

*Aqua*TM

(Prologue and Chapter One: Parts One, Two and Three)

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Translated from the French by Galatea Maman

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Prologue

WATER, WIND, DUST

...and here are the issues we will bring up during the course of our weather flash, brought to you by AirPlus, "Healthy Air for Your Home." The British Isles are bearing the brunt of a Force 12 hurricane that hit land just over one hour ago. More than thirty victims so far. Our event of the day...The Netherlands are reinforcing dikes and preparing, as far as that is possible, to weather the storm: keep listening for practical advice... For our special society feature: After thirteen months of drought in Andalusia, the last of the orange trees are dying... An exclusive report from Italy, where at this very moment, millions of mutated jellyfish are washing up on the shores of the Adriatic. Their venom is deadly... Finally, if you are driving in the Alps, watch out for landslides. Several roads are blocked. Stay tuned for updates on the situation... But first, a flash from our sponsor Green Links. Stay with us here on EuroSky, weather reports for *your* region, in real time!

CHECK POINT

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Sheets of water strike the windshield of the 50-ton Volvo tank truck with each gust of air, and the wipers, even at the highest setting can no longer sweep it away. Shrieking winds shake the truck violently, but its twelve wheels and polycarbonate tires grip the road's asphalt, and its trajectory does not deviate an inch. One hundred metres in its wake, shrouded in a blur of vaporized rain, a second tank truck follows exactly in its course. Plumes of water splash right up to the tops of their glossy Shell logo-embellished tanks.

In the dim truck cabs, an alarm suddenly flares on the dashboard swarming with a galaxy of electronic controls. A luminous message in red letters scrolls across the top of the windscreen, in three languages -- Dutch, English and German. CHECK POINT IN 500 METERS - REQUIRED STOP.

The two trucks brake with the regularity and perfect synchrony of automatic pilot. The leading truck stops with a schuss before the flashing barrier, which blocks access to the Zurich interchange at the edge of the Wadden Sea. Beyond the freeway lanes, transformed more or less into torrents of water, furious waves smash into the coastal dike, sowing the greenish-grey landscape with yellowish salt foam. The deafening, threatening rumble of the waves overwhelms even the screams of the hurricane. Wind turbines that line the edge of

Ijssel Lake have been locked down -- too much wind -- but the blades vibrate and oscillate dangerously at the top of their masts, adding their lugubrious complaint to the general chaos. One of them spins madly -- must be a bug in the security system -- droning like a crazed hornet. It could break at any moment, and if swept up by the storm, its 40-meter long blades risk beheading whatever stands in their path.

The flashing barrier is flanked by pre-fab guard shacks, a precarious shelter in the heart of these unleashed elements. The police guards don't risk putting their noses outside, preferring instead to communicate by radio with the driver of the leading tank truck.

"Identify yourself, please."

"Transports 106A and 106B, for Shell."

Silence.

"You're not listed. What are you transporting?"

Lemonade, you jerk, thinks the driver, with a frown. He responds with a neutral tone.

"LPG. Emergency delivery."

"Where are you delivering it?"

"Den Helder."

"On the other side? The Afsluitdijk is closed due to the storm. You'll have to turn around."

Damn. The driver considers the possibility of breaking through the barrier but the guards could order the bridges spanning the Lorentz locks to open up, far before the trucks could get to them, and the mission would fail. He chooses to negotiate, a foreseen probability, and uses phrases prepared and rehearsed. Nevertheless, this remains the weak point of the plan.

"That is *not* a possibility. They're in the dark at Den Helder. Fifteen wind turbines have fallen, electricity is out, and the hospital and airport are no longer functioning. That means they urgently need this fuel for their generators."

The driver sends a discreet signal to his colleague on an encrypted channel, warning him to be ready to apply Phase 1-B of the plan if the cop proves to be obtuse or too finicky.

"Listen, I have priority traffic orders from Shell, countersigned by the authorities at Groningen, allowing me to complete this delivery as quickly as possible and by the shortest route, whatever the weather conditions. Do you want to see them?"

Another silence. Then another voice resounds through the headphones, deeper, older -- undoubtedly the boss.

"Why do you want to take the Afsluitdijk?"

The driver explains it all over again, patting under his seat in the meanwhile, searching to put his hands on his mini-Uzi. The boss just might think to verify his statement, in which case he will have to apply Phase 1-B at once. But this guard proves to be more comprehending, or just does not want to risk getting reprimanded.

"Okay, I'll open it up for you. But I'm warning you, it's at your own risk and peril. That's some wild, dirty weather on the dike."

"Thanks, chief."

"I'll alert my colleagues on the other side that I made an exception, and let you pass."

"Understood."

The flashing light changes to green and the barrier goes up. The driver slides his hand machine-gun back under the seat, disconnects the autopilot, and shifts into second. The heavy tanker truck sets off, followed by its twin, drenching the guard huts with sprays of muddy water as they roll past.

APOCALYPSE

Afsluitdijk (Enclosure dike): Dike of sand, rocks and basalt on clay bed and gabion layer, linking northern Holland to the Frise, separating Lake Ijssel from the Wadden Sea. Supports the A7 Freeway. Length: 30 km. Width: 90 m. Average height: 7.5 m above sea level (as of 20th century). 25 discharge locks, 3 with water locks for boats. Maximum evacuation discharge: 5,000 cubic m/s. Year of completion: 1932.

Once past the Lorentz locks at Kornwerderzand, there is no going back. The lead Volvo driver makes the sign of the cross on the steering wheel, kisses his crucifix and recites the Our Father in a hushed voice, all the while pressing down harder on the accelerator. He would have liked to share this moment of contemplation with his associate, but all radio contact between them, other than brief signals, is strictly forbidden.

The deserted, dead-straight freeway stretches before him to the horizon, at least what he can see of it through the cascades on the windscreen. It truly is "some wild, dirty weather." Enormous waves, pushed ashore by the hurricane and amplified by the equinox tide, smash with monstrous sprays of foam on the embankment itself, even though it has been built up to 10 metres since the first Delta plan. The rollers finish as mudslides on the pavement, carrying tons of earth and clay that empties into the Ijssel. The lake is agitated with a nasty chop, brownish, foaming and littered with all kinds of vegetable and animal waste and cadavers of birds and fish. The sky is but a vast chaos of swollen mauve clouds,

terrifying at this hour of dusk. Everywhere, the furious waters rage; the spit of land and asphalt that delves through this turmoil seems so fragile...

Tense, filled with anxiety, the driver grips the wheel and tries to maintain the truck's trajectory as closely as possible, but the wind shakes it, the pools of seawater sweeping across the road make it skid. *That's all I need, to get in a wreck before I even reach the objective.* A glance at the close-range radar indicates that his colleague is maintaining his distance at 350 metres, in spite of the truck's yawing, of which he also is victim. *Good, good.* He accelerates again: 130...140... He'd disengaged the speed limiter long before, but still signals start to flash on the dashboard, and alarms start to chirp. He disconnects them. He can no longer hear the high whistling of the hydrogen motor, drowned by the fury of God roaring all around him. He renews his prayers to the all-powerful Lord, all the while contemplating the fact that God could have accomplished their purification mission Himself. But then, they couldn't count on that happening. For more than a century, the old Afsluitdijk had been assailed by storms of ever-growing amplitude, and it had always held out. The Dutch, no matter how depraved and perverted by the forces of Evil, knew how to build solidly.

150 km/h. No way to go faster without sailing off into the décor. But that should suffice. He crosses the esplanade of Breezanddijk and its parking lots, houses and service stations in ruins, all of it drowned under the waters. The objective is still eight kilometres away. The driver hopes that the cops at the interchange had not gotten information from Den Helder or Groningen, that combat air patrols were not right then racing toward the trucks to bombard them. But no, that would be impossible -- nothing can fly in this hell. Another glance at the radar. The other truck is still at 350 metres, skating, like him, from one edge of the road to the other, passing through the clouds of foam like a metalloid whale. *Our Father, who art in heaven, glory be thy name, give me the force to accomplish our*

divine mission, accept my poor sinner's soul into your eternal glory... Oh my God, what an enormous wave! It's going to sweep us away, we're going to crash, aye yai yai! No, it's okay, it's okay, hallelujah, the Lord is with us. Long live God and our blessed America!

Objective in sight. He's just spotted, in a break in the rain, the cylindrical towers of a monument raised to glorify the builders, at the precise spot of the closure of the last pass, on May 28, 1932. The drivers have learned the history of the Aflsuidijk by heart. One last look at the radar: his colleague is still there, at 370 metres. *Accelerate, old buddy. Not the moment to waver. God is with us. He will welcome us into his eternal glory. Paradise awaits us!*

At full speed, the semi-truck takes the exit ramp, climbs onto the bank and heads directly into a parking lot and the five cement towers that retrace the history of the dike. Two are missing, swept away by the blades of wind turbines. On the opposite side of the freeway, the monument has suffered just as much: the tower is gutted on the seaside; the rain is attacking the breach with rage. The exit ramp is at the mercy of the fuming waves, but -- surely due to the Divine Will -- the storm calms for a brief instant and allows the drivers to maintain their way.

The first truck hurtles right to the end of the parking lot, its driver presses the button of his remote control and gives the wheel a swift jerk to the right.

"God be with us!" he cries out as the Volvo flies off the asphalt, crushes the security ramparts, tears away the fence, soars over the rocky embankment and dives into the chaotic ocean. Four hundred metres back, the second truck does the same.

Ten seconds later, comes... the apocalypse.

The tanks are not filled with LPG. They hold twenty tons of mercury, argon and krypton gases, held at high pressure in a composite envelope (epoxy in nanotubes of carbon, Kevlar and Teflon), enrobed with the steel cylinder. The tanks also contain two super-

magnetrons, placed at strategic points in the composite and fed by the truck's hydrogen battery. The remote control, activated by the driver just before his suicide, is adjusted to the depth of the water at the foot of the dike. It activates the magnetrons as soon as the trucks reach the bottom. The bombardment of electrons ionizes the gas, which transforms into plasma and reaches a temperature of 3,500 degrees centigrade. In five seconds, the plasma reaches critical level, becomes unstable and explodes, generating a ball of fire as hot as 10,000 degrees Centigrade.

The dike instantaneously transforms into boiling magma, for as far as several hundred meters from the explosion. Whipped into vapour, the sea recedes and generates a column of blazing hot steam that pierces the clouds above. Then the sea comes on again, more furious than ever, in a tidal wave of millions of tons of water that breaks onto the melting dike. It is razed down like a piddling heap of sand, with a new emission of a mushroom cloud of Dantesque proportions. The sea floods into the Ijssel Lake and onto the neighboring polders; it is a black cliff of foaming water, charged with debris, crushing all in its passage. Other gigantic waves follow immediately after, completing the work of destruction, ripping large breaches in the Afsluitdijk, already cracked with fissures and snaking chasms. The waves overwhelm the coastal dikes, and far from losing potency, drown thousands of square kilometres of lowlands under chalky, tumultuous waters.

The double plasmatic explosion induces an electromagnetic shockwave as well. It spreads with lightning speed, immediately destroying all electric or electronic appliances under tension, one hundred fifty kilometres around. It reduces the entire country, save Limbourg and southern Brabant, to silence and darkness. The lights sputter out. Cars, trains, subways stop. Airplanes fall from the sky. Televisions explode. Radios fall quiet. Computers crash. All telecommunications are interrupted. In hospitals, scanner and dialysis machines stop functioning, tele-surgery devices remain planted in the flesh of patients.

Windmills cease turning, electricity plants cease furnishing current. Hydraulic pumps stop, canals swell and spill over. Hydroponics hothouses and factory farms fade into black cold. Traffic lights are cut, GPSs spin without purpose, flux controls for freeways are devastated. The lighthouses go out, boats break down and float at the mercy of the tempest. Factories cease production. Police, ambulances and fire-fighters are paralysed. The Netherlands plunges into chaos, a quarter of the country submerged. Over all this hell, the hurricane screams, bashes and spreads, indifferent to the outcome of humanity.

TULIPS

...And now, my dear friends, the moment you've all been waiting for! We are going to name the winner of our game "Any Dumber and You'd Die" -- that person who's uttered the most outrageously stupid thing during the course of our pitiless testing. The happy winner will inherit a splendid lodging in the prestigious Swiss enclave of Sion, amongst the elite of the elite, in an environment that has been *to-tal-ly* preserved. But first, let me introduce this charming love nest offered by our sponsor ReBuilt...

It really is dumb, sighs Aneke Schneider, sprawled on the living room sofa of her typical Swifterbant home, at the north of the Flevoland polder. An unlit joint in her hand, she watches without interest " Any Dumber and You'd Die" on her mural-TV, a 100% idiotic show by the well-known game show host Win Binker, "favored by ten million Dutch," or so it claimed. Aneke wants to switch stations, but the herb that Rudy grew is just too good. She doesn't know where she's buried the remote control, and she's too comfortable to get up and

look for it. From time to time, she casts a less-vague eye on her 4-year-old daughter Kristin, lying on her stomach on the rug, diligently slaughtering alien monsters on her Babybox console. It grumbles, blares and booms at regular intervals, all of which Kristin punctuates just as regularly with a "Yeah! I got him!"

I better go make something to eat, Aneke thinks, heaving another sigh. *It's almost seven o'clock and the kid must be hungry...And I better go take a look at the hothouses.* For a storm rages outside, the wind roars and the rain rattles on the awnings. She fears there must be some damage. Taking a look at the hothouses consists simply of going into Rudy's office, waking the computer, surveying the series of cameras and the various controls: temperature, hygrometers, pH of the tanks, low levels of the diffusers, etc. But even that effort seems superhuman to her. Aneke has a tendency to smoke too much when Rudy is not there. It's one way to face her boredom and loneliness, she rationalizes. Nonetheless she feels a certain guilt. At thirty-five, she should be letting up on it. And then, she's really wasting her time in front of "Any Dumber and You'd Die," while Rudy is in Brussels facing the Agricultural Commission, struggling to defend his union... Rudy cultivates flowers, the celebrated Dutch tulips, among others. That's maybe not too original, but it's better than fabricating featherless transgenic chickens in homeostatic factories for the FAO. Now the tulips of Holland are threatened by savage competition with China, where, Aneke imagines, the farmers employ thousands of seven-year-old children, paid two Yuan a day to break their backs replanting Universal Seed shoots. Plus, the European Agricultural Commission had reduced, again, their subsidies to Dutch horticulturists, forcing them to sell at higher prices in a market that was already not exactly thriving. Who has the means to buy flowers these days? With all these factors, a small farmer like Rudy risks being forced into bankruptcy, and soon.

That prospect demoralizes Aneke. And then the Flevoland, its mournful flatness and non-landscape depresses her. She misses her native Bavaria, where there are real mountains and actual vegetation. That's really why she smokes so much. the Babybox emits a loud *Rrooarr-füüü-BOOM-arrgh*. That too, irritates her.

"Lower the sound, sweetie," she mumbles. "You have to stop now anyway -- it's time for dinner."

"Oh no, Mom! I'm almost finished!"

Suddenly everything switches off. The Babybox. The wall-TV. The lights. The heating.

"Mom! It's not working anymore. And it's all black!"

"That must be on account of the storm. Don't move, honey, and I'll go get some candles."

"Mom, I'm scared..."

She starts to sob. Aneke makes her way back to her daughter by feel, and Kristin wraps her arms tightly around her legs.

"It's nothing, little baby, just the storm. The light will come back on soon. While we wait, we'll light candles and put them all over. That'll be very pretty."

"Like at Christmas?"

"Yes, just like..."

Aneke interrupts herself, listening tensely. A strange sound has arisen outdoors, rapidly dominating the accustomed ruckus of the storm. A vast grumbling, an enormous liquid rolling sound...and it's growing louder and louder. Absorbing all other sounds.

"What is...Kristin, let go of my legs!"

Aneke unclasps her daughter, who starts bawling, and quickly feels her way to the window, bumping into the coffee table in passing. She raises the blinds, using the handle, since the remote no longer works. And in the purplish obscurity of dusk, she sees...

She can't believe her eyes. Swifterbant is three kilometres from the Ijssel, she *cannot* be seeing that. And yet...

A wave. Gigantic. A wall of black and shining water fringed with pale foam, that rolls and approaches with its hellish lament, swallowing everything in its liquid belly. Rolls and APPROACHES. APPROACHES.

"Sweetie! Go hide..."

Useless. Derisory.

CLOUDS

Alone? Ugly? Timid?

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She is young, beautiful and very timid. Her name is Jennifer. Wilbur has been trying to "nail" her for close to fifty hours. *Nail her* means to go to bed with her. Not in base reality, of course; he has never made love in base reality. Too dangerous, too many diseases, too many mutagenic viruses. Too many hazards and unexpected twists. And then what girl would want Wilbur in base reality?

In high reality, Wil is an impenitent Romeo, a fox in the henhouses of All Heart or Love Links. His headcount is impressive: not less than sixty girls in two years, among them several actresses, top models and Internet stars. And he has no interest in the Easy Mary of the virtual world, who would get naked in no time. What he loves, above all, is the conquest. Meeting a young woman reputedly difficult, paying court to her patiently and passionately, deploying all his skills at seduction...and finally "nailing" her. Then abandon her for another...

Wilbur's principal strength is his avatar. He'd composed it with meticulous care, selecting its elements from the hundred thousand faces and fifteen thousand bodies available. A unique assemblage, an indefinable mix: longish hair with coppery nuances, tan skin, a blend of Pilipino and Masai facial features, one green eye and one blue, a beauty mark at the corner of the mouth -- he knew little defects were very seductive, a perfect face being anti-erotic. As for the body, he would not yield to the fashionable weightlifter look, favouring grace and harmony over force and power.

As for clothes, the wardrobe available on Maya is unlimited, so Wil adapts his attire to his chosen prey for the week. What Jennifer appreciates is ninja style: an open-necked red silk tunic embroidered with Japanese ideograms, loose black pants reaching mid-calf, and light espadrilles, also black.

Jennifer wears a bustier of white lace, ecru sarouel pants, and leather babuche slippers ornate with arabesques. A pink pearl nestles in her bellybutton. Her blond hair is crushed under a fuchsia bandanna that just gives a peep of her delicate ring-pierced ears. She has adopted a pronounced Nordic look, with big, blue, innocent eyes, very pale skin, and rosy, defined lips. Her chin is determined and her nose so fine in an oval face. The curves of her body are ideal, but then who is not ideal in high reality?

The two of them stroll down a path, hand in hand, in a prairie of tender grasses freckled with many-colored daisies, hemmed in by a forest of mossy oaks. The trees descends in a gentle curve toward a crystalline river bordered by flowering hawthorn. Beyond, the countryside undulates from low hill to wooded valley, laughing under the golden rays of the sun. Mottled butterflies gather nectar from one flower after another. Birds chirp, crickets shrill. It's a magnificent spring day, inciting wanderlust and naughtiness... Full of bliss, Jennifer smiles at the sparrows swooping around them, hardly shy at all. Wil tells himself it's time to angle her into his latest snare.

"It's so beautiful, Wilbur!" she cries, clapping her hands. "I never knew about this place."

"I can show you others even more romantic," he says, smiling and ruffling her silky hair with a light touch.

"No, I want to stay here a while..."

Just then, a sparrow perches on her shoulder. Jennifer places a light kiss on his crest. The sparrow smiles at her, or at least gives her that impression. Wil feels a slight irritation: he should program the birds to be a bit wilder, so they wouldn't distract his conquests. The sparrow takes off, peeping. Jennifer turns to Wil, with a suddenly grave air.

"When I experience moments like these, it's hard to believe base reality is so rotten."

He seizes her hands, and serves up his most becoming smile.

"Jennifer, my darling, why worry about base reality? While here everything smiles at us, invites us! This flowering prairie, for example, isn't it there for us to lie down on?"

"For us to lie down?"

The young girl gathers her fine eyebrows in a frown. *Mollo*, Wilbur tells himself.

"Yes, a blade of grass between the teeth, listening to the birds, watching the clouds pass... Have you noticed that some of them have extraordinary forms?"

Jennifer raises her eyes to the sky.

Wil discreetly clicks with his right eye on the option *clouds*, selects *cumulus* then *instantaneous*.

"Yes, look."

Darling little puffy clouds drift slowly above the centuries-old oaks. Their forms alter as they move, and then one of them clearly takes on the appearance of a person's bottom.

"Oh!" Jennifer cries out.

She blushes and puts a hand to her mouth, tries not to laugh. Wilbur laughs openly, as much from her embarrassment as from this facetiae of the program. He takes his quarry's hand once again, leads her to the grass where a carpet of moss layers the flower-strewn rock, judiciously placed like a headboard.

They both lie down on the moss, and Wil's arm slips under Jennifer's neck, his hand caress her shoulder. She makes a pretence of sitting up, but renounces it. She dreamily contemplates the clouds, a smile floating on her lips. Wilbur is boiling inside but shows an Olympian calm. He feels, far away, somewhere else, in his forgotten body back in base reality, a painful erection.

"I'm so happy," sighs Jennifer. "I haven't spent a moment like this since..."

"Shhh," murmurs Wilbur, who sits up and places a finger on her lips. "This is our special moment right now. Let's savour it to the fullest..."

He leans over her. Jennifer opens her large eyes in false astonishment, but in their depths he can see, *come to me...*

Their lips join, they open up to each other, soft and warm, their tongues merge. Wil has particularly worked on his avatar's sensitivity-option. Jennifer's arms fold around his neck, and her fine fingers twist in his coppery hair. *Finally, he cheers, finally! Fifty hours non-stop, but I've conquered her now!* Their kissing becomes furious, and Wil's hand caresses Jennifer's naked belly, slides under her bustier... She suddenly stiffens.

"Wilbur, please..."

"What is it, my darling?"

"I..."

She blushes again.

"I've never done this."

"Oh."

A total virgin! Incredible!

"Just relax, my sweetest. It's the loveliest of all pleasures..."

His hand insinuates itself once more under Jennifer's lace while he wildly kisses her lips. She shivers...

Important message from MAYA - Priority 1

Damn! surges up from deep inside Wil's mind. *It's not the moment!* He caresses Jennifer's breast, titillates her hard, erect nipple. *A high-grade avatar -- it reacts perfectly to stimulation,* he notes with satisfaction. But the warning by Maya flashing at the base of his

field of vision is annoying him. Apparently it's a personal message, that Jennifer has not received. Eyes closed, lips half-open, breath slightly erratic, she is discovering sexual pleasure. She must be equipped, like him, with a Manside, or with a sensor net, that feeds back all sensations perceived in high reality. *This is just what you were waiting for, little minx, you wanted to come, eh? You don't use equipment like a Manside just to talk!*

Warning - security: MAYA Communication

Please cease all activity

Later, Maya, shit!

The two lovers roll in the moss, covering each other with kisses. Wil's hand kneads Jennifer's breasts. He can't say exactly when she erased her bustier. He kisses them, licks them, descends toward her abdomen, sucks the pink pearl in her bellybutton...

Extremely important - Priority 1++

MAYA Communication - Enter your login

Cease all activity immediately

I said later! While he slips his prying fingers under Jennifer's sarouel pants, she touches Wilbur's groin with still-hesitant fingers. Wilbur calls up with his left eye a pirated utility of his Manside that, besides getting around the time limiter (which he did long ago), allows him to cut all contact with Maya and erase his presence from the networks. A practical little hack, as illegal as zipzap, the teledrug that he downloads regularly to keep connected.

A click with the right eye. The aggressive message from Maya is erased.

"Wilbur...no...I...ooohh..."

His fingers feel the soft, silky, wet heat inside Jennifer. *A really top model Manside, Wil notices. It transmits corporeal sensations. Virtual Life or Hyperreal, probably. Mademoiselle has some means at her disposal! Well, good, Mademoiselle will get her money's worth...*

Jennifer is afraid to erase her sarouel or has forgotten how. *All the better*, rejoices Wilbur. To pluck the petals off his conquest has become a pleasure too rare in high reality, where you can dress or undress in the blink of an eye, in the literal sense of the word. He slides the piece of fabric down -- Jennifer twists and resists weakly -- and unveils the treasure he's been craving for fifty hours. Suave, pink, gleaming in its jewelbox of blond curls, between two satiny thighs, trim as a dancer's. With one click, Wil erases his own clothing. The size of his member impresses Jennifer, but the juvenile form of his body reassures her. She dares a few timid caresses with the tips of her fingers...then all her reticence drops away and she grasps the object of her desire and mouths it greedily. *Well, well, for a virgin, you sure know how to do it!*

In truth, Jennifer proves to be an insatiable lover. In high reality, there is no weakness, no fatigue, no irritation of the mucous membranes, not even satiety other than the purely mental kind. And the zipzap boosts the pleasure. Wilbur deploys all his talent, satisfies his every fantasy and those of his lover, making her float on waves of orgasms. He ejaculates several times in his Manside, over there in the other world; it does not calm him in the least, though, and he starts over again and again in the assault of his conquest...

Suddenly, everything goes dead -- total black.

HORDES

"This so-called reduction of gases causing a greenhouse effect, of which we have seen the inefficacy, is purely an invention of the Europeans, who want to ruin our economy. It is out of the question to limit our mode of life or to sanction our industrials, when our experts can demonstrate that evolution of the climate is perfectly natural and has already taken place hundreds of times in the past. What's more, our technology is capable of facing most any climactic phenomenon."

-John Bournemouth, Governor of Kansas

There he was, out on the prairie riding Jennifer, who without the slightest modesty was offering him her ass -- and then nothing. An absolute void, silence, not one sensation apart from his Manside, which irritated him, wet with perspiration. A disagreeable reminder of base reality. He clicked his right eye, his left, tried vainly to recall the screen, to come back to the main menu. Nothing doing. Total system crash.

"God damn it!" he grumbles.

His hands in front of him, Wilbur makes his way over to his console, palpates the tactile controls, brushes the manual connection zone, but without result. Nothingness. Abysmal, anguishing.

With precaution, he removes the cyglasses glued around his eyes. Fifty hours connected non-stop leaves its traces. Not to mention his seething brain, due to the flashes of

zipzap he had not even bothered to count. He screws up his eyes, waiting to be aggressed by the light of his "love nest," which in base reality is the basement of his parent's second home. He had fixed it up in such a way he could live in near-permanent connection. He could even eat and drink in high reality: the fridge was at hand's reach, and he had programmed a wayout leading directly to the bathroom.

No light. Just an emergency exit sign above the door. Console off. Fridge off. Toilet absolutely nauseating.

Electricity outage?

But, no, that is *impossible!* Wilbur lives in the enclave of Garden City, Kansas, where communications, water and energy are *guaranteed!* If state distribution defaults, the enclave has at its disposal its own generators and water reserves, and its telecom networks are equipped with quadruple redundancy...

Wil peels off his Manside, not without trouble, glued as it was to his sweaty skin. It stinks of piss and sperm, revolting. He heads to the sink, his skinny legs quaking, naked and shivering, his larval body shaken by spasms from the zipzap. He turns on the faucet, and a thread of ochre water smelling of rust and chlorine gurgles out. *That's not from our water system, that... The old folks didn't pay the bill or what?* But his parents are rich; his father is CEO of Resourcing, the largest WorldWide consortium of environmental technologies. They don't really live here, okay, but he does, damn! Everyone knows that! At least, his Net providers know it...

He leaves his pestilential studio and climbs the stairs to the ground floor, crosses the deserted rooms, narrowing his eyes to slits at the aggression of the light of day. Curious, the light of this day: yellowish, dusty, low-angled. He enters the green-marble bathroom, presses the gold-plated button for the shower. The same disgusting water spews out fitfully from the five adjustable shower heads. He washes anyway, summarily, dries off with a

spongy towel in genuine cotton, slips on a robe embroidered with the family crest, the talon of an eagle gripping the terrestrial globe.

By reflex, he calls out for the domestobot to serve him lunch, for he realizes he is powerfully hungry: the zipzap cuts all parasitical bodily sensations while in high reality.

No response. What is happening, for God's sake? He turns on the visiphone in the living room (a slow circuit, secure but not very interactive, supposed to work in all circumstances). Nothing. The screen does not even light up. As a last resort, he presses the red EMERGENCY button, with no more effect than for anything else. Wil starts to panic.

The neighbours, he thinks. I better go see the neighbours. Maybe it's just the house that's screwing up...

The neighbours live two hundred metres away. That will be hard, especially if the sun is out. Wilbur is a creature of high reality; his body is not adapted to UV rays. There is talk of putting the enclave under a dome, but that is quite expensive...

He posts himself at the bay window to see what the weather is like -- and discovers the message, flashed by a drone on the photosensitive windows. It is already half-erased, but Wilbur can still clearly decipher it:

WARNING -- IMMINENT RISK OF FORCE 6 TORNADO.

IMMEDIATE EVACUATION BY HELICOPTER.

BRING ONLY THE STRICT MINIMUM.

He remembers now Maya's insistent warning that he zapped with an annoyed gesture while he was "making" his latest conquest. What was her name again? Oh, yeah, Jennifer.

Going out onto the porch, he glances mechanically at the weather panel installed just by the entrance, which normally informs him if he can go out or not and with what protection. The panel is dark.

The heat immediately knocks him out. At least 104, 105 degrees. The air is heavy, suffocating, full of dust and atmospheric ozone. Wil crosses the transgenic lawn, always green but fluffy and rumpled like an old carpet, reaches the road bordered with fenced trees, more like petrified skeletons. The road is strewn with papers, toys, various domestic objects. The evacuation must have been precipitate. Tank tracks in the dust, doubtless the army's armoured tanks. Traces of the helicopter landings also.

A distant, deep grumbling, behind him. He turns around...

On the horizon beyond the white villas, the turquoise pools, the always-green-lawns and the dying trees, the hordes of hell reach up to assault the sky.

An enormous cloud of inky black, swollen with tumors and purple nodules, ripped with immense, livid lightning bolts. Tentacles emerge from it, spinning and twisting like the tongues of demons. And in the middle...

The horrible, incredible, monstrous funnel of the tornado. Its immeasurably huge tube spirals in an apocalyptic droning, heaving along with it a myriad of spinning debris, minuscule seen from afar, but each dot could be a truck, a wall, a bridge span... An F6 tornado meant winds of more than 500 kilometres an hour, a funnel 5 kilometres wide, powerful enough to wipe out the entire enclave. The sun veils itself, a sulphurous ball. The wind rises, the dust swirls, annoyed. Leaves, papers, lightweight residues whirl around the deserted roads.

Nailed into place by an atavistic fear, Wilbur trembles in all his limbs and pisses on himself. The wind moans, a shutter bangs somewhere, the thunder continuously booms, but above everything, covering it all, is the Titan's rumbling of the tornado. It has already

devoured half of the sky, it is only a few kilometres away, the very finger of Satan -- and it's heading straight for the enclave.

Wil reacts finally by running straight toward the house, where he rushes down into the basement and locks the door -- a derisory gesture, he knows.

He grabs his stinking, stained mattress, burrows himself under his console table, and sticks the mattress in front of him. Then he waits, his flabby flesh all a-tremble, his teeth chattering, his eyes staring into the dark, listening to the roaring rumble invade the all of the outdoors.

A few minutes later, hell breaks loose.

Head between his thighs, hands on the nape of his neck, cocooned into his mattress, Wil feels the wall he is leaning against vibrate, crack and split. Above, screaming, crushing, exploding, breaking apart. The ceiling of the basement rips, a chaos of gravats, beams, a plaster cloud suffocates him. The hullabaloo reaches its paroxysm, and space becomes debris, spinning about the room, piercing the walls and his mattress, which nevertheless absorbs the shocks. Curiously, by luck, the table holds out. A terrorized animal, Wilbur brays to break his vocal cords, but he does not even hear himself. Muddy water invades his den, wets his feet and bottom. A fire breaks out somewhere, he smells the smoke. The pressure blocks his eardrums, makes his nose bleed, suffocates him...

Then everything becomes calm, as suddenly as the horror came on. The storm still rages, but it is just a storm now. Heavy, black rain beats on the ruins.

Transfixed, his nose blocked up and his ears buzzing, Wil remains curled up a long time without moving...then realizes finally that he is still alive.

He has survived. Survived an F6!

Slowly, painfully he unfolds himself, pushes away the mattress soaked with water and plaster, and extricates himself from his corner. The table is twisted and covered with

debris, and the remains of his console are buried under it, but he feels no regret -- not yet. He crosses the room with its cracked walls, picks his way through the soupy mud, climbs over the rubble. The ceiling yawns open: of the house, only the metal beams and bits of the walls stand, under a black sky that vomits a tropical rain. He lifts his face, lets the rain shower him. It is tepid, acidic, but he doesn't care. He is alive!

Up above among the ruins, he hears voices.

Rescue workers, Wilbur immediately thinks.

"I'm down heeere!" he cries out. "In the basement! Get me out of here!"

He pushes away the junk, reaches the door. Bent under its twisted frame, it refuses to open. He climbs back up the pile, starts shouting again.

"Heeeelp! I'm stuck in the basement!"

The voices sound closer, he hears footsteps, displaced debris. Plaster and dust fall through the hole.

"Come help me please, get me out of here..."

Wilbur's words die in his mouth when he discovers the man bent down towards him: a black, filthy, spotted face criss-crossed with scars, grungy grey hair, a toothless smile, a red-injected gaze. An iron bar in his hand.

An *outer*.

"Hey, guys," the outer says with a snigger, "Look at the cockroach in his hole!"

Evidently, the enclave's plasma barrier had not resisted the tornado.

Wil backs up, horrified, falls down at the foot of the debris pile. Four, five outers in rags jump into the basement. All horrible, armed, and jolly.

"Oh, what a pretty little ass on this one!"

"Yeah, all right, we got one!"

"We're gonna celebrate the day with him!"

AGONY

...in brief, all of Europe is stunned by the amplitude of yesterday's catastrophe, which, I remind you all, caused the loss of from two to three hundred thousand human lives and left more than five million without shelter, according to the first estimates. Our president Madame Fatima Konaté immediately sent a message of condolence and support to Queen Juliana II and to the people of the Netherlands, in which she states, and I quote...

A gloomy stretch of muddy rough waters, clear to the horizon at the first grey of dawn. Ruins of buildings emerge here and there, brought down by the tsunami. Muck-covered trees, felled, with broken limbs. Twisted signs indicating the existence of roads. Partly collapsed overpasses. Tangled electric lines. A myriad of debris floats on the water: half-submerged furniture, plastic objects, books and newspapers, all the stuff of life. Animal cadavers by the thousand and here and there, human ones too. Nothing moves aside from the lapping water. No sound outside the neutral voice of the news correspondent. The Euronews logo shows over the brownish water, at the bottom right of the screen.

The family of Kongoussi's mayor is glued in front of their ancient 15-inch television enthroned in the living room. Persian blinds darken the room and shield them from the furnace outdoors. The air conditioning is out of service, and the fan just paddles waves of heat around. It is 113 degrees in the room and the screen of the overheated television wavers at moments. To the Zebango family, these glaucous images of a Holland drowned beneath the sea, shown non-stop since the beginning of the news program, seem to come

from some other planet. They contemplate, mouths hanging open, those liquid immensities, plumbed by a heavy, lowering sky still spattering the ruins.

It is Felicity, the eldest daughter, who first expresses the opinion doubtless held by them all.

"It's not fair! Those people there are dying from too much water and here, people are dying from not enough of it. They should give us some!"

"Felicity, be quiet!" scolds her mother Alimatou. "All of this is just so sad. We don't joke about death."

But Felicity is right in a way, her father Etienne thinks. Three hundred thousand drowned in Holland, it's a global catastrophe. A million and a half deaths here due to drought, no one even speaks of it. No one cares about Burkina.

As a politician conscious of the international situation and of its effects on local life, Etienne Zebango already guesses what this European catastrophe will have as a consequence in his own country. A maximum of funds will be channelled into the reconstruction of the Netherlands, and there will be another reduction in aid, already incongruous, to LDCs, Least Developed Countries, of which Burkina Faso is a member. The failing public powers-that-be will summon all the NPOs to the rescue, and their volunteers and workers will be unavailable here in the struggle against drought and malaria. The media will mobilize in the disaster areas and will continue to ignore the slow death of half of the African continent. Kongoussi will perish under its winds full of sand and no one will ever know of it.

Etienne cannot help comparing each (euphemistically called) "urgent situation" that most of the world's nations endure almost daily now, against that of his own city. The agony of Kongoussi, for which, as mayor, he has the principal responsibility, may be less spectacular but it is inexorable. Deserted by its vital human forces, who have left in quest of

water to the south, or to what remains of the Niger river, decimated by hunger, thirst and those diseases carried by unsanitary water -- malaria, dengue, diarrhoea, bilharziosis, not to mention cholera, that has spared the city so far, thanks be to God -- ruined by ten consecutive years of drought, which has reduced to zero all hopes of raising stock, of harvesting crops, of tourism or capital investment, humiliated by a permanent state of beggary in relation to the global powers, NPOs, the African Union and international organisms... Just one file among thousands...

Etienne Zebango has been a member of the PRB (Party for the Renewal of Burkina, the party now in power) since its founding in 2011, as city councilman, then as deputy mayor, then as mayor, and has always pushed himself to defend and apply the principles and aims set forth by his president: a cohesive economy, sustainable development, respect for the environment, energy and food self-sufficiency, free liberal education, social services accessible to all. Fine principles in truth, but they presuppose a minimum of social organization... Now how is that possible when the council members are dying and fleeing one after another, when the farmers are reduced to scratching sterile sand and the ranchers to eating the carcasses of their dead animals, when the irrigation canals carry only dust, when the roads melt in the sun with never a truck passing to leave its imprint (and goods) behind? When the water is no longer distributed by the State, but by the Mafia who double the prices without any guarantee that it's sanitary? What to promise, to plan, to announce? Where find the necessary budget? How could one still believe in Kongoussi's survival?

Etienne thinks at times of quitting his post, and leaving to others the crushing weight of his responsibility to manage the agony of a town, of a whole region. To lead his family away, too, to the Ivory Coast or to Mali, somewhere where there is water. But, aside from the fact that that would put an end to his future career as a Deputy, which of course seems of little importance today, it would also finish off Kongoussi before its time. He knows that

nobody with his competence or his devotion to democratic ideals is ready to take over the reins. State authority would be violated and would evaporate like a puddle in the sun, and the region would be left to fend for itself, in chaos, survival of the fittest, the struggle for life as the Americans say. Sinister perspectives, that Fatima Konaté is trying to avoid at all cost. Etienne is responsible, and that eats him with anguish but he cannot escape it without facing eternal disgrace, condemned above all by his own conscience.

"Etienne, aren't you drinking your tea? What is bothering you now?"

He raises his eyes to his buxom Alimatou, who is clearing the table of the remains of their meal, *foutou* without gumbo sauce, as you can't find gumbos at the market anymore, then looks at his green tea of dried mint (fresh is astronomical, even for a bureaucrat). He sips a mouthful, it's almost cold and is barely sweetened. Of course, sugar is rationed too, go figure. Luckily, they still have water -- with her foresight, Alimatou knew to build up a reserve, certainly not inexhaustible, but enough to make the restrictions more tolerable.

"So, will you tell me?" she insists. "Or do I have to guess?"

Etienne shrugs his shoulders and finishes his tea. She serves him another cup.

"You know very well," he sighs. "The situation..."

He gestures vaguely at the television, which is now playing a commercial for testing kits, at "only" 9,900 CFA, that can instantaneously measure water quality.

"I'm wondering how we're going to get out of it this time."

He explains to her his analysis of the Dutch cataclysm and of its indirect effects on Kongoussi. His wife is his private counsellor, armed with good, solid "people" sense, as knowledgeable about local life as about the general evolution of the world. She is an undying fan of Fatimata Konaté, whom she has elevated to the rank of the ideal woman, and who she calls "Fatou" and purports to know well, seeing as how her aunt Bana is an

intimate friend of Hadé Ouedraogo, the president's mother, who lives in Ouahigouya, where she presides over a *bangré* circle.

Seated at the table, chin in her hands, Alimatou listens to her husband without saying a word. The children have left the room, off to school -- still open in spite of all -- or to search for some imagined fresh air.

"Tch! You're getting wound up for nothing," she responds. "The situation's going to improve, no matter what."

"What makes you think that?"

"Fatou will find a solution."

"Oh, yes? Has she called you to announce that?"

"Bana told me so."

"Oh, your aunt Bana! She saw it in the *bangré* of course? Your stories of magic and sorcery, those are just fables, Alimatou. You usually show better sense than that. Has the sun overheated your head or what?"

"You are wrong not to believe in these things, Etienne. Madame Ouedraogo is a great *silatigui*, famous in Ouahigouya and even farther. It appears she's seen a miracle taking place right in Kongoussi. She says that Fatou is going to take care of us personally."

Etienne shrugs his shoulders, drinks his tea, holds out his cup.

"Woman, you're rambling. Serve me some more tea instead of telling foolish stories."

VULTURES

<Sidwaya.com> -- October 10

New Water Restrictions

- L'ONEA imposes new restrictions throughout the entire Sahelian zone
[\[read article\]](#)
- Living in Dori on one litre a day [\[practical advice\]](#)
- Ougadougou: Sand in the faucets [\[see report\]](#)
- Water facility at Ziga dry: 500 laid off [\[read article\]](#)
- Madame Claire Kando, Minister of Water and Natural Resources:
"Importing Desalinated Water from the Ivory Coast Would Cost Dearly"
[\[listen to interview\]](#)
- "Exodus from Thirst:" Lively Tension at Banfora between natives and
refugees from the North [\[see report\]](#)

Fatou hasn't the force to budge.

Slumped in her staved-in garden chair, in the shade of the raw brick wall of her home, she gazes with a mournful and gummy-eyed look at the deserted courtyard, crushed by the sun and full of dust. Flies obstinately try to sip from her half-closed eyes and her cracked lips; she swipes them away from time to time, mechanically but in vain. *There are always flies*, she thinks. *These ones haven't any trouble finding things to eat*. Neither did the vultures for all that. For several days now, they had been perched on the highest branches of the dried-up tamarind in the middle of the court. They await her death or that of Idrissa who suffers with malaria in the room at the back. The vultures must know... They always knew in advance when someone was going to die. At times, they swoop from the tamarind with

their slow, heavy flight, and Fatou hears them in dispute over a cadaver, in the road or in another courtyard. Then they come back, full, and wait. They have all the time in the world.

Fatou lifts her eyes to the sky, looking for a cloud, some respite, a miracle. But it is always the same: an ochre sky, saturated with red laterite dust, and the veiled sun striking death. The temperature must be up to 130 degrees in the courtyard. As for clouds, it has been five years since she has seen any, at least not clouds thick enough to give rain. The government certainly bombarded them with salt crystals, the *wackmen* made sacrifices, the imams and the priests sent up their prayers, but it was all for nothing. God has abandoned them, the spirits of the ancestors as well, and the NPOs too. As for the State, it does not have the means. There are only the vultures left, and they wait patiently. They never abandon the people.

Idrissa groans in the room at the back. What can she tell him? It doesn't matter. Fatou can do nothing for him in any case. She has no more Nivaquine to give him, nor aspirin. Not even any water. What rests at the bottom of the jug not even a dog would want. Anyway, all the dogs are dead, from hunger or eaten by the people. Before, it had been the chickens. Before that, the sheep, the goats. Now it is the turn of the humans, beginning with the old folks and the children.

Fatou had borne three children. The first two died from typhoid and diarrhoea, at seven and five years old, due to the disgusting water that the bastard Omar Kelemory sold at the price of gold, from his rotten cistern. Who knows from what filthy backwater he pumps that water? Then the government took over distribution, and that went a bit better. All the same it did not prevent little Alpha, her last child, from dying in her arms, devoured by intestinal worms and swollen up like a bubble. Fatou hadn't any more milk for him, nor the money to buy powdered milk. Now her breasts sag flat, her stomach is hollow and her skin hangs on her bones: she is thirty years old but she looks twice that.

Idrissa groans again. His voice is loud in the silence. The silence... Just the rustle of the sand-laden wind and the croaks of the vultures. Before, there were children playing and shouting in the courtyard, the old people gossiping in the shade of the tamarind, women chatting around the water-hydrant. When the Muslim neighbours killed a sheep at the *Ait*, the entire courtyard shared in the festival, even the non-Muslims. And there were disputes between the girls to see who the handsome Morin would bring to the lake's edge on his motorcycle... Before, people shared, helped each other. Now, everyone takes care only of their own circle's deaths...or do not. Kongoussi has become a phantom town delivered to the vultures, to the flies and to the dry desert wind.

THE MARKET

Communication from the NOWQ

National Office of Water Quality

Water Distribution

(Provinces of Ougadougou, Bam, Dori, Fada n'Gourma)

Maximum delivery: 20 litres per person per week

Cisterns: Deliveries every Friday

Urban Systems: From 18:00 to 19:00, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays

Authorized price to the general public: 10 CFA/litre

"Fatou, are you sleeping or are you turning into a corpse like that?"

Fatou peers up. Josephine, her neighbour, stands before her. Her last neighbour...the only other survivor of the courtyard. Her husband Blaise died the year before of AIDS, and she should have passed too, but no. She had already caught dengue fever and got through that too. Afterwards, she prostituted herself on the route to Ouaga to earn a few coins; she'd caught nothing, not even a case of gonorrhoea. Josephine has survived it all, she has *baraka*. Petite and almost tubby, she still has the courage to fix herself up, even to put on makeup. Her *boubou* seems clean, what does she wash it with? That's just the way Josephine is: trim, fresh-looking, and coquettish no matter what the circumstances.

She carries a 20-litre jerry can of yellow plastic. Empty.

"Is it the day for water?"

"Hey, Fatou, it's Friday! Did you forget or what?"

"Wait a minute. I'm coming."

Motivated, Fatou manages to extricate herself from the chair and drag herself into her house. Another moan from Idrissa in the room at the back, who doubtless heard her come in.

"I'm going to get water," she announces. "Maybe I can find some Nivaquine, too..."

She says that to cheer him up, but she knows too well she hasn't the means to buy it. She has only one 100 CFA bill left, enough to buy ten litres of water, if it's still government water, with its price fixed. She will have to get by for one week with that and what remains of a sack of millet, she doesn't even dare check how much. *After that, well, we'll see.*

She puts on an old scarf, dusty and discoloured, slides the bill into a fold of it, grips her old Total container still smelling of gas, which it used to hold in a better life, and joins Josephine at the door.

"How is your husband?" Josephine asks.

"So-so," Fatou replies, without moving.

Josephine clucks her tongue a few times in commiseration, and they take off, struggling under the flaming sun. Direction, the market, where the cistern-truck should soon be arriving.

Josephine wants to talk, but not Fatou, and the subjects for conversation quickly run out: the harmattan that's been blowing several days now, the heat, abnormal for the season - - when has it been normal? -- the rain that people no longer even await, the desert overtaking Kongoussi with its sands, those who've left to take their chances in the south, and the deaths, the deaths, the deaths... They come across several on the road, skeletons picked clean by the vultures, an old leper -- the birds never touch those -- a beggar stretched out in quest of an improbable donation, a baby freshly abandoned in the ditch, that the carrion crows are already picking apart. The women do not pay attention, as it has become banal. Very little traffic, though before, the roads were crammed with people and stunk of exhaust fumes, to the point they had to protect themselves with a fold of their scarves. They advance haltingly, especially Fatou. Dizziness seizes her from time to time, and she must sit down on a low wall or lean on Josephine so as not to fall. Her friend asks about her health, and Fatou replies, "It's okay..." What else can she say? Even if it is not okay, what would that change?

Finally they arrive at the market, reduced to a few rows of empty stalls, half-ruined under the dead trees. Here and there some limp-looking vegetables, wizened yams, a handful of crumpled cola nuts, the poor trinkets of people selling off their last belongings, the ineradicable seller of *grigris* (good luck! happiness! protection! riches! love!), a meat stall with dog flesh or who knows what covered with flies, a scooter repairman with no scooters... Before, the market occupied the entire plaza, noisy, odoriferous, shaded, colourful.

The cistern is not supposed to arrive for another thirty minutes, but already about a hundred women are lined up, with their bottles, jerry cans and calabashes. A few of them venture among the stalls, without losing sight of the place where the truck will arrive. A few greetings and conversations, but most of them say nothing, just squat in the dust, eyes vague, heads lowered. One of them, a walking skeleton, dressed in colourless rags, suddenly lets her calabash fall and collapses. She lies on the ground and no one moves to help her, to worry about her state. A little later, another woman, realizing she is dead, collects her calabash and holds it tightly, as if it were a treasure.

One hour passes and the truck has not come. Normal. Another woman falls, from sunstroke or inanition. She tries to get back up, at least some women come to help her, they drag her into the shade of a stall, make her drink a little water. Too weak to get back to her place in line, she's going to miss her turn.

Another hour crawls by. A flurry of anxiety breaks out in the line. What if the cistern truck doesn't come? That has already been seen -- broken down, attacked by robbers, delivery cancelled for obscure administrative reasons... Where could they find water then? Rumours circulate: the mayor possesses a huge reserve, a sorcerer made water flow forth from a lake dried up ten years previously, it seems rain is expected next week, someone knows someone who called someone who was bringing some from Mali...

Finally the truck arrives, but it is not the government truck. It's an ancient Isuzu diesel that rattles along on its dead shock absorbers and spits thick black fumes stinking of oil. Effervescence, shoving surrounds the truck, and down jump four bruisers armed with M16s. They roughly push aside the women with the barrels of their guns while the driver attaches a hose to the pump.

"Water is being rationed!" he announces. "Ten litres max per person!"

Protestations, more pushing. The bouncers post themselves around the deliveryman, rifles in hand, ready to strike out again. The women calm down, and get back in line more or less as before. The first woman holds out her water bottle, receives her ten litres. Hands over her bill of 100 CFA.

"It's two hundred," the delivery man announces.

"*What?!* But that's thievery!"

"I can't help it, gas has gone up again, so the water does too. It's two hundred."

Vociferations of indignation, this time the massed women come close to rioting. The guards shoot into the air several times and frankly menace the mass of women with their guns. Screaming, vehement discussion and arguments, negotiating, tears, anger, nothing matters: it is 200 CFA for ten litres, period. *If that don't please you, go get your water someplace else.* The women draw portions corresponding to the Mafiaesque price and leave, dragging their feet, death in their souls. With only five litres for her last bill of 100 CFA, Fatou asks herself how she will survive longer than three days, four if she does not wash at all.

Josephine has not waited for her, so Fatou trudges home by herself, at an even slower pace than she came. Her five litres feel heavy at the end of her arm, and they weigh even heavier on her heart. She cannot resist drinking a few mouthfuls: the water is brownish, with a strong mucky taste and indefinable bits stagnating in it. Her stomach starts to rumble almost immediately. *It's not thirst that's going to kill me, it's the water,* she thinks. She doesn't care. Maybe the vultures will get poisoned too.

Fatou finally arrives home, exhausted, faltering. She lets the water can drop with a sigh of relief. Her stomach hurts and she needs to sit down. But first, take care of Idrissa... She has not even thought about the Nivaquine.

She pours a little of the stagnant water into a cup, carries it into the back room, dim and suffocatingly hot.

"Idrissa, I'm bringing you some water. I couldn't find any Nivaquine."

Silence.

"Idrissa? Do you hear me?"

Silence. Not even the raucous whistle of his breathing.

Fatou poses the cup on a stool and approaches the mat Idrissa lies on, enveloped in the lone blanket in the house.

She already knows what to expect, but forces herself to make sure of it.

Idrissa's wizened face looks straight up toward the sheet metal roof, his eyes wide open. Fatou turns back the blanket, glues an ear to his sunken chest and protruding ribs. Leans forward and closes his eyes. She feels no sorrow, only a sense of fatality. She has gone through too much already.

While drinking his cupful of tepid water, she reflects on how much energy she will have to summon up to drag him into the courtyard, where the vultures can deal with him. But it does comfort her that she will have more water for herself.

Chapter One

DEATH URGES

276,000 dead or missing, 5.3 million homeless, damages reaching 700 to 800 billion euros, such is the toll -- still provisory -- that we can estimate of the catastrophe that occurred the day before yesterday in Holland, a catastrophe, I remind you, that drowned close to a quarter of the country under the waters of the North Sea, and deprived 90% of the territory of electricity and communications. It is, moreover, these last two elements that are causing experts to suggest that the rupture of the enclosure dike (see diagram) along one kilometre of its length had been provoked, in spite of the violence of the hurricane assailing the region at the time. The words *terrorist attack* have not been officially pronounced, but are on everyone's lips. Now those who utter "terrorist attack" immediately think of some faction of the international Islamic Jihad. All the same, investigators do not exclude another alternative, that issuing from the American Integrationist milieu, extremely hostile, as everyone knows, to European politics: the Divine Legion...

EXOTARIUM

"Not French, not Breton, but Malouin."

Standing at her bedroom window, her forehead pressed against the window pane, Laurie observes with a mournful gaze the muddy water trickling across the disjointed pavers of the Vauban plaza, down below. The rain has just stopped, but it is not excess rain water that the ancient plaza of Saint-Malo is discharging. It is the sea infiltrating it.

At every high tide now, it starts all over again: the water inundates the plaza, dull green and stinking, penetrates into Laurie's ground-level home, spreads across the ground floor for about an hour, then withdraws, leaving behind a greyish deposit, a mucky miasma. The walls are impregnated with it, everything is wet and mouldy, the ground floor is now practically unliveable. It's not the ramparts at fault; during the centuries they have valiantly resisted the north-easterly storms. They are injected regularly with silicone, and they let pass only the sea spray. Vauban had foreseen all possibilities, against the sea and against the English, but how could he ever have imagined that one day the sea level was going to rise? Now the water insinuates itself into the lower zones of the ancient town, rots the walls and the lives of the inhabitants. All is in vain: pumping, draining, drying, hoisting, waterproofing, they've tried it all, they are still trying, but the water always comes back. Saint-Malo is not yet at Venice's stage of slowly but surely sinking into its lagoon, but some dare to make the comparison. And pack up their bags.

Laurie shivers, sneezes, and painfully blows her nose, once again blocked up. This cursed cold is going to settle in for the whole winter, complicated with bronchitis, angina and other infections. And then in summer come the sunburns and asthma crises. Terrible

health, terrible weather, the terrible sea... *What the hell am I doing here?* Sniffing and sighing, she raises her eyes to the ramparts, her unique horizon. The waves strike against the ancestral walls, splash onto the perimeter road with salty, dirty foam. The tempest has calmed down a bit since yesterday; the clouds haven't quite that look of wanting to crush down all the land. But still, rotten weather. It's not a good sign when you hear the swell smashing against the rocks.

When Laurie was little, she was afraid that the ramparts would collapse under the assault of the storms. In her nightmares, she saw an enormous black wave engulf the plaza, smashing her home flat. Her parents insisted that the walls were indestructible, that they could resist anything. (But they had also never foreseen that the water would pass *beneath*....) But Laurie never had felt reassured. Actually, she'd already feared the ocean. Now, her father was Malouin, a fisherman and son of a fisherman, so it was out of the question that someone in the family be afraid of the sea. Respect it, agreed. Fear it, never! When her parents had succeeded in buying, at outrageous cost, this ancient boutique *intra muros*, it was like heaven for the head of the Prigent family. Plus, with its façade ornamented with the genuine foreyard of a sailing ship and its door flanked with huge rusted anchors, it was frankly "a sign." Before they redid the façade, you could see printed on the shop window the word "Exotarium." Laurie always asked what "exoticisms" they had sold in the boutique, but her parents could never give a satisfactory explanation. Tropical fish, they said, bits and pieces from the time of the corsairs, trinkets made in the colonies... They probably just did not know. When they had died, Laurie promised herself she would find out. But she never did follow through. It had no longer interested her. The fact is, she had loathed, and still loathes, this house.

She turns in circles here, she ruminates, she can't stop chewing things over here, and her brain is surely becoming as mouldy as the walls at her feet. Why does she think of her

parents now, when she had left them behind as soon as she could? Is it their damned souls haunting her? *They are dead, Laurie, you can't change the past. If you want to go into a real depression, just keep on this way.*

Or think about Vincent. Oh, yeah, that's better.

Vincent. The beautiful, sweet, spiritual Vincent. Vincent who helped her discover love, serenity, a haven of peace in this world of brutes and madness. Who helped her, by his caresses and his wisdom, to get over the death of her parents. Vincent the Taoist...the fatalist. Fragile, cynical, floored by this world that he pretended to master, that he thought himself liberated from. A Net-addict, holed up in the virtual, he quickly got hooked on zipzap, that filthy teledrug that fried his neurons in just a few weeks, transformed him into a spasmodic zombie, into an avatar of himself. He neglected Laurie, rejected her, no longer even recognized her. "You are too good for me," he had murmured to her one day, the last day she had tried, one more time, to rip him away from his Manside, from his psychotronic flashes. He had pushed her away and she had fled. She had accepted whatever mission she found in the backwaters of SOS's lists: distributing vaccinations against AIDS to Tirana prostitutes, already too contaminated for the most part -- that was a month's immersion in the blackest of human and sexual misery, but it did not help her forget her own disastrous love affair. *SaveOurSelves*, yeah right! She had not even been able to save Vincent from himself.

When she returned, he had disappeared. Her flat in Paramé was full of *reco* squatters. Absorbed like some germ by Maya, by the Grand Illusion, reduced to an apathetic vegetable state in the depths of some hospital... Laurie had not tried to find him. She wanted to preserve her memories of him during their days of happiness, of love, those days of feeling detached from the world. Too late...

This memory draws tears to her eyes, which roll down her cheeks like the raindrops on the windows.

Okay, now you've done it, girl. What are you going to do now?

Through her tears and the rain, she distinguishes a grey and white form twirling above the ramparts, tossed about by the storm. A bird? Its behaviour is bizarre... Laurie wipes her eyes, scrutinizes it with attention. Yes, it's a sea gull. It's having trouble flying. Flipped about by the wind, its spread-out wings beat the air in an erratic fashion, vainly trying to catch an updraft. Now it's above the plaza. The wind pushes it toward the house. It needs to land, to find shelter, but it cannot manage it. It has lost control, and the gusts of wind blow it about like a wisp of straw. It crashes into the window, and breaks the glass! Laurie leaps back, bangs into her bed where she falls back. The sea gull lies on the parquet floor, shivering, bloody, in the midst of a litter of broken glass. Flurries of rain fly in through the shattered pane. Laurie approaches the bloodied animal, to take it in her arms, to care for it and comfort it, but thinks better of it at the last second. Those bulging, red eyes, those rigid wings and drawn-up feet, that beak still open on a silent call, that laborious and jerky breathing: the bird is ill with botulism. Sea gulls catch the deadly disease by eating fish poisoned by eutrophysed waters, or in fields saturated with pig wastes. A mutant form, extremely contagious, it can spread to humans by simple contact, all the easier when blood is present. You die in three days, and there is no effective antidote.

Laurie backs up, her hand on her mouth, watching the bird agonize. It watches her in turn, tries to stretch its neck toward her, as if to implore her help. It attempts standing, but its legs, like its wings, are paralyzed. It has difficulty breathing... It will soon die.

"I'm sorry, old friend," Laurie murmurs. "I can't do anything for you. If I touch you, I risk dying too."

The sea gull starts to tremble, its efforts to move are weak and in vain, its dilated eyes express suffering and panic. The rain strikes it, soaks the parquet, puddles over the splinters of glass. Laurie wonders how she can remove it.... Her telephone rings.

She unhooks it from her belt, clips it to her ear and sits back down on the bed.

It's Markus Schumacher from SOS-Europe, the big boss in person.

"So, Laurie, what you are up to?" he starts in, with a Ruhr accent you can cut with a knife, and only an approximate grasp of the language. "I send to you many emails and you not responding?"

"I was busy," Laurie improvises. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?!" explodes Markus. "There are five hundred thousand deaths in Holland, millions of *recos*, all is destroy, and you are asking me what do I want? You go over there, Laurie. They need all the people. What the hell you doing here?"

Good question, she says to herself. *Which, by the way, I have already asked myself.*

"No thanks," she says. "Too much water for me."

"*Was?! You refuse?*"

"Yes, I refuse. I've already got my feet in the water. My house is being invaded by the sea, a sea gull just broke one of the windows and is in the middle of dying on my parquet, and I really don't feel like going to Holland to kill myself gathering up corpses and coddling hysterical survivors. I've had my dose of water, and troubles, for today. I dream of some dry country, where there's sunshine, where the birds don't crash in through the window and die at my feet. You can do without me, Markus."

"You have not the right..."

"Yes, I do have the right. I have the right, from time to time, to renege on my solidarity with the wretched of the entire world, and to take a little time for my own problems."

The sea gull opens its beak, exposing a tumefied tongue, tries again to get onto its feet, falls back heavily, out of breath. Laurie turns her back on it, as she can't bear to witness its slow and distressful death.

"I can to fire you," Markus threatens.

"Well then, fire me," Laurie says with a laugh. "Who do you take yourself for? The CEO of some WorldWide? Is it an NPO you direct, or a multinational? We're obliged to compete for jobs, now, at SOS?"

"Think of all these poor..."

"Oh, I am thinking of them, that's all I can do! And imagine this, I count myself among the lot. SaveOurSelves, huh? Well, I'm going to start by saving myself. And I won't be calling anyone to the rescue."

"Laurie, I'm not recognizing you."

"Sorry, but you're calling at a bad time, Markus. Get back in touch with me later. Maybe I'll have changed my mind. *Schuss*."

She hangs up, and puts the phone back on her belt. Turns around apprehensively...

The sea gull is dead.

KILL THEM ALL

You live alone and suffer from it, you whose friends are absent, whose family is far away, whose partner has left and gone, SUFFER NO LONGER! Your Virtual Companion™ is there, at your side, as soon as you need him (her). He (she) talks to you, listens to you, understands you, consoles you. Virtual Companion™ possesses a vocabulary of 75,000 words in the basic model, evolvable by free downloads. He (she) speaks 42 languages and knows 1200

games. He (she) is entirely modulable and configurable according to your social and psychological profile. He (she) can be installed anywhere in your home, and can even follow you around. Available in male, female or child versions, for all the stages of life. So, hesitate no longer, adopt a Virtual Companion™, and rediscover the joy in living!

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After thoroughly wrapping up the sea gull and disposing of it in a trash container, Laurie cleans up the broken glass, scours the parquet with chlorine bleach to remove the blood (protected by two pairs of rubber gloves while doing all of this) and tapes a plastic trash bag across the gaping pane. But now she can't think of anything else to do. She could keep at the housework, down on the ground floor, but what use is that? Tomorrow the tide will be at coefficient 124 again and the flooding will start all over...

Night approaches, brought in by the clouds, and with it approaches the moment Laurie dreads most: the loneliness of the evening, the sad dinner reheated in the microwave and swallowed at a corner of the table, the telephone that never rings, the TV's grating pointlessness, her email box crammed with spams and ads, the futile wandering on the Net to give herself the illusion of being connected to the world, the noises of the town that she will bury behind melancholic music and then the icy bed, too big for her... Maybe go out? Elbow the winos in the bars, who will only have eyes for her ass? Call friends she has nothing to say to? Inflict her spleen on them? Wander in the dark, narrow, oppressive streets, just to get crossed or aggressed at every corner by recos or other homeless people? If she'd had a car, Laurie would have been gone, far away, right away. But a car was a luxury these days, a luxury she's never been able to permit herself. Working at a non-profit,

sure, she gets to travel, but it pays hardly anything... Should she accept Markus's offer (order) after all? Go paddle around the Netherlands, in the midst of corpses, wreckage, diseases?

"God is punishing us! The Lord will chastise us for our sins! He has sent his curse upon us and sent us the seven plagues of the Apocalypse, for we have worshiped the Golden Calf and made pacts with the devil! Tomorrow the four horsemen will come and their names are Judgment, War, Famine and Pestilence! Babylon the great whore will fall! Repent! Repent!"

Oh, no, not him again, Laurie thinks, sighing. She presses her face to the window again. Down below, a shaggy, gaunt and grey man, dressed in a white tunic with the Divine Legion logo that reaches down to his knees, feet bare in the mud, striding across the Vauban plaza, waving his arms. She cannot make out his face, as half of the streetlights are broken, but that doesn't matter. She knows him. He is one of the recos who squat the abandoned office of the mayor of the walled city, at the corner of Rue Sainte-Barbe. An "enlightened one," a nut, like so many others.

"The seven seals are broken, the Beast is among us! We carry his mark, all of us! Repent, you fornicators, you impious, you net-addicts! O Lord, preserve us from evil, from the infamous mark of the Beast! Preserve us from prostitutes, from deluges of frogs, from virtual reality! Miscreants, bow down before the light of Christ! For Babylon shall fall!"

Laurie moves to close the window, notices it is already closed. The reco's vociferations are getting through the double thickness of plastic taped over the broken pane of glass. She grabs the remote control of her microradio, programs the most violent thing she can think of -- *Holocaust* by the "harsh" band Kill Them All, a recording that her brother Yann had sent her -- and turns up the volume to the max. An infernal uproar fills the room, making the very tiles vibrate, a blend of bombardment meets canning factory meets

screams wrung out of the singer. Normally, Laurie detests this kind of chaos-called-music, but it does the job: the preacher shakes his fist at her window, braying inaudible imprecations. Finally, vanquished by this satanic technology, the reco takes off to bellow his anathemas elsewhere. This puts a sardonic smile on her face.

Laurie lowers the volume and replaces the din of Kill Them All with Kirlian Camera, an Italian electronic group from the beginning of the century, now her favourite soundtrack for gloomy moods. It restores that mood marvellously. Now the harsh band made her think of her brother, and gives her an idea: what if she went down to the Pyrenees to visit him? It's been a long time since they've seen each other, in fact, since she introduced him to Markus, vaunting his qualities as a programmer. At the moment Schumacher was looking for a new webmaster to handle the SOS-Europe site, the old programmer having collapsed from zipzap (one more victim). Since then, Yann must have made his way... Laurie hadn't had any news from him, and her rare emails had always remained unanswered.

She unhooks her telephone from her belt, hesitates. How will he respond to her? She hasn't really all that much in common with her brother, but they don't hate each other either. But the two of them are so different...their sole point in common being that they had both fled from their parents as soon as they were able to. Laurie had used her time to travel the world and come to grips with base reality, while Yann had left home only to hole up in the Pyrenees. He practically never left his den, preferring to explore the universe of octets, algorithms and system commands. Luckily, he's not addicted to zipzap...at least according to latest report.

Okay, I'll call him, Laurie decides.

"Yann Prigent," she says into the phone, clipping it on her ear.

She gets his message machine. *Hi, this is Yann Prigent, I'm hyper-busy, call later or let me know what you're calling about.*

"Yann, it's Laurie, your sister, can we talk for a couple minutes?"

She waits a bit longer, then insists.

"Yann, damn it, pick up, it's Laurie! I have something to say to you!"

Finally Yann responds.

"Yeah, Laurie, you caught me at a hyper-bad moment, I'm in the feed, on a hyper-big fish, if I unhook I'll lose it. Call me tomorrow, if I'm still alive."

Click -- bzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Oh, that jerk! Two years since we've seen each other, or even talked, and he sends me packing. You don't get it, Yann, I'm your only family! You can't do that to me! She prepares to call him back -- Laurie is of the determined type -- but then freezes, her hand on her phone. "If I'm still alive?" What does he mean by that? Yann, please tell me you haven't gotten into the zipzap?

IN THE FEED

Satellite Mole-Eye 2AC

Type: EcoSat (non-stationary)

Mission: Detection, count and analysis of underground hydric resources

Means of detection: 1 hydrogen maser, 2 molecular lasers, 3 spectrographs, 3 multifrequency scanners, 12 HRV cameras of which 4 are panchromatic with 1.5 cm resolution

Transmission: By UV laser, quantum encryption by OverCode© Enigma ww.

Orbit: Low polar, 301.7/542.4 km

Orbital speed: 7.4 km/s

Mass: 4,237 kg

Year of construction: 2029

Estimated life span: 8 years

Manufacturer: GeoWatch Inc.

Owner: Resourcing ww.

Launch: 12/11/2029 at 13:41 t U by MDD 4.5 launcher on SeaLaunch-Energia platform

Source: R20 (Repertory of Objects in Orbit)

No, Yann is not into zipzap. He regrets having been a bit short with Laurie, but what he's working on is far more important than his sister. An intrusion into a GeoWatch satellite, a Mole-Eye yet! An EcoSat full of data about aquifers -- you don't see that every day...

In three minutes, it will be time to rock and roll.

Boiling with impatience, he checks his equipment one more time, especially the demodulators at the system's vital centre. Outside, the night trembles and moans under a glacial wind descending from the mountain tops, but Yann is unaware of the night, and he has not looked out all day. Neither can he say how many hours he's been waiting, preparing, planning, simulating his intrusion into the Mole-Eye -- the summit of his hacker's career. That is, if he succeeds. For if he fails, or if he gets caught, he will be, to all purposes, *dead*. Tracked down, spied upon, infested by hundreds of snoopers, unable to make a single step on the Net without lighting up a constellation of alarms. Virtually dead.

But if he succeeds...

It all started thanks to a young "apprentice" of Yann's, a script-kid who, during a random exploration, had by chance hit upon a service entrance, a backdoor into GeoWatch. Because it was badly coded or just a lottery win, Yann didn't know: the novice was able to upload his "catch" before being devoured by Enigma's guard dogs. Too bad -- with a conquest like that, you could launch a career.

Still two minutes to wait.

Yann adjusts his sensor net and slips on his gloves with the precision and ease that comes only with having repeated the same gestures a thousand times before. He smiles at recalling the face of Steph, his buddy from the Pic du Midi, when Steph had recognized one of the captured files as the displacement vectors of a Mole-Eye.

"It'll pass at 19:32, at 471 kilometres, right above your house," Steph had said after his deciphering. "But don't do anything stupid, okay? GeoWatch is a really big fish, and it'll bite *really* hard."

"Don't worry about me -- just send me the coordinates."

"If you attack GeoWatch, I don't know you. I like my life!"

"Steph, you don't even exist on my box, and this conversation never took place. Send me the coordinates."

When you work for an NPO like SOS, having access to a company's backdoor, however fleeting an access, is always useful, no matter how secretive the company, a secrecy GeoWatch epitomizes. And to have latched onto the infinitesimal chance to directly access the data of an EcoSat, well, *that* is nirvana. Yann had insisted, and Steph had given in.

Just a minute more.

Yann puts on his cyglasses and presses firmly with his finger the CONNECT key of his console. He plunges into his personal wayout, a simple antigrav platform floating in the nebulous and uncertain territory of his imagination. It is really only here that he feels secure. Even the cyber-cops of NetSurvey would be incapable of unravelling the profusion of locks and bolts he had placed there. In any case, it would take them plenty of time.

Concentrating, Yann mentally rehearses what he has planned to do. The Mole-Eye's orbit is just 470.8 kilometres at the zenith, and with its speed of 7.4 km/s, that leaves him a window of only 24 seconds to act. The least error in phasing and Yann will lose this unique opportunity, and maybe even his intellect: the strength of the feedback can grill his neurons as surely as an overdose of zipzap.

"I must succeed..." he mutters. "I will succeed," he immediately adds, as if to convince himself.

30 seconds.

Through the sensor net, his body feels the vibrations of the motor of his parabolic antenna as it grinds into gear and swivels the antenna up.

Yann charges up his utilities, launches his automorph and takes a deep breath -- then kicks in his avatar, into the feed that has just opened.

The hyper-acceleration of the 1.3 T-bytes beam forces a hiccup of surprise out of him: he is already in the firewall lock. As foreseen, his automorph passes him off as a low-frequency parasite, very common at that altitude. This is the critical moment. Yann generates a priority maintenance instruction and injects his amoeba, a simple polymorphous Trojan encapsulated in Tequila, a 50-year-old virus, long considered obsolete, and ignored by anti-viruses.

3 seconds.

According to his estimates, Tequila should be 30% into its deployment. Another 21% and the Trojan will go into action.

5 seconds. Yann scolds himself for not having used a faster virus, but of course, that would have been less discreet, thus more dangerous.

5.6 seconds. That's it, the Trojan is activated, and pops into his field of vision, in the form of a hologram. Yann, feverish, undertakes to open a door for himself in the firewall, at the same time triggering a breadcrumb trail, a sweet little utility that places invisible key points between frames, permitting him to back out instantly in case of problems. A gadget lifted off a Monet anti-vi... One shouldn't leave utilities like that drifting around.

8.1 seconds. The firewall is wily, but a door finally opens and sucks him into a sub-program created by his Trojan. Yann exults, his plan is working splendidly... A bit too well even: Tequila is more efficient than he thought and starts to attack the core frame. Yann's exploration becomes difficult and above all, risky. Three times already, the floor has slipped out from under his "feet," and he's just barely avoided a fall into the forgotten tunnels of dead memory.

I better hurry, otherwise Enigma is going to be alerted by these glitches...

14.5 seconds. Yann finally has put his "hand" onto the databanks, but the degradation of the structures is reaching a critical level. One of his posted spies suddenly alerts him that an inter-satellite laser liaison has just been launched. He must recuperate as much data as possible and get out before the situation becomes grim. He dips in at random; too bad, he can sort it all out later.

21.9 seconds. Two Enigma SysExes penetrate the core. Luckily, Yann has filled his last available memory sector. Just time enough to send an ultimate instruction to the Trojan so it will auto-erase, then Yann calls up his breadcrumb trail and ejects into the feed.

23.1 seconds. He materializes in his wayout at the very instant when the SysExes cut the feed.

"Whew...that was hyper-close... But I *did it!*"

Later, while Yann joyously combs through the diverted data, the Enigma SysExes conclude, after analysis, that a glitch due to solar wind was to blame. Useless to alert the client for such a little thing. They reinitialize the Mole-Eye's system, having first safeguarded the whole of the satellite's data banks on an inaccessible disk, in order to verify that nothing had been lost.

For at GeoWatch, information is not simply diffused: it is sold. At a very high price.