Excerpts from the novel „Curiepolis – Volume 1: Annika“

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Intro

There is something strange about dream and waking. Occasionally – most happen to experience this as a small child only and forget about it in later life, some, like Annika, are capable of sensing it even when older – it happens, that Eerie Feeling, the scintillating, silent, floating sensation of strangeness, covering the world mantle-like, a separating layer between I and Object, which is invisble and mirage-like and extremely massive and lets one feel: The distinction between dream and reality is an artificial luxury, a practical myth for everyday life.

Over the Earth's Shadow

Alexa gave Annika a meaningful grin, raised her eyebrows: „We know a tiny bit more than just building some old breeder reactors and running them. What do you think?“

Annika's gaze wandered upwards, back to the bottom, slid back up again and came to rest on the pointed nose. Finally, she asked timidly: „What's its name?“

„Over the Rainbow!“ Alexa said loudly. „A so-called Shadow Jumper. Twelve gas-core engines, nuclear lightbulbs, they give us three thousand seconds of specific impulse! When one of these blasts off, you know you're going somewhere.“

Excitedly, Annika looked around for Dr. Korolyova. „Does this mean, we will... I will... now?“

„Ya. »As long as you still feel the stars as an „Above-You“, you still lack the eye of one who understands.« Nietzsche. In Curiepolis you shall become one who understands, Annika, so you must grow closer to the stars. A little shadow jump at first, above the Earth's shadow – these rockets pack enough Delta-Vee to take them, for example, from Earth's surface to the moon's, set down a thousand tons of payload and back into Low Earth Orbit: without refuelling once! – but we mainly use them for rapid point-to-point transit on Earth. Parabolic, two hundred fifty kiolmeters apogee, thirty minutes from France to Curiepolis. For lunar – translunar destinations we prefer to cut orbit to orbit with our large thermonuclear pulsating clippers.“

The airlock resembles a barrel, a huge wine cask (I have never been in one, but I imagine... it's something like this!), through the inner bulkhead, up a narrow ladder, Carmen's miniskirt shines ahead, so fly you flaming, you red plaited cloth – we are future's loyal fighters, we are the scientists of Curiepolis, strapped into acceleration couches, inside the Shadow Jumper's cylindrical windowless passenger cabin, radially around the datastormflickering monitorsaiced central column, the straps fasten themselves (memory-metal fibers, according to Dr. Korolyova), tight tight oh so tight, feels like these meddlesome blood-pressure-

thingies at the doctor's. The acceleration couch vibrates, I'm vibrating with it, the air my eyes vibrate, vibrate so tremendously to make everything roar! My body roars, shakes, my feet shake right in the shoes – I like my little boots, so nice and black and sturdy, the tiniest bit high-heeled, but robust, oh so robust! I like going cycling in them. Ah! „Mrs. Korolyova, what about my bike?“ „It's stowed away, don't worry.“ I wonder whether they have experience stowing bicycles in spaceships? Sure enough, the bike is now vibrating, too. Difficult to breathe when your own lung is roaring, just like the air you mean to inhale. Maybe I should take a nap, my eyelids are heave, terribly heavy. My little boots are heavy, it's probably difficult to stow a bicycle in a rocket so it won't tumble over when the rocket shakes quakes roars.

„Mrs. Korolyova... Alexa. Alexa, when will we take-off?“ „We broke the sound barrier half a minute ago. Just making for the tropopause.“

Claude Gagne, known to some as „Old Shatterhand“, bumped his head. The sink's drainpipe – where does one get the idea to repair this do-it-yourself-wise! Plumber's too expensive, wife says. So that's why I bumped my head. That old boozer – what's his name? Maybe Henri, Henri Lachase or something – he's asleep once again, or rather: has been sleeping until a moment ago, he's more or less awake now and stares unhappily at his almost empty wine glass. „Ssundrstorm, Mr. Innkeeper! Annudder Ssundrstorm!“ „I'll thunder your bones! This isn't a thunderstorm. That's the Curiepolis people on the energy embassy, they're behind this racket! Get up, if you can. Hobble after me. Let's have a look outside. To the street, the pavement, yeah lookit, there's other people looking. They're looking up, stop staring at your feet, old boozer. See? No thunderstorm at all. Just a few light clouds, that kind of faint whitish-gray cover with lots of sunshine beyond. Even more sunshine than usual, see?, there's a new sun. A rising sun, a tail of fire, glaringly bright, brighter than a welding torch, shield your eyes, you don't want to go blind, do you. The second sun punches a hole into the clouds, now it's above them, one can still see it as a bright moving spot beyond the clouds. There it goes, the second sun, up and away and gone to a world we can't imagine. That's what you get. Go on home, you've had enough to drink. I need to think.“ Claude Gagne, called Old Shatterhand, gave the boozer a push with his single arm, shooing him in the direction in which he suspected his home to be, stomped back into the inn, slammed the door shut and flipped the sign to read „Fermé“ from the outside.

The Shadow Jumper „Over the Rainbow“ ascended steeply above eastern France, riding on its tail of crsytalline-glowing hydrogen plasma supersonic lozenges – far too hot to react with the atmospheric oxygen to water: only one kilometer behind the rocket the oxyhydrogen reaction struck, created a secondary tangerine-red fan of flames trailing it – it gained momentum, increasing second by second by one hundred and ten kilometers per hour, after nine seconds, one point two kilometers above ground, the sonic boom barked, ringing out in Saarlouis as a muffled thump in the air, and scientists, unemployed people, engineers, doctors, teachers, industrial workers, criminals, zookepers and circus directors glanced up in surprise from whatever they were doing or not doing.

Above Limburg an der Lahn the computers switched off the Farnsworth-Hirsch-Fusors feeding the nuclear lightbulb with neutrons, causing the multiplication factor k to drop below one, zero point nine nine three, zero point nine five, zero point nine one, the raging fire of the plutonium plasma got cooler, milder. Annika shook her head to cast aside some

hairs that were tickling her nose, but they kept flying around all the more, stroking skittishly her forehead, cheeks, chin. She tried to push them away with her hand, but the hand turned out to be unruly as well, rushed upwards, floated in the air, the arm stretched nearly to the utmost. A tiny drop of saliva, which had come loose from Annika's lower lip, turned into a minuscule shining bullet, rushed away on a dead-straight trajectory, hitting the hand on the soft fleshy bulge between thumb and index finger.

Dr. Korolyova said: „Look!“ Annika glanced into the appointed direction, towards one of the monitors on the cabin's central column: „How lovely. The clouds, their drifting shadows on the distant beloved Earth. The water – dark, slightly sparkling plains. The horizon! Abrupt transition into the complete blackness of space. Just a thin, blueish aureola surrounds the planet, changing outwards gradually into darkness, turquoise, dark blue, purple, black.“

What's that: „Space“?

Space is black, silent, it is almost completely empty. Nearly everything which exists is space. Celestial bodies occupy a vanishingly small fraction of reality, their relative volume is vanishingly tiny. Space appears as a black hollow sphere – called „Hubble One“ by some –, within which thin veils of silvery star gauze float. Space is alien to the human eye. Our senses shy away from perfect darkness to which they can attribute neither size nor distance nor structure: „Division by zero“ says Alexa Nimitz dreamily, tracing the output line on the monitor affirmatively with her index finger. Earth, an almost perfect opal-blue sphere, trundles around in the neighborhood (just thirty-six thousand kilometers! a day and a half in an airplane, if those went beyond the Kármán-Line) of Port Terra, a metallic torus two kilometers in diameter, on which the Curiepolitan flag has been painted at regular intervals – „actually absurd“ – according to Carmen – „the other nations don't have manned spacecraft able to come up here, and we ourselves know it's ours!“

The „Trobadora Beatriz“

The experimental ship „Trobadora Beatriz“ has been towed some kilometers aside by Shadow Jumpers (which make quite sturdy orbital tugboats). From this vantage point, Port Terra is a radiant silvery sickle standing out from space's inexhaustible blackelation; different from the usual artillerygrenadoid-slamsquat thermonuclear pulsating clippers, the Trobadora is rather carmenheckenrosentallike tall and lean, with a bell nozzle at one end, which appears as tremendous as flimsy: for it is fashioned from an open lattice of magnetic coils, no solid matter would suffer focusing the fantastic heat of the plasma beam. Alexa: „The aim has always been to build something which in terms of specific impulse and thrust would draw even with good old boomboomboom [demonstrating by fist-into-hand two-three times], but doesn't go boomboomboom, burning steadily instead. Division by zero. It's that one include file, I think.“ „Why's it called tulipbulb.h?“ – Carmen, innocently. „Know something better?“ – Alexa, meanwhile rather gruff. „Sure. Pieinthesky.h.“ „Carmen, you seem bored, methinks. How about getting busy with the torch? Photocoupler T1136 doesn't respond like expected. Get your little cinneamon buttcheeks down there and grab a soldering iron.“

Now, where's that photocoupler T1136? Carmen holds the replacement in her hand, soldering iron clipped to her uniform blouse's breast pocket. Where are you, coupler? Tut tut, come here, come to me, coupler. Carmen puckers her lips and whistles the Wilhelm Tell Overture (which tends to drive Alexa insane: „If you insist on whistling, at least expand your repertoire a bit!“ „But my name's Carmen, so I like that opera.“ „This isn't »Carmen«, it's Wilhelm Tell by Rossini.“ „I know.“) The gas core nuclear reactor, which – Carmen finds this almost hard to imagine – is situated just a few meters beyond the right-hand wall of the access well, contains in its inner workings a tube filled with a Heliumthree-Argon-mixture, to generate the x-ray laser beam igniting the Deuterium-Heliumthree pellets in the thrust chamber, the resulting heat, two and a half thousand megawatts, is enormous and must be rejected into space, to which end the Trobadora sports around her rear mothlike infrared radiators, stretching hundreds of meters into black nearvacuum.

The Great Noon

Incredibly blue – blue like wind, like ice, like shimmering chromium steel; lightblue, rigelblue, Hertzsprung-Russel-topleft-blue; breathing blue, choral blue, sinfonia blue, brucknerblue, mendelssohnblue; waterblue, infinityblue, noonblue. Pacific everspring, Annika giggles, lies on her back, closes her eyes, licks her incisors, opens her eyes wide, Curiepolitan skyglow enters, rushes along nerve fibers, fills her brain with long quiet laughter. Opalclear the sky, just here-there so-tender feathercirruses: Annika recognizes the most delicate speck of cloud, almost every ice crystal floating sixteen kilometers up in the jetstream, breathchill powder of solid water, microscopic flakes, needles, splinters, from which sunlight rebounces joyfully. Immaculate crystal architecture, spires, castles, train station domes, pavilions, skyscrapers made of ice, so clear and flawless to seem to be made of pure light, lines, surfaces, columns, struttings of sleepyyellow and clinkingblue, slowly drifting tumbling coasting in thin icy air that streams around the globe, now and then thunderpierced by a climbing or descending rocket's, hypersonic deltaplane's heatflash . The Curiepolitans storm Olympus, towering top of the world and the eternal elationblackness full of stargems beyond. „Intelligence“, thinks Annika, „doesn't live well in the lowlands of the Earth's surface, the muddy fog-valleys of decay, of limitedness. Her world is height, expanses, silently vibrating laughing space, eternity sparkling with energy-richest radiation, weightless, happy, beautiful. Intelligence degenerates in a closed environment, she needs the ecstasy of infinity. Only if Intelligence succeeds in gaining as much of the universe as possible as her field of activity, she may have a chance – a very small chance, possibly – to win the final conflict with entropy at the end of time... or at least achieve a stalemate... Open the window of your cozy, claustrophile chamber: radiant luminosity rushes in, and cirrus-cold air that makes you shiver...“

Summerhand on goosebump skin: „Are you cold? Asleep? You okay, Annika? Like some tea?“ – Hikari. Annika turns her head, Hikari's bangs bobbing in the wind, thankfulglance backofhandpatpat. „Some riceballs left? One of the fried squid ones?“ Hikari nods, giggles, holds it for Annika's teeth, feed-chomp-gulp. One, two meadowcentimeters closer. Softfar noonnoises, mumblemuffled as if through a blanket woven of sunlight, but oh-so-clear, clear like the infinite sky. Strong puellae are the strongest when united, and happiest too.