

Andreas Pritzker

The End of Delusion

Translated from the German by
Alexander Bonet

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Characters and plot are the author's invention; they are only as real as they could be.

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When he woke up in the vagueness of dawn, Adam Schreiner felt like something had slipped from his grasp and floated away. Like a vision which he had clung to for a long time. Now he felt disconnected from the familiar events. As if the connecting threads between him and the forces that moved the world had been torn.

He looked in the mirror, wondering if the man who stared back at him with a doubtful expression on his face was really himself. Over the next few days, he was going to watch this man closely, register what he was doing and why he did it. How he would complete his tasks that were no goals as such. A part of him – born this morning – was going to watch the scene like a cameraman, not directly, but through an optical device that was not only going to allow him to view the scene from different angles, but was also going to record it.

Yesterday Schönholzer had summoned him. Without letting him know what it was about. Only to drop everything and come quickly. Schreiner sensed that something was in the wind. He tried to find out more from Schönholzer's assistant. She only shrugged and smiled encouragingly, as Schönholzer opened the door and dragged Schreiner into his office.

"The U.S. Department of Energy is going to scrutinize your project, Adam. We want you to be there. You'll travel tomorrow. The president will explain everything else to you. He wants to see you right now. In private. Adam, this is your chance. Who is ever so lucky to meet the president of our company? He shook my hand once, when he took a tour of our labs. Please

don't bring shame upon us, Adam. Stay calm, speak clearly and concisely, and only when asked."

Looking back, Schreiner saw himself enter the separate elevator to the otherwise inaccessible eleventh floor of the glass tower, from where not only the factory premises, but the whole world felt like toys to him. He thought, this is not my project. I merely observe what the Princeton lab is doing, and I write reports about their work for the executive board.

So far, Schreiner had only seen the president in photos. Up close the man seemed mousy and unremarkable. But when he spoke, Schreiner sensed the cold power and his ability to impose his will on others.

"You know that this project is very important to me. I have chosen it because it is not only profitable, but also because it has quite a public appeal – something I can't say about most of our projects in R&D, I'm afraid. That's the reason why I am taking care of it myself. I have read all your reports. You are lucky that you write so clearly and concisely, otherwise you wouldn't be sitting here right now. From now on you will not only report to me about the assessment but you will actively represent our interests. So far we have invested ten million dollars, and since we're not in the best of shapes financially, we need additional funding. This means that the assessment has to be positive. You'll travel tomorrow. That way you will have a whole week to convince the experts of the DOE. Their names are on this list here. Do you know any of them?"

Schreiner caught his breath. He found the very idea of what the president demanded of him utterly revolting. He tried to hide his facial expression behind the list and scanned the names. Then he shook his head.

The president continued.

"They are all professors, aren't they? I don't know

what to do with those academics. They don't care where the money they live off is coming from. But you are a scientist yourself, so I'm sure you'll find the right tone. Please teach them how the world ticks. Tell them that it's exactly inventions like this one the industry needs from the science community, not some fantasies conjured up in an ivory tower. I want you to act convincingly, the company is backing you. And please have a chat with Professor Franzotti before you leave. You can throw his expert opinion in the mix when you're over there. What do we have this expensive consultant for, if not for this? If necessary, get help from our rep in New York. Do you know him? His name is Rudloff and he knows how to wield influence. Do you understand what this is all about? "

Schreiner nodded. More than anything else he understood that the president was a man who knew exactly what he wanted. Much unlike himself. In research he was very target-oriented. But what he wanted to achieve in life he had yet to decide. Schreiner didn't live, he was controlled like a puppet.

The president went on.

"And then you immediately write a report about the positive outlook of the project. But please don't forget: write it simple enough so the lawyers on the administrative board can understand it as well. Even if the DOE says yes, we will still have to make further contributions. Oh and could you please do me a favor? Pay a courtesy visit to John Frost, he is an important partner. I was told you know him. Bring an expensive flower bouquet for his wife on my behalf. She used to be a very attractive woman in her day. Good luck, Schreiner, and don't disappoint me. For your own good. I will not tolerate failure for this project. If this assessment goes awry, I am not sure if we could keep

you in our research department, you have to bear that in mind.”

Schreiner felt a wave of protest building up in his mind. But before he was ready to unload, the president had already dismissed him. As he walked across the busy plant site to the research pavilions, he was still dazed from his meeting with the man who had the power to turn corporate affairs into a personal matter for Schreiner with little more than a few words. Before he entered the laboratory, he turned around and took another look at the glass tower which rose darkly in the hazy skies.

This morning he felt isolated in an unusual way. The president’s threat had pulled the rug from under his feet and put him in an uneasy state of limbo. It had torn the thread which had – until now – lead from his past to his future undisturbedly. In this mental state Schreiner wouldn’t have been capable of making an appointment with Professor Franzotti. Good thing he had called the meeting yesterday. Reluctantly though. The professor usually bored him to death. He was performing complicated calculations on behalf of Alcoswiss. Schreiner believed that Franzotti should have come with him to defend his work himself, particularly since it was so hard to explain. But yesterday, when they were talking on the phone, the professor had laughed him off: “Oh no son, I’m simply too old for such a long flight!”

It was a cool and grey November morning. The clouds were hanging low in the sky and it was raining nonstop. The physics lab at the university was well-lit, even though there was no soul to be found in the hallways. Only the muffled and monotonous buzzing of some machines broke the silence.

“Come on in. Come on in.” Franzotti was standing

in the doorway to his office, grabbed Schreiner's arm and pulled him into his room. "My assistant is here too. We'll order coffee in a second. You'll have a cup, while we'll show you the results, no? They are interesting – highly interesting! I hope your company is going to be satisfied, even though I have to admit they don't look particularly promising. But in the end we are getting paid to deliver correct results, not pretty ones."

Heaps of computer outputs and diagrams were piled up on the desk. Franzotti began to leaf through them nervously, pointing out a statistical series here and a chart there. The assistant sat there and remained silent. The calculations were his work. Finally the young man was allowed to answer Schreiner's questions. He did so gratefully, and Schreiner could tell he was eager to come into his own.

"And what do you think about the overall project?" Schreiner finally asked him.

Franzotti did not give his assistant a chance to answer.

"Well, at the current stage I don't want to commit myself to anything yet. I'm not one of those scientists who go peddling their preliminary findings. We have to intensify our studies. This being said – I hope your company is going to extend our consulting contract. Let's say the chances are not overwhelmingly high, but the novelty of this idea justifies the effort. Yes, yes. You may quote me on this." He nodded eagerly. "Oh and by the way – may I ask you a favor? Years ago when I was stateside I bought some radio equipment. Now I need a spare part, but ordering it from here is expensive and quite complicated. Please be a sport and get me this thing, will you? Here is the description of the part and the address of the store, which by chance is

close to where you have to go anyway." He took a sip from his coffee. "And now let us all hope for a favorable assessment of the project."

Franzotti shook Schreiner's hand enthusiastically, he hardly wanted to stop. Schreiner was relieved when the professor finally let go of his fingers.

He drove home.

Reluctant to go on the trip at all he had put off packing his bag until now. He always tended to wait until the last minute to do so. Now he did it in a minimum of time by throwing the open suitcase on his bed and, retracing every step he took in the morning, he threw everything he needed in there. Because of this and like methods, Anna used to call him a systematic person (she would list how complicated he prepared a pot of tea, how he shaved meticulously, one area of skin at a time, or how he sorted the records chronologically as opposed to the rest of the family who put them on the shelf so carelessly). He was not entirely sure if she meant it approvingly. Sometimes he rather believed to sense a mocking undertone in her remarks.

He also packed the murder mystery from his nightstand. Schreiner used to read murder mysteries. He remembered that last night Anna had once again asked him to finally read something sensible. First he didn't know what to say. Then he thought about it and came to the conclusion that the world was downright infested by subtle crime, and realized how much he enjoyed the idea that at least in literature law and order prevailed. Moreover, as a scientist he was interested in the process of investigation.

"Admit it, there is no human constellation that's not worth investigating. If you find too little or too much information the process becomes challenging. Proving guilt and finding a verdict is always uncertain and

influenced by external circumstances. Just think about the assessment that's awaiting me."

Anna had laughed. She had shaken her head and gone to the kitchen.

He closed his suitcase which was badly scratched from frequent use. The older he got the less he appreciated these trips. The thrill of traveling the world was long gone. He was weary of Boston, Los Angeles, Oxford and more recently of cities like Tokyo and Seoul. When he had too many trips his family would start to complain.

He had said his goodbyes in the early morning. Anna – who had accepted a position as librarian two years ago – had left for work, his daughter for her lectures at university and his son for grammar school. A perfectly normal day.

It rarely ever happened that he got to be alone in their apartment in the morning, exposed to an unfamiliar silence. A soft light was shining through the sheer drapes. Suddenly all the objects seemed to be set up in a certain hidden order. Today the familiar scene appeared as strange to him as the reality of a theater stage. As he looked around he saw lots of entertainment electronics; a shelf with about two hundred records; bookshelves with approximately six hundred books. Almost intellectual. According to statistics, the average Swiss reader hardly ever owned more than a hundred books, as Anna used to point out. She had picked the books and of course read them all. His murder mysteries were exiled to the hallway, next to the bathroom door. He looked at several artisan handicrafts they had bought on various occasions; exotic plants; the saxophone that belonged to his son David. It stood in a metal stand, ready to be played. The temperature in the apartment was cozy.

Suddenly his life appeared to be complicated and diverse, anything but simple. Actually too complicated and diverse. What was it good for? The scholars of the ancient world supposedly carried all their possessions with them. Schreiner would have to leave all this behind if his plane was hit by a bomb, or he was shot in the streets while he was in the US. These days, like it or not, one had to consider things like that. People's fears were driven by the daily news broadcasts. There was nothing he could do. Everybody was exposed to this.

He called a cab and picked up his luggage. I'll be back in two weeks, he told himself, as he locked the door.

The plane to New York, a huge bird without a beak, took off on time. With gentle vibrations it slowly plowed through the thick white clouds and emerged into the timeless, silvery light of the morning sky.

After they had reached cruising altitude, a meal was served. Schreiner wasn't really hungry, but he decided to take the tray anyway. At least the elaborate choice of portion packs would allow him to pass some time. Particularly since overseas flights meant little more to him than a few hours of detention.

Rationally seen, the differences between a ten hour transatlantic flight and ten hours in police custody in a packed detention cell were few. Why then was it perceived to be fundamentally different? Because people's conceptions of the world were centered around themselves. Because they didn't look at things from the outside, but had to view them through the filter of their emotions and experiences. This fact was the reason for all misunderstandings.

He imagined how Anna looked at him with a cheerful wink, provocatively asking him how he envisioned that. Whether he denied the possibility of human

communication. Not quite, he would reply. But people are influenced by the constellations on the stage of existence, no matter if those are permanent or temporary. From that point of view they judge everything, and within their very own reality they are all correct. It's about recognizing the threads between what people believe and the lives they actually have to live.

Did he thus understand people? Or were there deeper motivations that were hidden behind those realities? They would have to be as elementary as the forces of physics, and he could only assume for them to be something like the seven deadly sins powerfully driving the people.

The plane plowed through the sky with consistently booming engines. Schreiner looked out the window. His view was obscured by a thin veil of ice clouds. Perfectly amorphous. The connection to the real world was severed.

He picked up a technical report he had taken on his trip in order to reduce the irksome pile on his desk, but he couldn't focus. Sentences like "the spallation neutron source for the study of condensed matter was designed as an interesting new development in the field of neutron sources without nuclear chain reaction, since an increase in the cyclotron's proton beam current was planned anyway" refused to sink into his consciousness.

He leaned back in his seat and ordered a drink. He thought about the days to come. And the president's threat. And about returning to a past he had not cast his mind back to for a long time. When the project had just started, he had worked in the Princeton lab for two years on behalf of Alcoswiss. He remembered now that he had never been welcome there. What awaited him? It was about his future. Nonsense! It made no sense to

agonize about the situation in advance. He dozed off.

It was about 6 p.m. CET as the plane flew over Newfoundland. But his perception of time had lost its bindingness. He saw himself floating between the time on his watch (as well as his biological clock) and the time outside the plane, defined by the glistening light of the early afternoon. The descent was initiated, and a friendly female voice asked the passengers to fasten their seatbelts.

Schreiner could see the historic bay north of Cape Cod where the Mayflower had once touched the shore, as well as the silvery channel that separated Cape Cod from the mainland. A little later he spotted the huge bridges crossing Narragansett Bay. The human ant colony far below him tirelessly kept building shortcuts. In a reality which was subject to the laws of economy, mountains were pierced and waters were bridged in order to build the most direct route from point A to point B. In countless other realities, ruled by rituals that rooted people, the preferred route to a destination rarely used to be the direct one.

Schreiner recognized the landscape that was flying by underneath him. He suddenly remembered a weekend in October, when after a long rainy season the weather had changed overnight: the Saturday morning had been bright and clear with a mood in the air that made him suggest to Anna and the children, over breakfast at the sunlit kitchen table, to take a ride along the coast up north. Just like that, unplanned, a bit daring. And ironically it had been the children who had refused to come along.

“Sorry Dad, forget it. We’re invited to that awesome party. You’ll never believe how many girls envy me for that! And David simply has to come since there’s going to be a table tennis tournament. And actually,

Dad, I have to say that we are fundamentally opposed to those senseless weekend rides. They are a waste of time and gas!" declared Ruth. And David, swept away by his older sister, supported her unconditionally. Schreiner had accepted it and left alone with Anna.

The interstate in the inland cut through forests, glowing brightly in all shades of red; sometimes past ancient ridges, formed an eternity ago by fire and earth, ablated by water and air ever since. The countryside outside of the human settlements seemed untouched. Schreiner, driving his Pontiac with the powerful engine, enjoyed the ride with only little traffic.

At dusk they rode towards the bluish light of the coast and found a small harbor town with pretty whitewashed houses.

"You are our only guests", the elderly landlady of the bed and breakfast told them in her living room that doubled as her office. The building was perched on a cliff overlooking the ocean. "It's going to be a cold starry night, you better take these", she said, and handed them extra blankets.

Schreiner remembered that the situation had touched him in a peculiar way. As if he had entered a different world. This town had been bare of any hustle and bustle. Here time seemed to be running slowly and occasionally it even stopped. The style of the wooden houses lining the harbor was timeless. For centuries the clear, fresh salty smell of the ocean had mixed with the smoke of the fires in the old wood-burning stoves in the evenings. Locals stood around and chatted with each other. There were no cars on the road. The chipped tarmac had sandy potholes with bunches of yellowish, robust grass. With frayed edges it transitioned into sandy walkways. If you looked closely, you could see the paint flaking off the houses and the snags in the

screen doors. But this kind of neglect was not a sign of poverty, much rather a sign of contentment. A modest life, as genuine as the names the Native American population had left behind.

The only restaurant in town was the "Fishmonger's Café". The name was written in colorful letters on a reclaimed plank above the entrance. Inside, they were served a simple, tasty meal of stewed halibut at a rustic wooden table. When they left the restaurant, night had fallen. Above them, the sky was starlit. Faint reflections glistened on the calm ocean surface. The coastline faded into the night. Above the town the beacon of the lighthouse flashed into the darkness.

Aboard an airliner of the latest design on an airway leading directly from one economic area to another, Schreiner vividly remembered the scene. Something in his life had gone terribly wrong. Now he was one of those people whose everyday life was nothing but a frenzy of hectic activity with the sole purpose of continuously implementing apparently world-shaking plans.

Through the window he watched as the plane dove through the clouds towards Long Island and touched down. The air in New York was very cold and dry which made the inside of his nose tingle. After a short wait the shuttle bus to his car rental picked him up. The black driver wore a bulky cap and greeted him with the typical welcoming American smile. Singing gospels with his booming voice he dropped him off in the parking lot. During the ride Schreiner had watched his suitcase sliding around on the luggage platform. Is it going to fall over or will it remain standing? Subject to the forces of inertia, just like its owner.

Less than an hour after he had arrived he left the parking lot. They had given him a Mustang. In a way

the name was befitting the untamed power of the big block engine. He started to perceive the reality of the foreign country to be intrusive. Heavy traffic on the Belt Parkway. All these people had some task to fulfill, tiny cogs in that subtle, all-encompassing machinery that had replaced God. He drove along the marshy coast of Jamaica Bay, lined with reeds, and passed the red brick buildings of southern Brooklyn. He crossed Verrazano Bridge, cut through Staten Island and finally took the I-95 south.

He knew the route, but today he experienced the enormous infrastructure concentrated in the area through the lens of a film camera. He deliberated that the millions of tons of concrete and steel used to build bridges, high rises and twelve-lane highways required gigantic gravel quarries, cement works and steel mills somewhere, bearing witness of human over-production craze. People seemed to be addicted to multiplication, and where they couldn't produce goods, they procreated. There had to be a fundamental predisposition that didn't allow contentment.

The program on the radio set by his predecessor spread good mood and a feeling of lightheartedness. After he had been driving for a while, the countryside around him started looking like a park as he approached Princeton, the actual destination of his journey. He stopped in front of the Woodland Inn motel, where the company's travel agency had booked him a room. The name had nothing to do with reality. On one side of the building there was merely a tiny grove, and a few leafless ornamental trees were scattered across the premises.

His room was on the first floor on the back side of the building. Schreiner marveled at the narrow staircase that made him repeatedly hit the walls with his

suitcase. He had grown accustomed to a spacious life, where he never bumped into anything. From upstairs, he surveyed the swimming pool that had been drained for the winter and where garbage and leaves accumulated, adjacent to a development with cookie cutter brick houses; behind it the idyll of a formerly navigable canal, lined with willows, which the Princeton oarsmen now used for their practice.

In the room he dropped his luggage on one of the two queen-size beds and took a shower. On the outside, the lukewarm water tingled pleasantly on his skin. On the inside though, the anticipation of his return was tingling in his heart. In this mood he took the short ride to the lab of CERO.

Schreiner had been at Feininger's cramped office in Manhattan when the former Alcoswiss representative had rented this vast, empty factory site on the outskirts of Princeton. He had been part of the president's entourage, who had come to New York just to sign the CERO contract. The president had been convinced that the CERO project could be marketed with a huge profit in no time. Its inventor, he said, was a true trailblazer, to be mentioned in the same breath as Edison, whose genius had spawned General Electric. This is how Schönholzer had announced it to his research department, and some of the younger scientists, easily impressed, had nodded enthusiastically.

Schreiner was chosen to join the project for Alcoswiss. He had been delighted about the new challenge and eagerly willing to help prove the skeptics wrong. CERO had been launched by a busy physics professor named Bomolkin. He claimed he would be able to develop a plant for energy production based on his revolutionary ideas and have it ready for its commercial launch within less than twenty-four months

with little money – he'd only need a couple of million dollars, a fraction of the American research budget. But he did not succeed in convincing his university of the importance or validity of these ideas. His rich wife believed in him, as well as a dozen enthusiastic assistants. So he took his entourage and left the campus as soon as he had found a financially strong partner: Alcoswiss.

Finally the project turned out to be going down the same rocky road as the entire energy research: the path to the final goal got longer with each step they took. Twenty-four months later he had used up the Alcoswiss budget with no result in sight. A check over a million dollars, presented to an excited and sweat-drenched Bomolkin by a young, smugly smiling Arabian prince accompanied by a decorative blonde, allowed him two more years. But later the prince refused to increase his funding, since his extravagance had over time been neutralized by suspicion, as one of the Alcoswiss directors had complained bitterly. Then, at last, the American authorities had agreed to consider CERO's application to support the promising project with a fifty million dollar grant.

Shortly after five, Schreiner arrived at the lab. It was past working hours, but the company parking lot was still half full. Just like back in his day. At the end of the day the young scientists used to meet up in the conference room. Their discussions always revolved around the same topic: money.

"If only they agreed to give us a fraction of the annual budget they use to subsidize wheat exports ..."

"Or the equivalent of one fighter jet."

"But no, the research budget goes to universities and government labs."

"As always, the established institutions are preferred."

"Just think about what they spend on nuclear reactors, while we, who use solar energy, are left empty-handed."

"At least the Professor has another meeting with the governor. I'm sure this time he'll get something."

"Maybe. I've heard that Congress is getting more inclined to sponsor innovative projects like ours."

"That would make sense. If they wait until the next oil crisis, it will certainly be too late."

"Yes, time is working in our favor. We only have to survive these hard times."

"If only we could get the industry to engage more!"

"But not by making them majority stockholders."

"The Professor would never accept that."

"Certainly not, he's pretty smart when it comes to business matters."

"But his scientific reputation has suffered."

"Yeah well, you know university professors are hostile towards anything that exudes success."

"This too will change. The list of renowned scientists working as consultants for us looks quite impressive now."

"It's expensive, but it will pay off."

Schreiner entered the lab building and met Pete, the company chauffeur. He disliked running into him but scolded himself immediately. The old man's talkativeness was unbearable, but he had always been very helpful. Years ago, when Schreiner had just arrived here with his family to join the project, CERO had assigned Pete to them for a week. He had driven them around in the old, gas-guzzling company limousine and enthusiastically pointed out all the great spots for unbeatable bargain shopping. Including the cheapest auto insurance – which filed for chapter 11 within a year though.

Pete wanted to involve Schreiner in a chat.

“Great to have you back. That’s what I said when Miss Knittel told me. You won’t believe how much everything has changed here. The mall down the road just opened. It’s the biggest and nicest of the region. You definitely should go there. Oh, and the lab has changed too. We just got new rooms. If you want, I can show you around. I have the keys.”

“Thank you Pete, I’ll be happy to take a tour with you, but now I have to see the director.”

Upon mention of Bomolkin, Pete stepped aside.

The director’s office was a huge, airy room with a massive desk, a matching conference table, cheap shelves and an old-fashioned drawing board with the latest blueprints of Bomolkin’s machine.

Although fundamentally different in appearance – Franzotti was a beefy, white-haired man with rosy cheeks and shabby clothes while Bomolkin was suntanned, meticulously coiffed, manicured and elegantly dressed – Bomolkin welcomed Schreiner in a similar way Professor Franzotti had greeted him in the morning.

“Come on in, come on in. We’re so glad to have you here. It’s excellent, quite excellent. You will be a great help preparing the assessment. I have already told your president. And of course we’re looking forward to seeing Professor Franzotti’s results. You have to discuss them with Finn and Dowley right away.”

A warm welcome which, without any doubt, was meant less for Schreiner than for the powerful company that he represented. Schreiner mumbled his answer, but Bomolkin, taking refuge behind his huge desk, went on regardless.

“You know, I’m very optimistic. Their panel of experts is quite neutral. They even avoided picking one

of our old enemies from Princeton University over a man who is quite benevolent towards me. So nothing can go wrong. I mean, our project has to convince any unbiased scientist. But what am I telling you here? You're a brilliant scientist yourself and believe in our project!"

Schreiner wanted to reply that the battle was not yet won, but Bomolkin had already changed the topic.

"Have you heard about the new solar reflectors yet? No? You should have! They just released a communiqué in L.A. Quite fantastic light collection! Tomorrow you should calculate if that could be of use for us. You should team up with Libell. He has advanced your old calculations. Have you been able to make any progress in Switzerland? Why don't you fly to L.A. after the assessment to have a look at the thing? We could reorganize your trip right away. Just let Miss Knittel know when you're leaving."

Schreiner wanted to object that he had to travel back as planned, since the president was awaiting his report, but Bomolkin once again did not give him the chance to speak. He kept building an impenetrable barrier between them, a tough web of linguistic subtleties. Schreiner didn't feel like interrupting Bomolkin to break down this wall. He could just as easily hide behind it himself. To his relief the phone rang. It was a long distance call from California.

"You can listen in", said Bomolkin. "This is Jack Humber. He is going to get at the experts on the West Coast just as you're going to do it here – at least that's what the president told me ... Jack? How are you? Adam Schreiner is here right now. Have you had a chance to give any of those people a proper talking to? No? But at least scheduled meetings. Well then. Jack, I think our strategy should be based on three elements.

First: we use solar energy. Second: the established labs have been villainizing our project, because they don't tolerate anybody else and want all the research money for themselves. Third: the industry has shown huge interest in our project and wants the government to support it at this early stage. This is what I have discussed with the president of Alcoswiss. All right Jack. Go ahead now, good luck. – Well, Adam, you heard everything. I don't want to keep you any longer."

With a massive sigh of relief, Schreiner left the room. He knew that influencing the experts on assessment panels was a common thing, but he felt it was a breach of the rules. Bomolkin had just reminded him that he was also involved in this process, and it had left a nasty taste in his mouth.

Eula Knittel's office was right next to Bomolkin's. Her first name revealed her Midwestern origin. Eula was the head of administration at CERO and had been able to make her dream career come true here, as she had once told Schreiner with a blissful smile. Now she was the undisputed police chief of the operation. She was skinny, of indeterminable age. Eula in turn had her own favorite, a short, overweight assistant, who crept through the hallways, always listening, always eager to report to her master immediately when the cleaning lady had overlooked a half empty wastebasket.

Eula looked out her door curiously, and Schreiner waved at her while quickening his pace. He kept walking. To his left were the chaotic offices of the experimenters. To the right was the control room, a thicket of support-frames with control and measuring devices and cables that hung from the ceiling like vines; they led through wall slots to the machine that was the center of the whole operation and was always kept behind closed doors.

Then the conference room with a long table and a number of rows of chairs. Along the walls stood shelves with worn manuals and tattered journals. Schreiner had learned a long time ago that labs of the size of CERO were organized the same way worldwide. And they were all just as enthusiastic and convinced to be the best. That must have been the reason for the golden words on one of the walls: WE WILL LIGHT THE STARS FOR YOU ON EARTH. Schreiner was certain that he had heard this before. This motto had given CERO its name: it stood for Cosmic Energy Research Organization.

In this conference room he had attended so many tedious lectures and alcohol-drenched company parties. But first and foremost the weekly info-meetings everybody had to attend and that started every Wednesday at 1 p.m. with somber seriousness. The three dozen employees used to wait dutifully until the director arrived and sat down at the table. First he would scrutinize everybody with an authoritarian look on his face, then he would curtly announce his latest decision. First the appointments. The bells jingled – so Schreiner imagined –, the lucky one ascended the stairs, at the top of which Bomolkin would be waiting with the certificate of appointment while at the bottom a choir dressed in white robes would sing “this is a promotion”. Bomolkin loved to invent new, important-sounding functions – coordinators responsible for this and that.

Then he would address finances.

“Wall Street seems to be interested in us, folks! That doesn’t surprise me. Money is available in abundance out there, but what’s missing are really good investment opportunities! This brings us in the spotlight. So, hold on guys, you won’t regret it.”

Upon successful completion of an experiment,

sometimes Bomolkin had Eula serve champagne. Skinny Eula and her chubby assistant would float into the room with slightly condescending smiles and fill the glasses.

Whenever work seemed to be tough and malfunctions became more frequent, Bomolkin was livid. His audience ducked in their seats, while the director was ranting, complaining about poor performance, threatening everybody with pay cuts and waving pink slips in their faces, imposing "final deadlines" on those responsible.

Tonight Schreiner found Garding, Mannick, Libell and Sorbazzi in the conference room. As he entered, their mood brightened and they looked at him with unexpectedly friendly faces.

"Well hello! Adam is back. And he has certainly brought something for us", Sorbazzi exclaimed.

"Why would he bring you anything? You can tinker with your machine, that's enough. Franzotti's calculations are for us", said Libell, as Garding grabbed Schreiner's arm and said: "Look, Adam, you'll hardly recognize this guy. It's John Mannick. He has grown a beard to impress Miss Knittel."

Laughter.

"A glorious beard, John, but that's hopefully not the only progress you have to show me", Schreiner said.

"How could you ever think of us like that, Adam?" Libell cried with feigned indignation. He scurried to the blackboard and immediately began to outline the results of the past months.

Schreiner saw that they had made little progress and summarized Professor Franzotti's calculations until Mannick interrupted him.

"This can't be, Adam. The fuel density is much too low. Uh, are you sure Franzotti's calculations are

correct? We'll definitely have to take a closer look."

But Schreiner did not engage in the discussion. In Switzerland it was past midnight. He felt tired and impatient at the same time. He quickly said goodbye and drove back to the Woodland. In the evening rush hour traffic, he queued up in a seemingly endless stream of red tail lights that crept from one traffic light to the next.

He didn't feel like having dinner. Instead, he went to the bar and ordered a Whiskey Sour, silently acknowledged by the bartender with a quick nod. Countless loud guests crowded the bar for pre-dinner cocktails. He stood by himself, surrounded by a bunch of happily interacting people multiplied by the mirrors on the walls. When they finally went to the restaurant for dinner, and the bar was suddenly empty, he stepped into the night through the foyer. It had cooled down noticeably.

His room was cool, too. An icy draft came through the gap under the door. He turned the heater on max, and when he realized that the weak, lukewarm stream of air coming from the AC unit by the door didn't help much, he pulled the extra blanket from the closet next to the bathroom and went to sleep.