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It seemed to be a very low island although, for me, the problems of estimating dimensions were very real.

The entire procedure, already described, was repeated. We stopped above the coast and, this time, four spheres left the spacecraft and descended to the island. On the panel I could see a beach which the camera was scanning.

On the water's edge lay what looked like thick slabs, around which were gathered naked men - the same kind we had seen earlier. They didn't appear to have noticed the sphere and I assumed that this time, it was at a much higher altitude, in spite of the ever closing images we were receiving.

On the panel, we could now see the men carrying one of the slabs into the waves. It floated, as if made of cork. The men hoisted themselves up on to it, grabbed large oars that they handled skilfully and the boat took to the open sea. When they were a good distance from the shore, they threw out fishing lines and, to my surprise, almost immediately, pulled up fish of what seemed a respectable size.

It was quite fascinating to see how these men were surviving, and to be capable of helping them, as if we were gods.

I had released myself from the force field, wanting to go and study the other screens that were receiving different images. Just as I was about to venture from my seat, I received an order, *wit hout hearing a sound*: 'Stay where you are, Michel.' I was stupefied. It was as if the voice was inside my head. I turned my head in Thao's direction and she was smiling at me. I decided to try something, and thought

as hard as I could, 'Telepathy is great, isn't it Thao?'

'Of course,' she replied in the same manner.

'It's wonderful! Can you tell me what the temperature is down there at the moment?'

She checked the data at her desk. 'Twenty eight of your degrees Celsius. By day, the average temperature is thirty eight degrees.'

I said to myself if I was deaf and mute, I could communicate with Thao quite as easily as I can with the spoken word.

'Exactly, my dear.'

I looked at Thao with some surprise. I had been making a personal reflection and yet she had intercepted my thoughts. I was a little put out by this.

She gave me a wide smile. 'Don't worry, Michel. I was merely being playful and I ask that you forgive me.'

'Normally, I only read your thoughts when you ask me a question. I just wanted to demonstrate what is possible in this domain; I won't do it again.'

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I returned her smile and redirected my attention to the panel. There I could see a sphere on the beach, very close to a group of men who didn't seem to notice it. This sphere was removing sand samples from a spot about ten metres from the group. By telepathy, I asked Thao why these people were unable to see the machine.

'It's night,' she answered.

'Night? But how is it that we can see things so clearly?'

'Special cameras, Michel - something like your infra-reds.'

Now I better understood why the images received were less 'luminous' than on our preceding stops. However, the close-ups were excellent. Just then, on the panel, we had a shot of a face apparently that of a female. It was really horrible. The poor creature had an enormous gash where her left eye should have been. Her mouth was positioned to the right of her face and appeared as a tiny little opening in the middle of her jaw, around which were lips that seemed fused together. On the top of her head, a single tuft of hair hung pitifully.

We could now see her breasts, and very pretty they would have been, if one of them hadn't had a purulent wound on the side.

'With breasts like that she must be young?' I asked.

'The computer puts the age at 19 years.'

'Radiation?'

'Of course.'

Other people appeared, some of whom were perfectly normal looking. There were males among them, with an athletic build, who looked to be in their twenties.

'What is the age of the oldest? Do you know?'

'At present, we have no record of anyone older than 38 years, and a year on this planet is 295 days of 27 hours. Now, if you look at the screen, you can see a close-up of the genital area of that handsome and athletic young man. As you will note, the genitals are totally atrophied. We've already worked out, from previous expeditions, that there are very few men actually capable of procreation - and yet, there are great numbers of children. It's the survival instinct of all races to reproduce as soon as possible. Thus, the obvious solution would be that the males capable of reproduction are 'studs'. This man must be one of them, I think.'

Indeed, the camera was showing a man of about 30 years perhaps, possessing physical attributes certainly capable of producing offspring.

We were also able to see many children coming and going around small fires on which food was cooking.

The men and women seated around the fireplaces were taking cooked pieces and sharing them with the children. The fires seemed like wood fires, but I couldn't be sure. They were fuelled by something shaped rather like stones.

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Behind the fires, slabs similar to the boats seen earlier, were piled and assembled so as to form shelters that looked quite comfortable.

In the camera's field of vision, no trees could be seen - perhaps they did exist, because I had noticed green patches earlier as we flew over the continent.

From between two huts, some little black pigs appeared, pursued by three furious yellow dogs, only to disappear rapidly behind another hut. I was dumbfounded and couldn't help but wonder if I really was looking down on another planet. These humans looked like me - or rather, like Polynesians - and here were dogs and pigs. It was all more and more surprising...

The sphere began to return, as did the other spheres no doubt, that were being monitored by screens I couldn't easily see from my position. The operation 'return to ship' was initiated, and all the spheres 'reabsorbed' without incident, the same as before.

I assumed we were about to leave again and so installed myself comfortably in my seat, allowing the force field to restrain me thus.

Some moments later, the suns of the planet appeared, two in number, then everything dwindled rapidly, just as it had done when we left Earth. After a time, which seemed quite short, the force field was neutralised and I understood that I was free to get out of my seat. This was a good feeling. I noticed Thao heading towards me accompanied by two of the 'oldest', if I can say so, of her companions. I remained standing beside my seat before the three astronauts.

In order to look at Thao, I was already obliged to raise my head, but when she introduced me, in French, to the 'elder' of them, I felt even smaller. The latter was easily a head taller than Thao.

I was completely astonished when she, Biastra, spoke to me correctly, although slowly, in French. She placed her right hand on my shoulder, saying,

'I am delighted to have you on board, Michel. I hope that all is well with you and that it continues to be so. May I present Latoli, the second-in-charge of our spacecraft, myself being what you would call 'Commander-in-Chief of the *Alatora*.'¹

Turning to Latoli, she spoke a few words in her own language and Latoli too, placed her hand on my shoulder. With a warm smile, she repeated my name several times slowly, as would someone who had difficulty pronouncing a new language.

Her hand remained on my shoulder and a feeling of well-being, a definite fluid sensation, passed through my body.

1) *Alatora*, in their language, is the name given to their super long-distance spacecraft.

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I was so obviously overcome by this, that the three of them began to laugh. Reading my thoughts, Thao reassured me.

'Michel, Latoli possesses a special gift, although not rare among our people. What you have been able to experience, is a fluid which is magnetic and beneficial, and which emanated from her.'

'It's wonderful!' I exclaimed. 'Please compliment her on my behalf¹.' I then addressed the two astronauts. 'Thank you for your welcome, but I must confess I am absolutely astounded by what is happening to me. It really is the most incredible adventure for an Earthling such as me. Although I have always believed in the possibility that other planets might be inhabited by human-like beings, I'm still having a hard time convincing myself that this is not a fantastic dream.'

'I had often discussed things such as telepathy, extra-terrestrials and what we call 'flying saucers' with friends on Earth, but they were just words and grand phrases uttered in ignorance. Now I have the proof of what I had suspected for so long regarding the existence of parallel universes, the duality of our beings, and other unexplained occurrences. To experience all that I have in these last few hours is so exciting it takes my breath away.

Latoli, admiring my monologue, uttered an exclamation, in words I didn't understand but which Thao immediately translated for me.

'Latoli understands your state of mind perfectly well, Michel.' 'As do I,' added Biastra.

'How could she have understood what I said?'

'She has 'dipped' telepathically into your mind while you were speaking. As you must realise, telepathy is not hindered by language barriers.'

My astonishment amused them and perpetual smiles played on their lips. Biastra addressed me.

'Michel, I am going to introduce you to the rest of the crew, if you will kindly follow me.' She guided me, by the shoulder, to the furthest desk, where three astronauts were monitoring the instruments. I hadn't yet approached these desks and, even in Astral body, I had not paid any attention to the read-out of these computers. The glance I now gave them immobilised me completely. The numerals before my eyes were in *Arabic!* I know the reader will be as surprised as I was, but it was fact. The 1s, 2s, 3s 4s etc. appearing on the monitors, were the same numerals that occur on Earth.

Biastra noticed my astonishment. 'It is true, isn't it Michel, for you there is one surprise after another. Don't think we are having fun at your expense, as we totally understand your wonder. All will fall into place in good time. For the moment please allow me to introduce Naola.'

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The first of the astronauts rose and turned towards me. She placed her hand on my shoulder, as Biastra and Latoli had done. It occurred to me that this gesture must correspond to our handshake. Naola addressed me in her own language and then she, too, repeated my name three times, as if she wanted to commit it to memory forever. She was about the same size as Thao.

The same ceremony followed each time I was introduced, and thus I officially made the acquaintance of all the members of the crew. There was a striking resemblance between them. Their hair, for example, varied only in length and shade, which ranged from a dark copper to a light golden-blond. Some had longer or broader noses than others, but all had eyes of a colour which tended towards light rather than dark, and all had very neat, well-shaped ears.

Latoli, Biastra and Thao invited me to sit down in one of the comfortable seats.

When we were all comfortably installed, Biastra moved her hand in a particular way near the armrest of her seat and I saw coming towards us, *floating* in the air - four round trays. Each carried a container of yellowish liquid and a bowl of something whitish with a consistency similar to fairy-floss but in granulated form. Flat 'tongs' served as forks. The trays came to rest on the arms of our seats.

I was quite intrigued. Thao suggested, if I wished to partake of this refreshment, I might like to follow her lead. She sipped from her 'glass' and I did likewise, finding it quite a pleasant-tasting drink, similar to a water-honey mixture. My companions used the 'tongs' to eat the mixture in the bowls. Following their example, I tasted for the first time what we, on Earth, called 'manna'. Similar to bread, it is however, extremely light and without any particular flavour. I had eaten only half the amount in my bowl when already, I felt satisfied, which surprised me considering the consistency of this food. I finished my drink and, although I couldn't say I'd dined in fine style, I experienced a sense of well-being and was neither hungry nor thirsty.

'Perhaps you would have preferred a French dish, Michel?' asked Thao, a smile twitching on her lips.

I merely smiled, but Biastra snorted.

Just then, a signal drew our attention to the panel. In the centre, and in close-up, appeared the head of a woman, resembling my hostesses. She spoke rapidly. My companions turned slightly in their seats to better attend to what was being said. Naola, at her desk, entered into a dialogue with the figure on the screen, just as our television interviewers do on Earth. Imperceptibly, the shot changed from the close-up to a wide angle, revealing a dozen women each in front of a desk.

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Thao took me by the shoulder and guided me over to Naola, installing me in a seat in front of one of the screens. She took a seat next to me and addressed the people on the monitor. She spoke for some time, rapidly, in her melodious voice, turning frequently towards me. From all evidence, I was the main topic of conversation.

When she had finished, the woman re-appeared in close-up, responding in several brief sentences. To my great surprise, her eyes fixed on me and she smiled. 'Hello Michel, we wish you a safe arrival on Thiaoouba.'

She waited for my reply. When I had overcome my surprise, I expressed warm thanks. This, in turn, elicited exclamations and numerous comments from her companions, appearing again in a wide-angle shot on the screen.

'Did they understand?' I asked Thao.

'Telepathically yes, but they are delighted to hear someone from another planet speak his own language. For most of them, this is quite a rare experience.'

Excusing herself, Thao re-addressed the screen and, what I assumed was a technical conversation, ensued, including Biastra. Eventually, after a smile in my direction and a 'see you soon', the picture was cut.

I say 'cut' because the screen did not simply become blank; rather, the image was replaced by a beautiful, soft colour - a mixture of green and indigo blue - which produced a sense of contentment. It gradually faded after a minute or so.

Turning to Thao, I asked what it had all meant - had we rendezvoused with another spacecraft and what was this Thiaba or Thiaoula..?

'Thiaoouba, Michel, is the name we have given to our planet, just as you call yours 'Earth'. Our intergalactic base has been in touch with us, as we will be arriving in Thiaoouba in 16 of your Earth hours and 35 minutes.' This she had checked with a glance at the nearest computer.

'Those people then, are technicians on your planet?'

'Yes, as I just said, at our intergalactic base.'

'This base monitors our spacecraft continually and if we were in trouble for technical or human reasons, in eighty one per cent of cases, they would be able to control our safe return to port.'

This did not particularly surprise me as I had realised I was dealing with a superior race, whose technological possibilities were beyond my comprehension. What did occur to me was that, not only this spacecraft, but also the intergalactic base appeared to be manned by only women. An all female team such as this would be quite exceptional on Earth.

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I wondered if Thiaoouba was populated only by women ... like space Amazons. I smiled at the image. I have always preferred the company of women rather than men: it was quite a pleasant thought..!

My question to Thao was direct. 'Are you from a planet solely populated by women?'

She looked at me with apparent surprise, then her face lit up with amusement. I was a little concerned. Had I said something stupid? She took me by the shoulder and asked that I follow her. We left the control room and immediately entered a smaller room (called the *Haalis*) which had quite a relaxing ambience. Thao explained that we would not be interrupted in the room, since the occupants acquired, by their presence, the right to absolute privacy. She invited me to choose one of the many seats that furnished the room.

Some were like beds, some like armchairs, others resembled hammocks, while others again, were like high stools with adjustable backs. I would have been difficult to please if one of them did not suit my requirements.

Once settled comfortably in a kind of armchair with Thao facing me, I watched, as her face became serious again. She started to speak.

'Michel, there are no *women* aboard this spacecraft...'

If she had told me that I wasn't on a spaceship but rather, in the Australian desert, I would have more readily believed her. Seeing the expression of disbelief on my face, she added, 'neither are there any *men*.' At this, my confusion was absolute.

'But,' I faltered, 'you are - what? Just robots?'

'No, I think you misunderstand. In a word, Michel, we are hermaphrodites. You know, of course, what an hermaphrodite is?'

I nodded, quite dumbfounded, and then asked, 'Is your whole planet inhabited only by hermaphrodites?'

'Yes.'

'And yet your face and mannerisms are more feminine than masculine.'

'Indeed, it might appear so, but believe me when I tell you that we are not women, but hermaphrodites. Our race has always been this way.'

'I must confess, this is all very confusing. I'm going to find it difficult to think of you as 'he' rather than the 'she' I have done since I've been among you.'

'You have nothing to imagine, my dear. We are simply what we are: human beings from another planet living in a world different from yours. I can understand you would like to define us as one sex or the other, for you think as an Earthling and a Frenchman. Perhaps, for once, you could make use of the neuter gender of English and think of us as 'it'.'

I smiled at this suggestion but continued to feel disoriented. Only moments ago, I had believed myself to be among Amazons.

'But how can reproduction of your race occur?' I asked. 'Can an hermaphrodite reproduce?'

'Of course we can, exactly as you do on Earth; the only difference being that we genuinely control the births - but that is another story. In good time, you will understand, but now we should rejoin the others.'

We returned to the control post, and I found myself looking at these astronauts with new eyes. Looking at the chin of one, I found it to be more masculine than it had seemed earlier. Another's nose was decidedly masculine, and the hairstyles of some were now more manly. It occurred to me that we really do see people as we *think* they are and not as they *are*.

In order to feel less embarrassed among them, I created a rule for myself: I had taken them to be women, as to me they were more like females than males: thus I would continue to think of them as women and we'd see how that worked.

From where I was, I could follow, on the central panel, the movement of stars as we proceeded on our way. Sometimes they appeared enormous and blinding as we passed by a little too closely - a few million kilometres from them. At times too, we noticed planets of strange colours. I remember one was of an emerald green, so pure I was stunned. It resembled an enormous jewel.

Thao approached and I took advantage of the opportunity to ask her about a band of light that had appeared at the base of the screen. This light was composed of what looked like millions of tiny explosions.

'These are caused by our anti-matter guns, as you would call them on Earth, and are, in fact, explosions. At the speed at which we travel, the most minuscule of meteorites would shatter this spacecraft were we to hit it. So, we make use of specific rooms to store certain forms of dust under enormous pressure, and this is fed into our anti-matter guns. Our vessel could be considered to be a cosmotron, firing streams of accelerated particles that disintegrate the most microscopic of errant bodies in space, for great distances ahead and to the sides of our spacecraft. This is what allows us to attain speeds that we can. Around our vessel, we create

our own magnetic field...'

'Oh please, not so fast. As you know Thao, I have no scientific background and if you speak of cosmotrons and accelerated particles, you are going to lose me. I understand the principle, which is certainly very interesting, but I'm not good on technical terms. Can you tell me instead, why the planets on the screen are coloured the way they are?'

'Sometimes because of their atmospheres and sometimes because of the gases which surround them. Do you see a multicoloured point with a tail, at the right of the screen?' The 'thing' was approaching at high speed. Second by second we were better able to admire it.

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It seemed to explode constantly and change form, its colours indescribably rich. I looked at Thao.

'It's a comet,' she said. 'It completes a revolution around its sun in approximately 55 of your Earth years.'

'How far are we from it?'

She glanced at the computer: '4 150 000 kilometres.'

'Thao,' I said, 'How is it you use the numerals of Arabic? And when you speak of "kilometres", are you translating for me, or do you actually use this measure?'

'No. We count in Kato and Taki. We use the numerals that you recognise as Arabic, for the

simple reason that it is our own system - one which we took to Earth.'

'What? Please explain further.'

'Michel, we have several hours before arriving at Thiaoouba. This is probably the best time to start 'educating' you seriously on certain matters. If you don't mind, we'll go back to the Haalis, where we were before.'

I followed Thao, my curiosity stronger than ever.