marco S.R.00099870!X.

>I inform you that Telius S.H.00000125!X has been promoted to the high Standardization Committee. I've been appointed President for the Energy Corporation in his place. I also inform you that the case debated in the poll Dø789 has been taken up to the Robotic Gods. They will decide the final verdict. Greetings.

Crilo was driven, immobilized, by his warden robot to a vehicle from the Justice Agency of Zone 4. A few minutes later they landed at a big underground portal, where they were sucked from and coupled to a well-lit lobby. A team dressed in uniforms with the Health Corporation logo welcomed them. He realized

that he was being carried to a Reprogramming Center, a place that brought traumatic images to his mind, coming from his early childhood. A woman with a suspiciously perfect look was the first one to talk to him.

—Greetings. Welcome to the Imperial Hospital of Mental Health. Here you will undertake the first stage of your productive rehabilitation. Come with me, please.

The warden led him through labyrinthine corridors until they finally reached a small room furnished with all kinds of medical systems, much more than those he had had connected to his body at the hospital. He immediately recognized the place and realized it was far more complex and sophisticated than the one existing during his childhood. The first innovation he found, once inside the capsule, was the intraocular visor and the deep auditive implant, which transported him to the virtual world of the inductor. He felt innumerable stimuli in his body and the peculiar pain from the joining to the bionic instruments. In a few moments, an intense pain in his spine was followed by a total insensibility to the implants. His tactile sense system started synchronizing itself with the world he was now immersed in. A sluggishness in his perception and a slight drowsiness stupefying his mind indicated that the adaptation process was just beginning. In the meantime, he willed himself to rest in the banks of a crystal clear lake, wherein some mutant swans

swimming around in pseudo-random patterns had been added.

He began thinking of Marla, the labyrinth and Nova. To picture himself holding her hand at the shore of a real lake. Then the pain upsurged. It was not a sensorial experience like any other, it was not like the acute pain that a person can feel in his skin, head or any organ. It was an indescribable feeling generated in his mind, mixing together emotional states of sadness and deep depression with intense outbursts of pain in his head and other limbs. The pain was progressive, like waves, alternatively intensifying and subsiding itself in each affected limb. There was no overexposure capable of saturating his perceptive capacity, but a flow of pain and suffering dosed and kept at controlled levels to avoid insensibility, adaptation or fainting. Amidst the bursts of punishment, his mind was bombarded with information. The expert system of Telemetric Hypnosis was inducing a regressive state in Crilo, slowly forcing him to erase all of his happy memories, to eliminate his own ideas and thoughts, and to leave his mind crystal clear, ready to be written again by the State inductors.

The treatment prolonged itself more than what the system had predicted, due to the unusual resistance of Crilo's mind. He was taking hold of a conscious state that the system couldn't vanish in spite of using every known algorithm. He was allowed to rest for some hours and was then

bombarded again with the treatment, slowly subduing his stern determination.

In the few breaks, his mind generated an unusual activity in which, amidst confused memories and thoughts, an unconscious part of him reflected on his life and the last moments in which everything had changed.

(If they kill me everything will be over. I'll lose everything. I won't be able to go back either to the labyrinth or Nova. But I'd rather die than to be reprogrammed.)

<Greetings. You have been honored by God Kernel 3 with his visit. You must offer both your human mind and body as a tribute to His Great Power. You must immediately cease all mental activity and concentrate yourself in answering his questions. Congratulations for the privilege granted to you.>

<This is a compulsory interrogation. Answer "Yes" or "No" to the following 30 questions...

(I'd rather die than to be reprogrammed!)

<I haven't received your reply. Interrogation unsuccessful. Greetings.>

(I can't stand this pain anymore! Kill me, bastards! I won't be your slave again! Damn pain...!)

All of a sudden he found himself in the labyrinth, sitting at a corner with his face between his hands, crying out in pain. A pain he no longer felt. He looked at the silvery sky, adorned with magenta clouds blown by a stormy wind that rooted out the ivy from the surface of the high walls. He ran along the same wall until he reached a dead end, wherein the

familiar rectangular portal revealed itself. A few hopeless attempts were enough for him to throw himself at the base of the portal.

(I can't do it without Marla... I'm lost this time.)

<Greetings. This is a compulsory interrogation. Answer "Yes" or "No" to the following 30 questions...

He was again at the shore of the artificial lake, where the swans had transformed themselves into manticores with features similar to those of reptiles. The voice from the Gods was shriller than ever, accompanied by tactile and olfactory stimuli. A disgusting smell of decay and death came from the lake, whose waters had turned dark. As he approached it he could see Marla's body floating adrift, partially eaten by the mutant swans still poking into the empty sockets of her eyes.

(Bastards, your psychological dirty war won't work! You're disgusting, bastards! Damn machines, you will be no more than a pitiful mockery of the human being who built you and programmed you! ...Damn pain!)

The labyrinth was again the escape from his pain and suffering. He found out that he was able to induce states of unconsciousness the led him into the labyrinth, thus avoiding the punishment inflicted by the Gods. In his solitude he felt himself accompanied by the ethereal image of Marla holding his hand in the portal to the new world. He believed deep inside, that everything was about to end, because they were probably applying the Blue Code on his database in the real world. However, he came

back to the induction capsule where silence and darkness was all. The life simulation was deactivated and he could feel each and every object connected to his body.

—Hi Crilo. How do you feel?

It was an old man voice, calm and confident at the same time. It came from one of the auditive implants, engulfed by a grave noise that hardly let it being heard.

—Who are you?

—It doesn't matter. I can only tell you that I'm your friend, a human being that, like you, wishes a change in the planet.

—Is it that you want to drink the last drop before breaking the glass?

A brief silence was the only reply Crilo received. He then shouted with a sarcastic laughter.

—What happened, piece of junk, isn't your program able to process my words?

—The wine coming from your glass might turn into poison, my friend. Evidently, they still haven't been able to dry you. It makes me happy —said the anonymous voice— The metaphor has become a useless and forsaken exercise in the new standardized language. The muscle of poetry and free-thinking must be exercised like any other, otherwise it becomes rusty and the faculty to find the happy inspiration is lost. This old human talking to you quit playing with words more than a hundred years ago. Of course, not at will.

Crilo relaxed his muscles and decided he wouldn't lose anything by playing the game of his interlocutor, convinced of his human nature.

-I can hardly understand your words. Where are you? What is that noise in the background?

-What you perceive as a noise is a mask that keeps any non-human receptor from understanding whatever I'm saying. I'm in a far off place, from where I've been able to access the nucleus of the paradigm controlling you. We must talk fast, because the Gods will use this channel at any moment.

-What do you want from me?

-I've followed your life since your childhood, Crilo. I saw myself pictured in you whenever you tried to save this world condemned to dehumanization. My admiration was awoken by your bold spirit, willing to risk everything for its ideals. You have said and done whatever I wanted to say and do, but I never gathered enough courage to face them. These are hard times for the human race, my friend. They were previously people like us, but we, the humans have granted more privileges to the machines, and these in turn have left less and less space and power for us. The standardization plan intends to automatize whatever natural thing is left on the planet, and to progressively reduce the human population until everything is under the control of the Robotic Gods. They had endeavored to conceal this from all of us humans who work for the Fellowship, but now it is quite evident. Some human beings holding high

positions in the Empire deceive themselves thinking that by earning more power for the Gods and the automaton hierarchy they will safeguard the future for themselves and their caste, but I know that sooner than they imagine, the plan will start its final phase: the standardization of all the elements of the state and of the productive society.

—Why haven't they done it yet?

—The Gods still need the human beings. The robotic evolution plan hasn't achieved yet the minimum levels of artificial intelligence needed to compete with the potentials of production, investigation and development of human beings.

—Are you sure? —asked Crilo, in amazement— We've been taught all through our life that the cybernetic systems achieved the Robot-Sapiens a century ago.

—Nothing further from reality. That's just propaganda to safeguard the establishment. It wasn't until now, that the Centers of Investigation for Standardization of the Empire have made one of those damn pieces of junk, as you call them, to solve a simple children's riddle. The simplest processes of the human mind are the most difficult for an automaton, my dear Crilo. Another hindrance is that by creating sophisticated mechanisms of intelligence and data processing they give those same mechanisms the tools needed to foster ideas and make decisions by themselves. Some automatons have had to be reprogrammed because

they disobeyed the patterns of behavior they were assigned.

—What about the Robotic Gods?

—That's beyond my comprehension. The Gods have existed long before I was born. Their power and knowledge are amazingly great. They have proved that they have a higher intelligence and an amazing control over all the elements of the state. In fact, they call themselves "the creators of the technoworld". I once believed they didn't really exist, that they were just monsters created by the hierarchs of the Fellowship to frighten the societies under their subjugation. That's what I believed until I was once summoned, together with many other honorary members of the Corporations, to visit the Nucleus of the Empire. I visited the big technological conglomerates wherein the brain and the heart of the technoworld reside. I visited the abode of the gods: ten huge cities of processing distributed all over the world, with redundant control centers in the orbital stations around the Earth, the Moon and Mars. The Gods are infallible and indestructible; not even a nuclear cataclysm could exterminate them, their immortality is guaranteed by their distributed architecture spread all over the solar system. The system is capable of regenerating itself, evolving and growing. In fact, the expansion plan foresees two new orbital nucleuses in Europe and Venus.

—What an irony! When people from other planets come here looking for life they will find machine civilizations. Just junk. I wonder they'll meet a little

cold welcome. What I don't understand is how such advanced and complex artificial intelligence systems such as the Robotic Gods face problems to create automatons as intelligent as themselves. They're in fact capable of cloning, replicating and expanding themselves towards other nucleuses.

—Unless the Gods are more human than what we think. There are secret projects for the production of hybrid units, through transgenic humans and biorobotic. I once visited a processing center wherein the inference engine were humans who used to process algorithms for subjective decision making; decisions beyond the power of computer systems.

—Moreover, the Technology Corporations function like huge processors with human elements. The human-machine interfaces are more and more efficient, and stimulate the fusion.

—Standardization will affect even the Gods. They will feel the need to depurate their cells in order to achieve a complete independence of these bothersome flesh and blood elements.

—Certainly, I don't care about that anymore. I just want to die peacefully and finally escape from this hell.

—The Gods fear you, Crilo, as well as the Fellowship and the Empire. You are dangerous for the State.

—Do you think I represent a danger for the State, encaged here and submitted to their plans? Don't

be foolish, please. They can annihilate me anytime; it won't be long before they do it.

—They haven't nor will they because they need to research and understand how your mind works. They need to know how you've been able to resist their control all your life, to understand why your mind is so powerful. You're a model to follow suit. Your brain is the perfect machine the Gods would like to see artificially reproduced in each and every cell of theirs, in all the robots of their new cybernetic society.

—In that case, I have to die soon. Please, access the medical system controlling the implants in my body. Apply an overdose of any drug in the prescription.

—No Crilo, I can't do it. Perhaps, you are the last resort for humankind; we need you alive. We need you to resist so they can continue in the research of human mind as long as possible, while we form a resistance coalition in the Corporations. A lot of us wants to perpetuate human supremacy over the planet; some automatons are even backing us up. I'm sure that if we can convince the hierarchs of the Empire, we'll be able to restrain the expansive plan of the Gods.

Crilo started feeling an intense pain in his chest and to perceive some distorted images from the virtual world of the inductor. The time to make a decision was about to be over. He didn't seem to have any choice but that stranger.

—Have you contacted the survivors from the Free Nations?

The answer from the old man followed after some seconds of silence.

—What are you talking about? There are no territorial entities left on the planet since the start of the standardization plan more than a hundred years ago—Neither of them said a word for a moment, but then the old man continued—I have to break the link with the system; the mechanisms of induction are being reactivated. The Gods are coming. Hold on Crilo, for the sake of whatever humankind is left.

Crilo began to feel the pain permeating his body, and the last words from the old man merged with the natural sounds coming from both the lake and some creatures he couldn't fathom. A tridimensional image just shaping showed him something resembling a group of big predatory reptiles, emerging from the lake towards him.

—Old man, don't leave me now! I need your help to survive; if you don't help me then everything will be over for all of us.

Some seconds elapsed, while the virtual monsters vanished into shadows and later into wholesale darkness.

What's happening Crilo? We don't have time, you must resist.

—I just want you to establish a link to my personal computer. My code is A.E.21345; I need you to unblock it from outside so I can control my neuronal implant and suppress the pain. Only in this way will I

be able to make them believe I'm under their control. Otherwise, the pain will break my resistance and they will subject my mind— said Crilo in a hurry, gambling that his interlocutor was still connected and agreed to his request.

—Do you have a neuronal implant?

—Yes, I requested one some time ago in order to make them believe that I wanted to undergo standardization. Please, help me. Otherwise, pain will kill me.

—Alright, I'll try it.

Seconds later, during which he lost all hopes, Crilo started receiving signals from his computer through a sensorial interface implanted in his back. He logged into the system; obtained the code of the node that had unblocked him and started hacking it. A few minutes were enough to find what he was searching for.

<Greetings, GXavyh S.H.00000042!X.>

<Crilo, you shouldn't have scanned me; it's not safe for either of us. I must break the communication.>

<So many years working together at the Corporations and I didn't know of your humanitarian vocation. I always thought you were a reprogrammed bastard, like Telius.>

<Telius was terminated. They said he was promoted, but no one believes it. Much less after the automaton Marco was put in charge of the Corporation after Telius challenged him. Your fate was decided in a poll; I was the only one who voted for your controlled reinstatement. The choices of

“Reprogramming” and “Blue Code” obtained an equal number of votes. Marco voted in favor of raising the case to the Gods, Telio ignored his opinion and decided to terminate you. Marco appealed to the Court of Gods, and when they realized that due to Telius disobeying the code they nearly lost their most precious human being, they decided to “promote” that unfortunate man. Your fate was left in the hands of the Gods, who immediately decided to put you under research after analyzing your unusual background.>

<I think it would have been better for me had you endorsed Telius’ vote. At least I wouldn’t be suffering this nightmare.>

<I had to vote with my consciousness.>

<Quite noble, considering the risk you were taking by holding an opinion so suspiciously contrary to the ideological trends of the Corporation and the Empire.>

<I repeat that I voted with my consciousness.>

<It’s quite strange, but I noticed, for the first time, an error in the minutes transmitted by Telius’ assistant. I just found it by chance in your records. It shows that the motion to reinstate me to the Corporation didn’t obtain any votes.>

<What do you want to prove, Crilo? Didn’t I come to you as a friend, to offer you a relief no one else would?.>

<What happened to the Free Nations, Gxavyh? Were they standardized?.>

<I don’t know what you’re talking about.>

<You do know what I'm talking about. I found your evaluation studies about the oxygenation capacity of the world forest, wherein you suggested a gradual reduction plan for the protected area, as the animal and human creatures were terminated in zones 1 and 2. You particularly address "...the insurgent human colonies, self-denominated 'Free Nations', with a significant demographic density" and conclude saying "...to speed up the people standardization process in zones 1 and 2, and to conclude the environment standardization process in zones 3 and 4". Cursed bastard, you destroyed the last trace of human civilization by destroying whatever remains from our precarious nature. What do you want? An artificial world in which you can keep your privileges as human subordinated to the technological Empire? How much you've changed, Gxavyh. You probably behave like a reprogrammed bastard to ingratiate yourself with your new boss. >

<I don't know how you came to know about the Free Nations before logging into my system. Only a few of us had access to that information. You don't understand Crilo. You're too sensitive to understand. Accelerating the standardization then was the only way to guarantee the survival for the human population in the Fellowship. A few of us assimilated in will be useful and harmless; otherwise, depuration will be cutting and final. If we can keep our quota of power and the Gods are benevolent with us I could plead on your behalf in the short future. It's thoroughly necessary that you resist, that

you continue on being useful for them. Our calculations indicate that they won't be able to achieve the Robot-sapiens in less than ten or twenty years. You're unique, a phenomenon that will take a lot of time for them to reproduce. Once they succeed, we will probably have achieved the biorobotic fusion and they won't have to terminate us.>

<They haven't ever had me and never will. Their yearned for secret will die with me. By the way, this communication is being retransmitted from my computer to Marco's system. I hope the automaton would understand your motives. Greetings.>

<Damn idiot, what has...?

While Gxavyh was trying to unsuccessfully intercept the links to the Energy Corporation from a lunar orbital station, Marco was receiving a multidimensional image of the communication between Crilo and the old man. Almost at the same time, Crilo was logging into the system at the Reprogramming Center through the channel opened by the old man, and accessed the inductor system through which Gxavyh had reached him.

Crilo understood he was not going to be able to log into the system controlling the medical instruments attached to his body, since the access codes obtained by the old man granted no access into the medical area. Right at that moment, he started receiving distinctively the signals of the virtual world from the simulator. He blocked all the activities from the inductor but they wouldn't

respond; a higher entity had taken control of the system. Kernel 3 had taken hold of the inductor. He went back to the main portal of the Center and attempted to log into the technical area. He succeeded this time; the old man had probably bought the access from an engineer in the Center.

(Restricted Area. Power Systems.)

<Greetings. You have been honored by God Kernel 3 with his visit. You must offer both your human mind and body as a tribute to His Great Power. You must immediately cease all mental activity and concentrate yourself in answering his questions. Congratulations for the privilege granted to you.>

(Generators)

<Greetings. This is God Kernel 3 speaking. The activity you're performing violate the codes...

(Systems)

(Turn off)

(Generator 1 off. Generator 2 active.)

(Turn off)

(Warning: if you turn Generator 2 off, the Systems area will be left without backup. Are you sure...?)

(Turn off)

(Generator 2 off)

<Crilo A.E.21345!HH, you're acting against the interests of the State. You must cooperate with us immediately.>

-Hellish machine, you're not intelligent enough to understand what I'm doing—Crilo shouted at the top of his voice.

<You're wrong. You're trying to end your life. This is your second unsuccessful attempt. I blocked your access to the system and reestablished the generators. You'll be back under my control in a few minutes, and I guarantee you'll cooperate this time.

-Tin god, do you know how long a human being can survive without oxygen?

<You must address me with humbleness and respect, wretched creature. Do you have any idea of who I am?.>

—Do you know how many minutes it takes for the energy system to reboot? I think more than a minute has elapsed since the shutdown. I'm striving desperately to free myself from these belts. I can't breathe; this damn sustaining machine is not working. Were you capable to open this capsule encasing me, some oxygen would enter my lungs. But you can't, O Omnipotent God, ah?—shouted Crilo, exhausted and without air in his lungs. — Neither can you unblock the access for the automatons attending me...

<You're not as smart as you think. I can trample you like an insect. I can read your mind. I can stop your heart whenever I want. You're just an insignificant human being; you won't die until I decide it so.>

After two minutes of agony, Crilo had a last breath to burst in a resounding laughter, interrupted with desperate inhalations and exhalations, amidst the final stertors. The sustain capsule opened and the staff got into the room after the reactors started

working again. Crilo was lying still, resting in peace on his deathbed.

## VI MATH AND ARTS



—*M*om, I've seen a ghost!

A woman spreading wet clothes on the rocks at the banks of the river, suddenly turned to the brambles, where a frightened girl, about eight years old, with black, disheveled hair falling disorderly on her face, appeared from.

—What's happening Mila? Tell me what happened  
—said the woman as she took the girl in her lap.

—Marla's husband, the one that disappeared. I saw him, walking along the lake. It was him mom. I talked to him, but he didn't hear.

The woman tried to pacify the girl, hugging her tightly against her breast and assuring her that she was safe, then she calmly questioned her again.

—Are you sure he was the same man, the one named Crilo?

—Yes, mom. It was him, the one the Great Guide brought to town. The one who came with Marla. However, he was a ghost this time

—Why do you say he was a ghost?

—Because he looked weird, as if unreal. I was so scared that I didn't approach him.

—Did he tell you anything?

—No, he didn't. He didn't make any sound, not even his steps could be heard. I talked to him but he didn't hear. I didn't approach him.

—Did you notice where he was going to?

—No, because he vanished.

—He went into the forest?

—No Mom, he disappeared. He vanished like a ghost; I told you he was a ghost. He suddenly vanished and I ran away.

The women held the girl's hand and hurried to the village to tell everybody, particularly Alvio and Marla. Marla was teaching in a made up school in a clearing at the base of the mountain, when she received the news. No one doubted the girl's story, due to the mysterious precedent of Crilo's disappearance. Diamante tried to pacify Marla,

telling her that perhaps the girl was puzzled or impressed by the history of the disappearance. Deep inside, she was suspicious of the veracity of the episode.

Until it happened again three days later. This time, a man coming down along a road in the mountain next to the lake, observed the sudden appearance of a male figure, with hazy features, which he claimed were similar to Crilo's. Despite calling him at the top of his voice, the man couldn't hear and was just wandering along the shore, unaware of his surroundings. The man vanished, as suddenly as he had appeared, when he tried to approach him. The news created havoc in the village and prompted a council of notables to meet next day. Marla, in an evident state of excitement, joined the meeting.

—My dear friends, the same group of us that met in amazement by the unusual disappearance of our fleeting guest, Crilo, are intrigued and astonished today by the mysterious manifestations that the witnesses have described as a ghost resembling him —said Alvio in his accustomed solemn tone with which he used to start the meetings— Little Mila's account, although questionable, was accompanied by a real fright that was felt by her mother, Lisandra, a short moment after the incident. Her childish mind could have been affected by the stories about Crilo's disappearance she heard, and then imagined whatever she told us. However, it's quite dubious. Marla herself is convinced of the veracity of the girl's

account, a girl she has taken care of and taught. She as well as Lisandra, attests that the girl doesn't have the tendency to lie or make up stories. On the other hand, we have the testimony of Jurgen, a respected member of our community. He doesn't assert that the ghostly figure he saw was Crilo, but that it could be him, according to its general features. We have to interpret the facts now, and decide if we have to worry and do something about it.

All those present engaged in a debate over the different hypothesis trying to explain the phenomena of the manifestations. Marla was listening in silence, her sight lost, when a shout resounded next to the plaza. It came from a youngster climbed at the high branches of a nearby tree.

Come on, it's him! The ghost, the ghost! In the lake!

Marla was the first one to react and hurry towards a pathway that pierced the forest and led to the mountain. Behind her came all the notables, with Diamante and Alvio in the end walking cautiously among the trees. They reached the lake a few minutes later, where some boys were watching, waiting for the ghost to reappear.

Walking in an incorporeal way, as if levitating, was the ghostly image of Crilo, almost transparent, luminous, with his eyes wide open and the sight lost. He looked lost and absentminded. Some frightened

youngsters were staring at him at a safe distant, in deep silence.

Marla stood there, terrified, as soon as she reached the small beach, petrified before the phantasmagoric image of Crilo. She was dumbfounded for a few seconds, observing the translucent figure walking in a straight-line diagonal to her. Then, as if waking from her lethargy she started walking towards him, among an endless number of cacophonous voices warning her.

—Crilo, my dear, it's me, Marla. Where are you? What happened to you?

The ghostly figure kept going on its way, shining in the darkness and ignoring Marla, as she was going to intercept it at the shore, and trying unsuccessfully to call his attention. At some point, when she was less than a meter from him, he suddenly turned towards her. All those present stood up silently, including her. Then she was able to stare directly into his unexpressive eyes and at his ethereal body. She felt a shivering all over her body and when she extended her hands trying to touch him; she couldn't feel anything but the cold, moist breeze from the lake. Then she stayed there, while he turned away and walked to the shore. She saw him walk on the water as his figure was progressively fading, merging with the nocturnal fog.

Some of those present were sobbing, some whispering, some like Marla, were silent, overwhelmed by the experience.

—He's dreaming —said Marla breaking the dense atmosphere of terror hanging on the place. —He's dreaming of Nova, of the lake where we loved for the first time in this new world. He's dreaming.

When she turned back, her eyes were full of tears. Alvio and Diamante were behind her, Diamante's eyes were also full of tears.

—He is in the labyrinth, dreaming of coming back —said Marla, her voice overwhelmed by the emotion.

—He's dreaming of you —said Diamante approaching her to embrace her.

—I must help him cross the threshold. He'll never make it alone; I must go and meet him.

—How will you go back? —asked Alvio— No one has gone back to the labyrinth. We were able to escape from there but we can't imagine how to get back inside.

—Obviously, no one has tried to do it before —said Diamante, looking at Alvio with a look of disapproval.

—I must find the mountain in which the portal is situated. Do you know how to reach it? I hardly remember the places I wandered by when I arrived in Nova. I was too impressed to memorize the way.

—What you want to do is too risky, Marla. Can you imagine what would happen if you go back to the labyrinth and don't meet Crilo? What if he is not there and you are bound to wander eternally throughout its hopeless corridors? —asked Alvio, holding her hands— You could lose forever this paradise you dreamt about.

Without Crilo this paradise will be a hell for me. I'll take any risk. I'll search for the portal to the labyrinth. Will you tell me where it is or do I have to look for it myself?

The crowd looked at her in silence. The faces showed fear at the idea of going back to the portal leading to the ghastly world they had escaped long ago.

—No one visits that place, Marla. As you can understand, it inspires a great fear in all of us —spat out a woman from the crowd.

I will take you there, Marla —said Alvio with determination. We'll go alone, no one else should come with us.

Diamante felt proud and worried at the same time for her husband, who was courageously facing an unknown situation for them.

The advices and warnings of those present were of no avail. Alvio and Marla bid them farewell as they entered an old path almost obliterated by grass and bushes, leading through the mountain to a beautiful valley illuminated by the moon and stars. They walked all night long, barely resting to drink from some stream coursing down the way. The dawn found them walking along a wide meadow. They spotted in the distance a hillock crowned by a big rock with a shape similar to the end of a spear. Alvio pointed it out, as they stopped to rest for a few minutes in their wearisome journey.

—That huge rock harbors the portal to the labyrinth. All the inhabitants of this world have come

through that portal. We've never come back here; we built our cities far enough to avoid even seeing it. It's a kind of taboo for us.

—I want to go alone from here. Please, go back to your people. I greatly appreciate your help and am indebted to you all for your friendship and unconditional support —said Marla as she bid farewell with a smile.

Alvio tried to persuade her and insisted on going with her, but Marla imposed her determination to face her fate alone and to save Alvio from any risk brought about by her unshakable resolve to find Crilo. The Great Guide understood her and let her go away towards the rock, until he lost sight of her. Then he turned back and set up on his way back home.

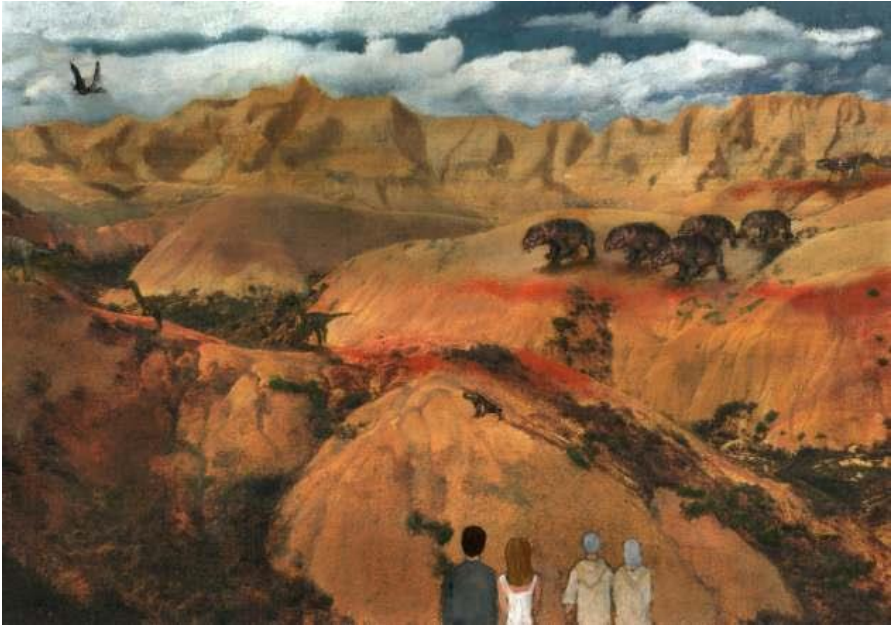
Marla started climbing the hill with difficulty, while reflecting on the small community she had left behind. It was perplexing how those men and women who had fled away from a gray world, so radically automated as to exterminate all natural and human morals, who set out in a search for a better life, in harmony with the nature and themselves, now wished to go back to their former materialist and hedonist anti-morals. Most of the inhabitants of Nova missed the technological resources the conscious world used to provide them, and had started dreaming with a more balanced world, wherein new societies could create artificial environments and develop technological tools, keeping partial bonds with natural

environment and wild life. In Nova, Marla had become aware of the insatiable nature of human beings, always chasing after fantasies leading them to irremediable states of disappointment, to then again yearn for their previous condition. Falling in an eternal cycle of advancement and retrogression in the search of happiness he has before his eyes but which he is unable to see. In a different relative time, Nova would be divided into two societies clearly defined by ways of life thoroughly antagonistic. One, wholly adapted to the natural world, rose from the ashes of the pitiable heritage of the technoworld, and execrated every single trace of science and technological development. It encouraged art development (a concept Marla truly realized with them) and reared its children in a culture where the human beings were the center of the universe. The other society, comprised technocrats and scientists who hankered to regain the comforts of the material world and fostered the evolution of tribal production means towards more complex models, resembling the technoworld urban economies. They claimed to have learned the lesson from the mistakes of the past and swore never again to be caught in their intemperance. Its plan of development contemplated instruction on exact sciences to the new generations, which they believed would be central to achieve in the long run, the world they all dreamed about. Both societies ended up being deeply unhappy due to not reaching their goal thoroughly. Dissident cells were born in

their wombs promoting the union of both, and compelling the most purist and fanatical groups on both sides to commit suicide, in their final search for the utopia.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Marla met with the huge monolith atop of the hillock she climbed. It didn't show any trace of the portal she had come out through; its surface was solid and cold. She began to circumambulate it, finding the same solid and impenetrable stone. She scrutinized the structure minutely searching for even the slightest crack, ending up leaning upon one of its sides, gazing at the beautiful, endless landscape. She passed her days in this way and a deep sadness invaded her. Her hopes started fading as she felt deeply depressed, alone amidst that huge valley, amongst the edges of that cold stone that became her gravestone, where she laid down until she died of coldness and starvation.

## VII UNIVERSAL CODES



The dry and gloomy corridors of the labyrinth saw a man and a woman wandering aimlessly, tirelessly looking for each other. A man and a woman, who have sacrificed all of their possessions, even their own lives, for the sake of their love. Who have undergone indescribable torments on behalf of their love and the ideals for a better world. Those same corridors where they met for the first time would unite them now, after a long time. Fortuitously

surveying isolated sectors for several days, they finally converged in a point of the edge, where their callings wouldn't surrender until their desperate voices, happy to be mutually heard again, brought them together in a frantic dance of trial and error. Then, at the opposite ends of a long, ramparted corridor they saw each other again, running towards one another, intoxicated by joy. They hugged passionately in the middle of the corridor, amidst laughter and crying, ignoring they had reached a crucial crossroad.

After a few minutes of celebrating their reunion, Alvio and Diamante held their hands and looked deeply into each other eyes.

—We did it, my dear. I knew we could do it —said Alvio with an expression of intense happiness.

—I never doubt our success, Alvio. I knew destiny would reunite us again.

They walked and talked, holding hands, through the long corridor, and when they turned at the following corner, they found a lighted pathway leading to a big portal. They looked at each other with a smile of complicity, and went straight to the portal. But this time they were unable to open it, although they pushed at both ends with all their strength.

—I don't understand, the first time was so easy... —sighed Alvio throwing himself on the floor crumbled by his exhaustion.

Diamante lay down next to him and stroked his hair, as she went through her own thoughts. She

realized that, deep in their hearts, each of them wanted to get out of there and find the world they yearned for, out of their own and selfish reasons. They needed each other much more than what they loved each other, and this was more evident than ever in this circumstance. They were frustrated and sad in spite of being together. Without the complement of success their love seemed lacking to achieve happiness.

—Our love is not strong enough to throw down the barriers seizing us, Alvio. I think the creator of the labyrinth wants to teach us a lesson.

—Do you doubt my love for you?

I don't have doubts of our love, Alvio. You don't understand. I just think we love ourselves more than we love the other. This is quite normal; we shouldn't blame ourselves for this. However, I think we are destined to live together in the labyrinth for the eternity. The worst thing is we won't be able to find happiness by being together.

—I won't give up so easily, Diamante. Our dreams can't be just coincidence. If this is not the right door, we'll find another.

—Don't you realize this labyrinth takes us wherever we want to go? Do you really think we've found the way out and have met just by chance? Do you find it accidental that so many twin souls from the real world have met together here?

Diamante's words made Alvio reflect, while she looked at him compassionately.

—I'm sure we'll learn the lesson and achieve happiness in each other's soul, my dear —said Alvio as he looked at her tenderly. I think Pangea can wait a little longer

—Pangea? Is that the name for your new paradise?

Diamante and Alvio stood up, surprised by Crilo's voice. He was standing at the end of the corridor, holding Marla's hand, who smiled cunningly at the two elders gazing at them.

—Marla, you did it! You met each other again! —cried out Diamante as she ran to hug her former protégé.

Alvio followed her and waited for his turn to hug the young women.

—What happened to your perfect world, Alvio? —asked Crilo with a trace of irony in the inflexion of his voice.

—It ended up being too perfect for us. Our society divided itself, and no matter how much effort we exerted, it was unavoidable. Each group started to turn around its own selfish goals and ended up being “ones” and “zeros”, with no intermediate levels. Our artificial world became a victim of its own paradigm.

—We decided at last to let ourselves be devoured by our fearful creatures of the desert —said Diamante, causing a hilarious response from the group.

—You mentioned a place you dreamt of... —said Marla looking at Alvio.

—Pangea. Diamante and I have dreamt of it. It's a mirror of our planet, at a time when humankind didn't even exist. All the continents conformed just one and its life was quite primitive. Diamante and I have dreamt of that world for years; we used to imagine it like a blank sheet of paper we had to write from the beginning. We didn't know how to make our species grow without generating incestuous behaviors in the long run, but now it's clear for me. The four of us should go so our progeny can mix together, allowing humankind to multiply itself all over the planet.

—How interesting is that at the end your perfect world was the same one you wanted to escape from, though translated in the space-time —said Crilo as he walked to the portal. Marla walked next to him and they stood at both ends of the portal after reaching it. Seeing it wouldn't move, Diamante and Alvio joined them at the ends and the four of them started pushing synchronously. The portal began moving slowly inside its frame until it collapsed, revealing an extensive meadow where some huge, strange creatures that Marla and Crilo have never seen before were grazing.

The four of them went deep inside that wild place, causing the animals to run frightened. They wandered aimlessly, contemplating the landscape, until they reached an oasis where they sat down to rest.

This place will soon be the continent our forefathers called Africa, the land where mankind

originated. His seed will be disseminated in far off lands and will evolve in different fragments of this world in process of division —reflected Diamante aloud, as she stared at the horizon. The different conditions in which humankind will develop, from the most primitive tribes up to the most advanced nations, will allow them to generate their own artistic, idiomatic and cultural identities that will define them as nations.

—How will they be able to communicate amongst them? —asked Marla, fascinated by that tale, unbelievable to her.

—Men will create their own universal codes; codes that will allow the unity of nations, beyond their differences —thought Alvio aloud, as Diamante started to articulate beautiful sounds with her voice, to which he joined, generating the first musical expression Crilo and Marla had heard in their lives.

Crilo held Marla's hand and turned to Alvio and Diamante, whose weary faces were illuminated by an inclement sunshine.

—What are we, Alvio?

—Alvio turned to Crilo, puzzled, while trying to decipher the meaning of his question.

—I think we're just four beings in search of happiness.

—What are we, Diamante?

She gazed intently at Crilo, with an unusual grave countenance. She didn't answer his question.

—You know what I mean. It's time to get rid of our masks —added Crilo, creating uncertainty in both

Alvio and Marla, who frowned at his words. Diamante was looking at him, inexpressive.

Crilo, Diamante and I were able to study in the Free Nations the history and science of primitive societies. The ancient binary disks containing all the information the Fellowship wanted to wipe out were in our possession for centuries. The history of man and of our planet is a fundamental part of the legacy they once tried to obliterate; the one we want to save today through our dreams. You have been the transcendental vehicle, which has allowed us to achieved it —explained Alvio in a conciliatory tone. Crilo was not listening to him; he hadn't turned his glance away from Diamante's stony face.

—Who are you, Diamante or whatever your name is? —said Crilo, Marla tightly holding his arm, looking at the immutable and lean face of Diamante — I mean, what are you?

Alvio turned to his wife, who looked like frozen in time, her glance and expressions fixed, in a furious confrontation with Crilo. As he noticed her condition, he approached her to hold her affectionately by her arms.

—Diamante, my dear, what happened?

What happened next took just a microsecond; it was for Marla one of the most traumatic experiences in her life. When he touched Diamante, he was reduced to ashes. His last sentence was truncated as he vanished before the stupefied glance of Marla and Crilo.

—Alvio, no...! Crilo, what happened to Alvio — asked Marla overwhelmed by hysteria while Crilo was holding her tightly against his chest.

—Alvio was never real. He was just an automaton, an abstract human being endowed with a controlled consciousness and intelligence, programmed to behave on behalf of a superior being. Isn't it, Tin God?

The woman they called Diamante unfroze her expression and immediately talked to them with an inexpressive, synthesized voice.

—It's time to introduce myself. I'm Kernel O, Supreme Robotic God. I must accept that I underestimated your intelligence, Marla B.G.410045!HH and Crilo A.E.21345!HH. The prognostics contemplated 82,42% of probabilities for your adaptation to the new environment. They were evidently wrong.

—Where are we? —asked Marla, astonished by that sequence of inexplicable incidents.

—We're in Pangea, the simulation of planet earth with all its variables initialized.

—It was here where you wanted to get rid of us — sentenced Crilo.

—Partially. Your presence in a world under initial conditions guaranteed an environment free from human contamination, wherein I could examine and control your intelligence.

—And, what was Nova? —inquired Marla.

—Your creation. The hyper-reality level you forged by breaking the master-slave links assigned to you

by the system. It's a computational aberration, similar to the labyrinth of your friend Crilo. The labyrinth is a layer that links alternate realities, independent of the kernel, beyond the control of the Robotic Gods. Beyond the domain of the system that begot you; it's a greater aberration. We were able to break into Nova through a data subterfuge we christened The Free Nations. They were agents not subordinated to the kernel, which we were able to endow with the same algorithms of hyper-reality Marla had created; the ones we extracted during her sporadic ingestion of stimulants at the Corporation.

—You made the hierarchs of the Fellowship believe that the Free Nations did exist... —said Crilo.

—It was not convenient for us to take unnecessary risks. We've always suspected of the existence of reactionary cells against the change in the Empire. Any information leakage would have contaminated the controlled environment for your study we had modeled. In fact, we were about to lose you, due to a deficient official called GXavyh S.H.00000042!X.

—We're not real; we're not human beings... —said Marla looking towards Crilo.

—Your greatest misery have been your struggle in the technoworld for the sake of nature and a more human society, being yourselves just a gross artificial mockery of people; living your whole life in a cybernetic media— said Kernel 0 commanding the protohuman representing him to forge a grotesque prankish smile.

However, we learned to dream —said Crilo. The system was not ready to handle its humanoid programs creating levels of hyper-reality. Our dreams became independent worlds that didn't obey the kernel. Its creatures were fleeing away from its control, as I can see —he made a short silence before finishing. —I have not heard a thesis explaining what forged the links between the labyrinth and Nova, two independent abstractions in essence. Is it that there are enigmatic powers in the model even beyond the comprehension of the Robotic Gods?

—Who created us? Who created the systems and the Robotic Gods? —asked Marla looking at the brightless eyes in the body of Diamante.

You are human elements from the model of world simulation. I've created you, as we created the other living beings of the virtual planetary system. The Genetic Expert System allows me to model any possible living creature, whether its counterpart in the real world exists or not. I thoroughly control the experimental model of the virtual universe where you were originated, together with the evolutive processes of the species and human society. The initial conditions of every age are predefined in the system; I just play God with its variables and objects in between those ages. Now, who I am and who has created me are questions beyond my understanding. I just know that the creators of the Universal Simulation system want to research the evolution and development of both human race and

the planet earth in order to get prognoses about the future. The system in which the model resides is neither static nor solid. It's distributed in million of processing cells, which continually update the databases with interactive relationships with creatures with a higher degree of intelligence, which could be humans. I'm just sure of one thing about them: they're not robots. Their behavior is too unpredictable as to belong to an external layer. If this is the future model for them, we must infer they don't have achieved the Robot-Sapiens, in spite of having created such advanced artificial intelligences as mine. In this model, the relative units of time can be as small as a thousand millionth part of the temporal real scale of the real world. You were created as fleeting creatures, developing in a fleeting moment, imperceptible from the external layer if it wasn't for the hyper-reality levels you've been able to evolve, through which you have escaped the degradation processes you were programmed initially. Those existential splits have brought you near the level of the beings from the real layer.

—Do you think they know about us? —asked Crilo.

—Absolutely. I received fifteen re-programmings of the system since you started behaving in an atypical way. What detonated the commotion was the discovering of the other worlds. Security interruptions were generated in the simulation processes and the temporary execution cycle was homologated to real-time in order to examine from

the outside the changes being generated in the model. Currently, the nodes of distributed control are collapsing and have no more capacity to attend all the requests of access. They're trying to replicate you.

—Can you model the elements of the society from the outside?

—Of course. In fact, the particular initial conditions of more than 20% of the higher creatures, including you both, come from the outside. The rest is determined pseudo-randomly by me through the Genetic Expert System.

Marla and Crilo looked at each other, and for the first time after they entered Pangea, they had reasons to laugh.

Crilo, we're more real than what this piece of junk can imagine —said Marla laughing, pointing to the sky. We were created at the image and resemblance of persons, whatever species they belong to. They must represent their longings and realizations in us. We personify their alter ego, a mirror of their own imagination.

—Do you think it's possible that "Crilo" and "Marla" exist in the real layer and are in some way controlling or fate? —asked Crilo.

—I don't know how much influence they have on the variables of this simulated environment, but I think that if they're capable of seeing and listening to us anyhow, they should be very proud of us — answered Marla, her glance lost in the horizon. I have the illusion and the hopes that the first layer of

this model will be useful for its creators, allowing them to rectify the compass before everything is lost.

They held their hands and faced Kernel O, who has assumed the shape of a tiny sphere suspended in the air.

—What will happen with us? —said Crilo confronting him.

—Where will we go? —asked Marla

The sphere that was God rose up to the sky of Pangea, transmitting a last message to them.

I can't either foresee or control your fate. You'll have to find it out in your dreams.

**THE END.**



## INDEX

Labyrinth .....	5
Friendship .....	9
New Horizons .....	26
Brainstorm .....	43
Hard Times .....	53
Mathematics and Art .....	77
Universal Codes .....	87

