

He had only been away for one minute, while he licked a stupid multi-colored ice cream and styled his hair in the chrome of the hondas with wasp thorax parked across the street from “The Golden Frost”. When you are a kid on the block in the ether, your hairstyle beats conservation instinct every time. One can bear being beaten up badly; one could run away like the ultimate coward on the billions of alleys that divide the ether; word goes that you’re up to nothing, nobody makes friends with you. But one would kill if a hair were out of place.

But he wasn’t in the ether now, he was outside. On a warm spring day. One of those when a lot of insects surviving who know how on the unstable dunes of the salt crust, waking up, were moving glassy weeds beneath the lower edges of the House, making a monotonous noise like vague promises.

The ones who dared try as many ether exteriors themselves were wandering through the shops hunting for souvenirs, trifles to take along, close them up in silver or glass tears as big as a fist and display them in full view for the rest of their days.

You have objects at home, nicely displayed in the ether, hundreds of thousands that you can access in an instant, enjoying the beauty of each of them or rather letting your brain wander among the alleys and shelves on automatic pilot. Serve you only at night, before sleeping, a drop of strong essence from the sum of all the sensations it caught while you were busy with something better. Such as playing “Die-revive”. But when you really bring something from the Exterior, when you come with something that can be touched with your fingers, sniffed with your own nostrils, and even tried with the tip of your tongue, it seems that everyone looks at you in a different way.

They had a lot of choices, because the shops were full. Screws from Mechanic (faked only a few days before with scratches and red-yellow rust so that you could swear they were centuries old); chips from Electric, cesium from Atomic. They would get out of the ether once per month or less, they would buy everything and go back where the danger is only a word, an invention of story tellers, a desire of the many. Through the damp moistness that lasted until the afternoon, changing the feet of the salt crust to deceitful foam, they agitated, euphoric, enjoying the thick clothes closed with golden buttons under the chin and the high boots. They detested the Exterior, fearing the parasites and not even the sunrises or sunsets were perfect, as they could have them in the ether.

The hondas had halted with roars of terror, ridden by salt crust mutants whose leather cloaks made them look like covered in chocolate. When they disconnected themselves from the engines, splashing, bits of flesh were left among the wings of the radiators. But they couldn't care less.

The two-inch dust, their bowlegged walk, the fixed stare showed they came a long way. They had speeded above the dunes on the great machines replacing their legs. They had forgotten how to walk a long time before.

– Haaaah! Shouted one of them, meaning anything.

They started the chronicles of the travel mixing their own noises and words borrowed from other nations from one end to the other of the white desert that was their road and their shelter for life. Before they invaded the holo cabins, the boy saw them up close. Their flesh hollered for a hot bath and bad brandy. They needed images with a lot of green that should sweep away the obsession of the salt crust from the small brains of lizards, good enough just for maneuvering the hondas. They particularly enjoyed “Tarzan and the Jungle Nymphs”, an antique overwhelmed by vegetation they enjoyed a few times in a row before getting to other stuff. They fell one by one consuming more and more exciting holos.

– Want? The one who had shouted earlier said, “You wants this?” A funny doll extremely appropriate for banging against a wall.

At first he didn't understand what he was luring him with. Then he saw it: on the leather sleeve the salt crust butterfly, Ksi-Ksou, was climbing prudently with yellow and grey velvet legs, big as a fist, now harmless. Every button of the coat – a screw, a pin, another small piece of a honda deceased in the middle of the desert, its skeleton more and more whitened by the sun, was a difficult obstacle for Ksi-Ksou.

Leni could not take his eyes away from the shiny skull of the pilot, under which all the events of the journey were, funny or scary. The mutant lured him with the moving butterfly again, then gave up. The rare folds of his little brain could not tell him what to do further.

The boy lifted the insect. It would not resist in his room for too long, but in the folds of the ether they swarmed by the thousands, bigger and more beautiful and in addition you could improve them in any way you wanted. You could find anything, but you couldn't take anything with you outside.

He wasn't afraid of such hondas. Behind him was Comix, a humanoid object with a beard like a wolfram brush on his cheek, bones of super-alloy and biceps of best quality plastic. Comix was looking forward for a motorized to mumble something in order for him to crook it even more. Besides the synthetic brain, he only had tough plastic in him, regenerative, but some time ago he had been more human than you and me and the boy had put him on his list of favorites.

Meanwhile, Daddy S, wearing impeccable clothes, was teaching billiard lessons to the agents, moving spryly through the fog of expensive perfume. The agents were watching him carefully. For his personal escapades, Daddy would only order watchmen with a pedigree upwards of three generations. Over his head in business with composites, he couldn't stand being close to synthetics.

– Daddy! Shouted the boy crossing the street stumbling, look at what he gave me...

He had heard him. He waved distractedly to him, twisting the cue.

The place called “Golden Frost” was rented for an afternoon. It was one of the few in the exterior, except the Transactors’ Circle, where Daddy took him. Before sunset, when the ether became so crowded that it threw out a billion inhabitants in order to operate, he opened the door with a discreet knock. Elegant top hat of authentic contraband wool, reed cane, polished shoes, a white carnation in his buttonhole. “It’s time to go out”, shone his shadowy eyes of old lover boy with polished incisors beneath the moustache that made as many victims as the latest war. And he would jump, drunk with joy, jolting out of the ether without complying with the backwards steps. Sometimes he would even forget about the jacks.

*“You’ll be losing your head one day,”* the Frennd scolded him monotonously.

The man bent over the green cloth, balanced the cue, and hit the last ball. The agents were holding their breaths respectfully. The ball rolled slowly, as if someone moved it with their eyes. A trick.

A terrible explosion followed.

Daddy, slices of the pool table, and six agents landed on the street beneath a slow fountain of shards. The blinds of the souvenir shops blocked, sequestering their customers. Five seconds later the white ball fell on the street dust as well.

Afterwards nothing moved any more.

*“Run! Hide! Don’t cry!”* the shrill voice of the Frennd sounded beneath the boy’s skull. A cheap fellow for children between six and twelve bought by Daddy for one of his birthdays. Leni listened to him, running to shelter himself against a wall. Comix followed him staggering. The explosion had blown up the left side of his chest. But even if only one piece of a finger had been left of him, that piece would have run after the boy. It had this thing engraved in every one of his molecules.

And Leni wanted to go back to what was left of Daddy S, tricked by the wind that was ruffling his hair. Fortunately, the Frennd paralyzed him before he took the first step.

The Coppers arrived twenty seconds later in a tornado of lights and sirens. The one who bent over Leni was wearing a helmet, leggings, and gloves reaching his elbows that made him look like an insect. A BossCopper probably.

– Can you move? He asked.

His voice was squeaking like the bearings he was turning his head on. The sounds were drilling the air down to the boy's eardrums, but afterwards they scattered not understood.

– Are you OK? Would you like to stand up?

Seen from downwards, it didn't look well. Through the plaster that used to be, "The Golden Frost" swarmed others. Leni tried to unclench his arms from his knees. The Frennd was attempting to calm him down.

– One wounded here, the BossCopper shouted again.

The hondas were dragged out of the holo, aligned, and killed with short blasts. Leni glimpsed the one who had given him the Ksi-Ksou butterfly, falling first with a surprised face. The others rolled after him.

A dream with Daddy at the Transactors' Circle...

A hundred of superiors in the fire of the sunset, on the great terrace. The end of a difficult day. Daddy got himself and all the others rich once more, just like that, to show them who the boss was. They were withdrawing away from him, bowing.

"Leni," says Daddy S (and every soft syllable comes out packed in blue smoke, obtained by burning some very expensive cigarettes), "you must live amongst the roaches. Don't be afraid of them. If they make you sick, just shake them off and be done with it."

The boy can't understand how men can light such beautiful things as cigars. In a world made of chromed, precise, cold, tough objects, they are soft, warm. Their perfume comes from inside, like a soul, like fog-of-life. Warmth transmitted from the hand that twisted it, from the sunny thighs of a woman loved once upon a time.

The two of them sip in the sunset like the grass sips the salt. Leni feels something gregarious. Before asking Daddy, the voice of the Frennd dissipates the magic. "*Coolness. We'd better get in, Leni.*"