A boom!! An up-to-date technician is in close proximity.

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

-Py-I told you! I told you! But never! But you never listen to me! Never! Do you think you're made of steel?!

-As-well... Is it my fault for being in the parabolic trajectory of a propelled brick?!

-Py-probably!...as always your stupid self-destructive behavior! Able and you stood there on purpose! Let's see if these adapted pieces work... How do you feel?

-As-I liked the old ones, I was used to their architecture.

-Py-make do with the new ones! How many times did I tell you?! How many?!

He places on top of my legs a metal box filled with my old systems, they are a bunch of little pieces that should go inside my head...or at least what's left of them, the brick crushed them...apparently the top of my head It has less thickness compared to the side parts, mainly to improve the readings of the internal sensors... and well, it also seems that a good quality brick of approximately 2.4 Kg at 1400 M/s is enough to cause a significant dent in the upper part... and I can confirm that it was a bit traumatic to feel how your pieces were crushed and their last measurements were distorted... but, at least the replacements are already in place, fortunately there is more than one unit available in the area capable of making repairs .

-As-1, 2, 1, 2… yes, everything seems well calibrated, thanks.

-Py- can you walk now?

-As- I think so.

I get up and take a few steps... yes, the gyroscope is well calibrated...

-As-I think, for now I'll go and complain to the head of the project. Exactly what kind of explosives do they use to make a brick reach such a speed?

-Py-don't worry about that… I already took care of the matter.

-As-don't shoot him right?

-Py-no, I just hit him on the head… and recommended continuing the demolition at a greater distance with the use of artillery.

-As-… \*sigh\*

I don't even know what to think about it... that's exactly what Python would do if given the chance.

-Py-now… since the repairs are done, do you think we can continue the operation? You know… the prey.

-As-I think I'll go for a walk first of all.

inside the reactor and after the technical staff gave it the go-ahead, the reactor was also activated, they also moved or built in record time all the necessary machinery to produce the parts for the new dome almost from 0… we will be a little tight while the construction is completed but at least we already have an almost self-sufficient infrastructure, we just need to install an extractor pump to draw water from the subsoil or install a pipeline from the Dnieper… and if we continue its course we will eventually reach the dam but, it is not something that the rest of the group has talked about a lot, we do not want to create more expectations than there are, it would not be good for anyone.

Outside... after the little boy, the MI continued the demolition with a little more calm, I can understand their enthusiasm even though they almost killed me, at least a little, but it didn't take long for them to demolish 2/3 of the city and remove all the metal they had. they could, they dismantled almost all the nearby infrastructure to get more metals and they are already digging the pit that will serve as an underground warehouse and once it is reinforced it will serve as a base so that the heavy concrete dome does not sink too much, in reality you have to let it sink sink just a little to solidify the soil below.

And a few kilometers away... they are building something else but this is the first I've seen of its kind, a receptacle for rockets... they plan to make them reusable and multipurpose and soon they intend to use them to maintain constant communications between the new dome and the ICBM base... sorry that they are letting themselves be carried away too much by emotion Anyway.

I go back to the vehicle and but once I look inside... there is, here is something strange, but... there are 2 local MCs on a table and String is standing a few meters away with a small book while giving them detailed descriptions of what to do... the funny thing , apart from the position… is it… some kind of stretching pose? No… we units don't need to stretch, do we? Also… they stared at me just between and one is trembling:

-As-I think… I'll be back later.

I don't want to get involved, if it's String it was probably another weird idea of his… and I don't want anything to do with it.

-.-.-.-.-.

Without saying anything I sat on a rock a few meters from the vehicle to observe the construction work, for some reason I felt disturbed to see whatever was happening in the vehicle... could it be their expressions?... until, finally they left but I preferred to wait a few more minutes before returning to the vehicle:

-As-have you finished your… matter?

-St-yes… another couple of satisfied customers, but how beautiful is freedom.

-As-fine yes… that's good.

-St-if someone asks you didn't see anything, trade secret.

-As-Yeah, it's okay if…I want to forget about it too.

I better manually edit the last few minutes and forget what name I gave the record... name what?

- St-from what I see your repairs are over... I wonder if that was a warning.

-As-warning?

-w-yes, a warning… I mean, it may sound superstitious but superstitions are part of every society and-… I mean, we just crossed the last frontier we had on this continent… what could it mean?

-As-eh… well…

-St-yes, don't listen to me, I'm going to call the embittered one to leave, but first.

He takes a closed box and places it in a cargo compartment, anyway, who cares?... while Python arrives I have something I have to take care of, I haven't had time since we arrived... the photographs.

I begin to review them in detail, one by one... and to memorize them, they are beautiful... it is the real sky, not the one seen inside the domes, that was a once in a lifetime view... but there is one, it was one of the last ones that... It has something I should check... I keep looking until almost at the end of the sequence I find what I was looking for, it's... well, I don't know what it is, its resolution isn't very high but a satellite shouldn't be that big... what could it be?

-St-honey, as soon as the embittered one arrives that we leave, ready?

-As-look at this \*I hand him the photograph\*

-Whew-oh… yes, I already reviewed the photographs we took up there, I could make them into posters the size of a standard ceiling and sell them. Who wouldn't like a night sky as up-to-date as possible?

-As-look at the last one, 5 cm from the upper edge and 4 cm from the left.

-St--well, a… satellite?... no, this… this isn't a satellite, is it? maybe it's space junk.

-As-… it could be…

-St-to all this... the head of the coaching staff said "I hereby declare the start of the space program" and so on, how literally would I be speaking?

-As-please, I don't want to know.

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

We waited until Python arrived and immediately set out, following the Dnieper while the rest of the units continued construction, although they are so motivated that they may even have the warehouses completed before our return... of course, if the weather allows it but… the current forecast is optimistic that… even I can feel that, I can feel hope… whatever it is.

-You-know… I've noticed something since we arrived.

-As-what?

-St-look the roads are clear, we haven't seen traffic jams yet and we've been on the road for a while.

- Py-perhaps the others have seen ME one.

-St-maybe but... such an orderly evacuation? It seems strange to me... it's as if, it had already been cleaned before.

-As-that's impossible.

-kwe-I know, but I wanted to highlight it... I'm just saying, even though we're in a rural region it's still strange.

Between the base and the valley there are about 30 km... it's a lot of ground... and if I think about it a little - no, I better not do it, I don't want to create expectations, no more than there are.

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

A few kilometers further on… we are finally reaching the reservoir, it seems that the dam is still intact or at least still strong enough to contain the lake… the instruments on board immediately detect something… the radiation readings are considerably lower… please I don't want any more hope if it's only to tear it off later.

We stop for a moment to look at the lake... the water looks surprisingly clear although... the bottom of the lake, how can I say it? It looks very tall:

-St-bad business, if we don't remove those sediments the dam could collapse at any moment.

-Py-noted, it may not be of much use to us but the valley could be of use to us.

-St-or the pressure could tear it from the foundations and cover the entire valley as if it were a great sarcophagus... although that is already being a bit fatalistic.

-As-please... don't continue.

-St-but I haven't even come to the worst idea.

-Py-look, maybe we can go down there \*points to a corroded sign that still reads bridge\* instead of continuing to listen to your nonsense.

We slowly follow the dirt road until we find a small zigzagging bridge that runs along the front of the dam until it reaches its base:

-Py-those…those are…are…

-St-post-build repairs.

-As-y… recent.

There is a scaffold hanging from the edge of the dam held by hemp ropes… that, that means that we are close, we are, we must be, what other reason could there be for this to happen? It's not like dams naturally fill in their cracks or anything.

puffff

-St-what is that? A leak?

We all look across the booth but it's impossible to pay attention to the sound...

CLICK!!!

I even manage to take a picture of it... the first picture that I can really define as "hopeful" in all this time... all this trip was worth it... it's the foot of the dam... there is... the foot of the dam, it's green, not completely but ... this one, it's very green... it's the greenest thing I've ever seen... this one, it's alive... the valley is still alive!

BOMMM!!!

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

…hell…that, I didn't see that coming…that…hurt…damn sense of touch…but at least it looks like we narrowly survived…I look around for a moment…heck…I think I need a full diagnostic right now…but…I think What can I wear… no… the gyroscope hit again.

-As-hello? Is anyone still working?

-…

No, it looks like... I don't... need... to get to the console... maybe the base will still receive us... I hope... I should... I should have invested more in shock absorbers.

Crawling I manage to get there but... I think something is broken but I don't know what, everything generally hurts from the jolts... damn default functions... at least it seems that the vehicle fell on top of the tracks... and the radio is still in place:

-As-base, do you receive me?... here recognition, we already arrived at the dam, I repeat, we arrived but... we had an accident.

-\*static\*

Damn... I think I'll have to do the repairs myself but the windshield was smashed by the fall, if I open the compartment dust could enter and cause more damage... and to top it off it's aiming straight at the prey, I can't see anything.

-St-he's not there! Ascrid! Where have you been?!

-As-driver's seat!

They are String and Python, they look somewhat beat up but functional...

-St-what's wrong with you? What do you feel?

-As-significant damage to the gyroscope, and then some.

-St-you have a screwdriver in your head and a dislocated knee joint.

-As-oh… I see.

-St-it also seems that some loose connection due to the state of reduced consciousness, hey Python, I will start its repairs and you, this is what they designed you for, right?

-Py- and to think that the day would come when I would have to use these things for real.

I turn with my leg, the chair works a bit and… Python, he's taking things out of his weapon box, is that… a flamethrower and a machine gun? Why are you also equipping a saber and some grenades of that model that has a throwing stick? Do you really need a shovel and some cans?

-Py-the Germans really knew how to do their thing.

-As- can someone explain to me what just happened?

-St-they launched a bloody rocket at us! It was lucky that it didn't hit the cabin or we might not have been having this conversation, but it hit the bridge and sent us off the cliff, it was almost 200 meters.

-As-Who?

-St-I have no idea, but they're on their way…it seems the locals aren't exactly peaceful.

-As-Python don't overdo it, you're the one saying it, we shouldn't go back there.

-Py-as long as they don't throw the first stone, this can be resolved peacefully, otherwise... I'll have to do it \*closes the visor of his helmet\*

-St-for a change I agree, I'm not going to let them scrap us without a fight, to begin with we were just passing through... in fact at some point we must have assumed that locals might not welcome us with open arms.

I watch as he tosses aside the top plate of my head with an embedded screwdriver.

-St-hate you high quality gear

-As-… suddenly everything is upside down or is it me?

-w-are you... I'll see if that clown brought you the necessary spare parts.

-Py-I'm going out and I'll try to ambush you, shout if you need me.

-w-don't worry, we'll do it \*he kicks his box of weapons near us\*

-St-well… I already changed it. Do you know where it is upstairs?

-As-yes... maybe, I think so...

-St-that's enough for me.

He starts to disarm my knee quickly… Why are his hands blurry? I think it is the battery that is not wired correctly-

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!

-Py-they're here!

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!-

They keep firing at the vehicle and leaving little dents in the side armor…until I hear a rattle in the background, they must be reloading.

-Py-they definitely don't want us here!

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!

-St-why aren't you firing back?!

-Py-I'm considering…

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!-

-Py-…our options \*observes the exterior of the vehicle with a small mirror\*

BANG!!

-Py-your aim isn't that bad... I managed to see 5, they're among the trees but I can't see the one with the rocket launcher, that's the real risk.

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!

-Py-what was the Slavs without the AKs, their rude people and-? \*points in our direction\*

BANG!! BANG!!

Fires a pistol 2 times just above my head hitting both headshots at one:

-Py-I'll try another way. How long are you missing there?

-St-almost there! Almost!

Python approaches, aiming at the front of the vehicle, and takes a bolt-action rifle from the drawer and a pair of combs:

-Py-you cover in front and I'll take care of the rest.

-St-I'm here! Wake up Ascrid! Wake up!

I put the knee joints back in place and oil them before resealing it… I move it around a bit and yes, it's like new, I can move properly now.

-As-yes, here I am.

Funny… I really don't know how to react in this situation… I might help to fire back but Python seems to have a plan.

I take an old shotgun from the box and point it out of the vehicle through the hole where the windshield should be, if anything enters my line of vision I will kill it.

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!-

BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!-

-Py-okay…I hear 7.62…short…and a long 7.62, I can handle that. Cover the front!

Without looking, he removes both hands from the vehicle while holding the rifle... and in a show of superior mechanical coordination.

BANG!! Click! BANG!! Click! BANG!! Click! BANG!! Click! BANG!!

It fires 5 times in barely 2 seconds and when the last shell is ejected it throws itself to the ground... and then nothing happens... not a noise... I think I eliminate them all:

-Py-Ascrid, I need a spotter upstairs \*throws the rifle at me\*.

-As-on the way.

-St-now what should I do?

-Py-I recommend you take a weapon or hide in the cargo compartment.

As String searches one of the cargo bays, I turn off the lights in my head, climb up, and open the top hatch a bit, just enough to get a clear view of the outside and the ability to lock on a target with this old-fashioned rifle, it seems. being an old standard 98k mauser… well, it's far from my weapon of choice but in this case it's adequate:

From what I see the vehicle as it falls I end up looking at the dam, not exactly perpendicular but rather looking to one of its edges while the tailgate ends up looking at one of the surprisingly leafy slopes of the mountain... and right in front of the prey, in a straight line is where our pursuers were, I see 5 bodies among the trees... it would be 6 counting the one in front of us... I see black raincoats, in fact the whole outfit is black, helmets and gas masks- wait! Does it move! One is getting up awkwardly and approaches one of his companions and begins to drag him through the trees without losing sight of the vehicle:

\*stays still and raises hands\*

Through the glass of the mask I can't see anything... but if I can tell where he's looking... or who, better said, is looking directly at me, he knows I'm here aiming at his head... he must have good eyes to see me through this small opening through that mask…could…could do it right? it's so easy but... no, we shouldn't go back there, at least not without a good reason:

-\*under the rifle\*

Noticing that I am no longer aiming at him, he lowers his hands and continues dragging it, but at one point he stops and looks behind, more come from between the trees:

-As-python, I see more… coming this way.

-Py-keep an eye on them, I'll go out and see if they understood my little gesture of goodwill.

-As-gesture of goodwill? What did you do?

-Py-do you have them in sight? Watch their heads… unless they've had a lot of bad luck they should be fine.

I look at their foreheads but I only see dents in the helmets… I deliberately shoot at the helmets trying to knock them out…

-\*pull the latch\*

I look inside the chamber and these are not standard 7.92 bullets these are shorter and flat nosed:

-As-need to congratulate you, you planned everything.

-Py-come on, keep flattering me…it's not something I hear very often.

-St-don't get conceited either!

-Py-Ascrid, I think we have rats in the cargo compartment, do you mind if I clean it with a grenade?

Ignoring String's groans, Python leaves the vehicle and simply stands in front... it may seem like he's taking too much of a risk but... as MP it's designed for conflict resolution, from its extensive language support to its solid armor if someone can stand out. here is him.

And they come from the forest, whoever they are... and the second group, 10 people, seems to come much better prepared than the first, while the first ones only had AKM and a mosin, they bring RPD machine guns and the largest of all has a rocket launcher... At least I know which one to take care of first.

They keep getting closer trying to take cover among the trees while Python is just standing there with his weapons in his hands... waiting for them... let's see, how do you plan to deal with this situation?

Finally they take cover behind the trees and start to split up, a group drags the first one and the rest are watching us... there's one more... he's in the background hidden among some leaves, rookie sniper? It seems so, the lens reflection gives it away easily... I don't know if he's aiming at me or Python but regardless of who he's aiming at, if he flexes his finger even a bit it's the end:

-Py-(Ukrainian) can you understand me?! Can anyone here understand me?! Can anyone understand me?! \*puts away weapons\*

-…

They're talking to each other…in a low voice…I can't understand what they're saying, not with the masks interfering and that…that sound? What could it be? It's… one is coming!

The one with the rocket launcher comes out of cover and approaches Python... it's big, very big... approximately 2.30 cm... and now that I notice it... it's as if it's walking on tiptoes? No... if he was doing it, his boots wouldn't have that shape... and if his chest is very wide... more than that of a common person.

-As-python do you copy me? Be careful… I have doubts about… look at her legs…

-Py-yes, I saw it… there is something strange here.

He stops a few meters from Python and rests the rocket launcher on the ground while pointing into the distance and gives us a message in perfect Ukrainian:

-go away.

-Py-wouldn't you rather talk about it a bit more? We could reach an agreement-

-go away!

-…

Use the radio to continue communicating with us:

-Py-(we look vulnerable… we are not in a suitable position to negotiate, we have to leave and try again later)

-St- (they seem a bit reasonable? Anyway, ask them for a few minutes while I check the vehicle)

-Py-(are you really sure we can't leave like this? I don't want to strain his patience)

-St-(Python, you know we can't)

-As-(what are they talking about? What was hurt?)

-St-(the rocket that threw us off the precipice)

-Py-(let me try) could you give us a few minutes? We need to repair our vehicle in order to leave.

-\*he stares at the side of the vehicle and then at the rest of his group, they just wave back\* to be quick.

-Py-(Okay, they agreed… you take care of it while I look at you ugly, if I lose sight of you you could try something)

I slowly open the hatch and get out leaving the rifle inside... ok... they saw me but I didn't alarm them...

I jump in front and start looking for the problem:

-St-where does that water come from?

There it is, the undercarriage is almost intact but one of the caterpillars broke into pieces:

-St-if there is someone up there, what have we done to offend him?

-As-I think you exaggerate, can't you fix it? It's very simple.

-St-simple?! That?! Not even with the entire coaching staff I think I can do something on time!

-As-it's just a caterpillar-

-Py-Ascrid… is not talking about the caterpillar.

I look away from the undercarriage and look at String, she's looking up… and I follow her gaze until I find out what she meant… it's the dam… the huge wall that contains the lake on the other side is cracking and leaving escape a cloudy and dirty water.

String turns around and starts yelling at the others, who are still staring at the prey and its weak structure:

- wha-you! They've been fixing the dam all this time, maybe they should keep fixing it instead of continuing this pointless conflict!

The one who seems to be the leader of the group looks at us, then at String… and then at the dam as the cracks continue to grow… then he looks back at us and slides a hand under his mask:

-\*whistle\*

It resonates with such force that it even causes a slight echo… wow, he has good lungs… and from what I can see that is the signal that attracts another group that was much better hidden than that rookie sniper who is still hidden even though this group does not carry any weapons , bring construction materials, plaster, tools, metal plates, sacks, cable and other materials, they simply pass by us ignoring us and use the scaffolding that we saw at the beginning to start climbing the wall and start repairs.

-St-(fine, then I'll start repairing the vehicle while you guys watch, should I threaten to blow up the dam if they try anything?) \*returns to the vehicle\*

-As-(shut up String)

-Py-(String… I… need your opinion here… this is your area of expertise… do you think they can repair that wall in time?)

-St-…

String returns outside with a toolbox, pausing for just a second to look at the prey.

-St-you!

-\*points to himself\* me?

-St-yes you! You know... this is not my problem but in my opinion now that the dam cracked they will only be able to delay its collapse, the best thing is to pack your things and get out of this valley as soon as possible.

-…

Python and I looked at each other... I would expect such a lack of tact from Python but... I think he's right, I'm not a specialized unit but I doubt he can repair this dam with just the material they have on top.

And it seems that he knows it too, I expected him to be at least a little annoyed but no, he's just watching the prey... what could he be thinking at this moment?

While the leader of the group is still absorbed from the forest another one appears, one much smaller and faster, perhaps a child? He wears the same suit as the others and seems to have a message for the greatest:

-come with me… the matriarch wants to talk to you.

-Py-is your leader or something similar?

-Yeah.

-Py-she has to stay to make repairs, we will accompany them if they promise not to do anything to her (although the truth would not be lost much)

-St-(can't you stop spitting venom even at a time like this?!)

-Py- (sorry... it's because of stress and habit)

-Yes I promise.

-St- while you're going there, don't forget our mission! This could be our only chance!

Yeah, we need to locate the lab and find out what's been going on here for the last century.

We began to follow him cautiously through the thick forest... with the watchful eye of that sniper, does he think he can hide from the sensors of an ME?... but on the other hand... I can now detail the forest a little more, tall trees and leafy, soft and humid earth... it looks like a vestige of a distant past paralyzed in time, the air is still very polluted but compared to the wasteland this small valley is an oasis... perhaps that was what allowed it to survive this people… but for how much longer?

And near the center is our goal, a small town in a clearing right on the slopes of the river, I see about 30 or 40 huts reinforced with metal walls and even fields full of corn in the distance...

CLICK!!

Then I will evaluate it, on the other hand:

-As-I think the cars we couldn't find ended up there.

-Py-I have serious doubts about the actual protection provided by this improvised engineering.

-Stop chattering, it won't be long.

As he literally takes us through the middle of the town, the residents do not lose sight of us, they all have the same black clothes, gas masks... and weapons... and from the way they look at us it seems that the only reason why they have not greeted us with a rain lead is because we are behind this big guy.

-Py-look there.

-As-that means that the radiation has not rendered them sterile.

There are 3 of them, like the one who brought the message to this big guy at the beginning, they are dressed in the same clothes as the rest.

We leave the town with the attentive view of the residents behind us and we continue straight until we enter the forest again... into a part much thicker than the rest as if it were the center of everything... hidden among the trees there is a large deteriorated building and dirty, I distinguish what appear to be very dirty windows and a large rusty metal door between the trees... and it seems that this is our destination.

-Here it is… the matriarch awaits you inside.

-Py-so… we just go in and that's it? Is there a code of conduct we should know about?

-If they try something we will tear them apart.

-Py- we will take it into account.

We move forward a bit, until we reach the door, but we stop, there's something here that I don't like, for some reason I don't want to open this door... behind there is something that I didn't like... besides... this sound:

-As- do you hear him?

-Py- they're like, like heartbeats.

-As-do you think they let us do analysis in the area before entering?

-Py-I don't think so… and they probably won't change their aptitude if we don't talk to their leader first.

-As-do your scanners say anything special?

-Py-you'd have to be more specific, I've never had the opportunity to use them on something more complex than a plant… you go first, okay?

-As-as always.

I push the rusty door open surprisingly easily…and peek inside…but immediately I have to stick my head out…there is…something there, but it's too strange…I don't even know how to begin to describe it…I don't want to go in there alone.

-As-let's go in together, please.

I shake his hand and we quickly go inside closing the door behind us, this place is dirty, very dirty, there is hardly any lighting due to the little light that enters through the dirty windows and maybe it is better that way… it also smells horrible, a smell of decay concentrate that could well take decades to accumulate and as if that were not enough... there is something here, but I don't know what it is... it's like the bulging roots of a tree that come out of the ground and spread everywhere... but... they look fleshy, they look ... very alive ... and I think, they move a little ... and that noise ... is that a heart? Is that the beating of a big heart?

-Py-those lumps… are…

-As-what are they?

-Py-cancer, a lot of it looks like cancer tissue out of control...

-As-so if he is alive?

-Py-yes... but who knows for how much longer... and if this is a creature, the main body must be underground, right?

It's a good deduction.

-As-Who said that?!

A voice was heard, but... it doesn't seem to come from a visible place in the immediate vicinity... I think, it's hoarse and sharp at the same time.

-Py-is this mass around us speaking to us?

-that's how it is.

- Py-it can't be... we have a couple of hundred questions to ask right now... what or who are you?

-… That I am? That is something quite complicated to explain... I could ask you the same thing... what I see is not... you are not people, are you?

-Py-it seems that this mass has some curious capacities… maybe it's because we don't smell like organic?

-another good deduction, although they don't give off heat or hear their heartbeat either... and they sound exactly like any external sound player.

-Py-you seem to know a lot…

-I'm a geneticist... or well... not exactly me... could you explain to me what they are? Somehow it reminds me of an automated diagnostic unit... or some old war machine but... this apparent level of autonomy is strange.

-Py-\*looks at me\* I think... you better do it... you have more tact.

-As-don't leave me alone!

-Py-don't worry, here I am \*takes a single step back\*

-As-How do I explain this?... I've never had the need to explain what we are.

-Py-just say it…

What a unit designed to resolve conflicts, you do your job amazingly…. Moron…

-As… we are, we are the third generation exploratory and police models, E061 and P070, we are currently on a recovery mission that brought us from faraway France to our current location, we are a group of independent AIs designed for security tasks. cleaning and general support in the widely irradiated environments that the third world war turned our world.

-then they are machines… right? Are they really aware or do they just follow pre-programmed protocols?

I look at Python, and he just shrugs... well then.

-As-although we are fully aware that we are machines and we work based on complex programs, at least I like to think that we are... well... we are a little more than just that, a little more than machines.

-That's interesting… and where did you come from? It wasn't my specialty but as far as I know no AI model ever reached such a level of awareness as you two seem to… in fact I would like to test your logical processes with contradictory questions hahaha just to see what happens.

In that case we'd just get a little annoyed, it's not like we lack practice dealing with dumb or redundant questions.

-As- the units, that is how we identify ourselves as a group, we went through various phases of development, first our functions were carried out by old war machinery adapted to dismantling and construction work, then by units recycled from the first ones very similar to the pre-war automated diagnostic units, and later the design was improved and an AI core was integrated to originate the current units.

-Interesting but... Who created them? French maybe? No... rather, what flag do they serve?

-As-a none actually, the older units and cores were designed directly by something we know as the original AI, we're not exactly sure what it is, presumably it's a huge network of pre-war AIs that came to consciousness presumably from the powers' own technology.

-It must have been one or several of the central supercomputers that controlled the extensive network of technology in the hands of the powers... and to think that those infernal machines would become this... so... they say they don't serve a flag... then who? I doubt they exist without a purpose... and one more question, are there different internal groups or factions among "the units"?

-As-yes, and no... we only serve something called the purpose, all the units exist and we work for its eventual compliance, the eventual decontamination and reconstruction of this world but we are dispersed and our bases have little communication between them, but when necessary we collaborate extensively with each other.

-such a daunting task? I have my doubts but… before I continue I need to apologize for the behavior of my children, they are good boys but they were scared and acted impulsively… I mean, I like that they act independently but I think they were very paranoid.

-Py-that means the creatures out there aren't human, right?

-Not at all... to put it in some way... but, there is a reason why they acted like this... a few days... or weeks ago, we had an unexpected visitor.

-As-a visitor?

-Py-couldn't be a drive, could it?

- We don't know what it was, but maybe my children had a bad approach and made him react badly.

-Py-how bad?

-He got violent, too much... and at some point he went crazy and tried to cut them down with an ax before fleeing to the east, and that was enough for them to look for some weapons in an old army warehouse and you know what happened next.

-Py-at least, we don't know anything about said traveler.

-They suspected that they could come with him or be from the same group, as they imagined we don't have many visitors.

In this case there are several possibilities but... at least we don't have anything to do with any of them.

-Py-you know, I think that since we share a lot of information… could you explain to us what happens? What is this place? And you are?

-Well, it's fair... right now we are in a town at the foot of the Damocles dam, the geography of the area is located in the valley against the wind, so at least during the first months the pollution was reduced and even after winter the valley it still retained its greenness.

-As-have you been alive since winter?

-Yes, since before the truth.

-Py-continue please.

-god…don't expect to live long enough to retell this story to someone…what exactly brought you here in the first place? To this valley from so far.

-Py-recently we expanded our operations to the vicinity following a note, a researcher left several notes that brought us here, we have been looking for information on a variety of technologies that should have served to facilitate the survival of humanity after a nuclear apocalypse.

-As-do you want the corresponding documentation?

-No thanks... I know what I need... after so long... I never thought I'd hear about the project again... and less than a lot of machines... if I wasn't hearing it I wouldn't believe it.

-Py-project? "In case the worst were to happen"? that same project?

-This world was already a lost cause and we only cared about finishing the project and saving what we could... when the bombs fell we told ourselves that it didn't matter who finished it but that someone, whoever it was had to do it out of mercy for humanity... maybe? is that someone you? In any case, this facility was part of that project, but nothing remains here regarding those technologies, here it was just a humble genetic research facility.

-As-genetics?

-Py-that means that… you and those things out there… are.

-We are the product of that research, well, an accidental one, the original purpose was to create a species capable of surviving everything, yes, it is a very vague description but if I go into details it would never end... although... it is a complicated story but someone has to know.

I look around, and… I don't see anything to sit on, it will have to be standing.

-As-we have time... start please, I'm taking note.

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

This creature began to tell us its story while I was taking notes... apparently, this facility was affiliated with the same project we are following, although this type of technology was not developed here, advanced genetic research was done here, and this creature is a by-product of that investigation albeit a completely accidental one. What happened? It seems that, shortly after arriving, the group that we are following had to evacuate the area just as the locals were fleeing winter that had been following them, but... this creature and its master stayed behind, its master was apparently one of the researchers and This creature, it seems that at that time was an old Siberian husky of almost 15 years, its purpose was to take care of the facilities while they waited for the return of the rest of the group and search for the reagents stored in the subsoil.

Things ran relatively well for at least a couple of months before the winter reached its deadliest...the facility had an extensive built-in life support system that is currently somewhere in this tumor mass.

At some point a group of survivors from the east arrived who somehow managed to survive the intense radiation, cold and hunger long enough to reach the laboratory and here things turned ugly... the researcher offered them what little he had but that did not seem enough to them and they stormed the facility, significantly damaging the systems, leaving the researcher mortally wounded and then taking everything they could, at least it is good to know that if the cold did not kill them, the radiation poisoning did... but did the researcher and the husky? Well…they smashed the containers a couple of floors down in the facility flooding the area with the reagents, they both drowned in that chemical mix which, it killed them both…or so it should have.

That didn't kill them, it just... changed them, it seems that the reagents and other things that were mixed in the chaos ended up causing an extreme mutation that fused them into a creature that seems to mix the memories and consciousness of both but kept the consciousness of the husky as dominant, perhaps due to the poor state of the researcher, was a slow and extremely painful process, only slightly attenuated by the numbness that winter caused as soon as I managed to enter the facility.

Some time later, it seems that when the winter ended and it thawed a bit, it began to grow slowly, covering a good part of what is here, adding more samples to its unstable biomass, it seems that its genes compose and decompose rapidly due to its own instability and the radiation only facilitated the process until at some point it began to perforate the reinforced walls to begin to spread across the land as if it were a plant in search of nutrients, which in part it is... and it has connected with much of the matter valley vegetable nurturing it to keep it relatively healthy.

But... what about their children?... apparently, their organs, both of them are highly mutated and scattered throughout the building, the main body is here in its entirety, buried under the ground... And in a room near where that putrid smell comes from is where the exit of her uterus is... that... is disturbing even for someone of a mechanical nature like me... from that uterus have apparently come out... many things, many, many, many things throughout the years years, many... most did not survive due to the mutated disaster that they were unable to keep functioning properly, some, were abominations like their progenitor that were reabsorbed in the central house... and others, a small group of individuals, who are the ones who live there outside they had surprisingly well-structured genetics that somehow inherited much of the original's capabilities but without most of its flaws.

As soon as that group of about a dozen individuals of the new species came out, they found a way to clog the exit duct, sealing it forever... and even so, from time to time it seems that something tries to get out of the duct but doesn't make it... maybe be it better that way... and since then this creature has dedicated itself to taking care of the new species to the best of its ability until earning the nickname "the matriarch"

-As-wow... that's a journey... maybe one as long as ours.

-As-that… is incredible… and how do you feel? It hurts?

- Not really... the truth is that after so much time I only have exhaustion left... although I don't have much time left anyway, on the one hand the dam, you know the state it is in, and on the other-

-Py-cancer, you're dying.

-Yes... that's right, for years I've tried to keep it at bay but it doesn't stop growing, it's bigger than you could imagine and it occupies more than a thousand people than I would like... and I already feel that the end is near, the valley it is losing its greenness.

-As- and what do you intend to do?

-At some point, I supposed that I could wait for the dam to break and as soon as the flood ended, rebuild everything but... it won't be possible, did you see them?

-Py-yes… there is too much sediment putting pressure on the dam.

-And as if that were not enough, there is also a cracked pump on the lake bed and it has been contaminating the sediments for decades, in short… as soon as the dam breaks, there will be nothing left of the valley for my children to return to.

I zoom in on Python for a moment:

-As-what do we do now?

-Py-I think… you know what to do, but we can't leave here without more information.

I turn back to the matriarch... this, I don't know if it's a good idea, but we can't leave them here. What would be the point of everything that happened here if it were forgotten like this?

-As-I have a proposal, but we require your collaboration... we have technology and right now our colleagues are establishing a base upriver, we could lodge them there at least temporarily while we find a solution, if you manage to convince your children to follow us. we will take with us, but... we come here to search the laboratory and we cannot leave without even a hint of where to go next, there must be something here that will serve us.

-Well... I can't say for sure, I only know that they were heading north but if you dare to explore the lower levels of the complex there might be something that will help you, there are at least a couple of rooms that I haven't expanded to.

-Py-do you mean that you let us enter… inside you?

-If your mission is as big as you say, we are all interested in collaborating, will you dare to do it? I assure you that it is probably not dangerous for beings of a non-organic nature but I think that… you may find some views disturbing.

-As-… Python… do you want to go?

-Py-I'm not going down alone, we're in this together.

-As-yes… I know.

- Py-excuse me... it's a strange question but \*unsheaths the saber he brought with him\* there's no problem if once downstairs I cut some things, right? We might need it to break through and well…

-As-Python.

-I don't love the idea, but if necessary do it, just don't cut any nerve please.

-Py-I'll do my best

-Well, continue straight up the stairs and try not to sink.

We follow his instructions to move around the facility, although it is not very big, all this fabric has turned it into an uncomfortable maze, a very small, fleshy, stinky and somewhat humid maze... it is much easier if I turn off certain sensors... and at some point …we arrive at what looks like a very deteriorated staircase, parts of it have been replaced by this same mass… and then we start to descend lighting the best we can… although, I don't know if it's a good idea… here… everything is alive, very alive... my sensors keep detecting movement inside the walls... also, sometimes they swell as if... pulsating...

A few meters below, there is... something that makes a curious noise... it inflates and deflates repeatedly.

-As-let's not touch that, please.

-Py-must be the lungs… they are probably connected to the outside.

-As-… I'll need at least a month off after this… please.

-Py-what I wonder is where the heart and brain are.

-As-I don't want to know that either.

We move a little more... the more we go down the floor, the more humid it feels as well as sticky, I think I understand what he meant by "beings of a mechanical nature" if an organic falls here something tells me that... well, I prefer not to think about it too much but most likely it became part of the mass... permanently... come on... keep your head... we are relatively safe... maybe we are... maybe.

And so we continue making our way... until we reach what I think is the bottom of the installation, my systems in my legs detect that the ground we are on is much more solid than the rest, it is probably already made of stone but, there is some cavities with something much softer…must be roots.

-Py-Ascrid… look at this, but don't run away.

-As-do I have to?

-Py-it's not mandatory but since I mentioned it to you, you won't be able to avoid following the impulse.

-As-hate the reflections feature.

I look where it points and... I think... this... I don't want to see it anymore... it's... that thing... it seems to be a part of the biomass that was petrified or completely replaced the tissues, leaving something close to the shape of the researcher, even ... he still has his glasses on, besides, on the side there is also the shape of the husky… this place is horrible.

-As-let's get out of here, please.

Something must be too well done inside us if this sight manages to cause so much anxiety…definitely, if I look at that and it blinks…I'll run home even though it's through the craters.

At some point we find a wall that, I can detect a gap behind, must have been a room but the door is sealed.

-As-well… here you take care of it, but try to be careful.

He walks over and starts feeling the wall in various areas…he's looking for the door…when he's done he steps back and then slams his saber into the wall going all the way through…and starts to propel it cutting one hole in the wall at a time that slices the dough that covers it... the dough lets out a very thick orange liquid that smells of chemicals although I can't fully identify its composition.

-As-is it hurting?

-Py-yes… but I don't think for much.

The mass… when it falls to the floor it mixes with the rest taking on its appearance and coloration, leaving a small lump… I definitely want to get out of here.

As soon as the door drops... inside, there's a sealed room, though it doesn't have much equipment, just a couple of computers, instruments from the lab, and a shower that probably doesn't work anymore.

-Py-okay, we'll take the hard drives and head out… I wonder if they left a note here too.

We went through drawers and shelves taking anything we could find, but... the note isn't here, maybe I didn't leave anything because the place wasn't really abandoned, or maybe I left it somewhere else... where could it be?

-As-you can hear us up there!

-Yeah.

-As-now I begin to wonder where your voice comes from, an investigator could have left a note. Do you know where it is? I paste 2 before on computer monitors.

-I think... there was something about a note somewhere... but... where was it?... behind... a panic room, there was one for... get out of there and go down a little more, my master saw a note at some point but I don't touch it.

We follow his instructions and go down a little more cutting through a wall that was broken by the biomass, behind it is the panic room or what is left of it, there are many growths around... and from one of them a still intact monitor with a sticky note... is what we were looking for.

-As-Should I take the note?

-Py-I think not, it could be undone, better photograph it.

CLICKK!!

Halo of the note but, it disintegrates almost immediately... wow, if I hadn't taken a backup it would have been the end, maybe that would have been better, since we already made a pretty big discovery here.

-.-.-.-.

We go back to the upper floor and immediately, I hear my radio module... it's String...

-As-hello?

-St-hey… not to bother but are you very busy?

Construction sounds in the background...

-As-well… we still have a little bit to go.

-Py-remember what I said about “blowing the prey if they try anything”?

-As-…don't tell me that…

-St-it's not that! But that destination is not far away! Right now I'm on the dam with 6 tools at once trying to patch the holes but I just can't handle all of them, there are too many! Get out of there!

-As-we'll try to hurry, do what you can.

-St-move your damn servos! For something I just repaired them!

-As- do I hear that?

-Yes, one of my children is waiting outside, please call him inside, the others will listen.

-Py-as long as I report that we'll be touring the area, we'll need as many biological samples as possible from the valley before the dam collapses.

We left for a moment, and as I indicated, the matriarch was out there waiting, just looking at the door, and we indicated that they were looking for her.

While Python was looking around I started running around the area with a shovel in one hand and a couple of bags in the other pulling out all the sprouts I could and collecting all the seeds I could find, we need all the possible samples of this strange ecosystem before it the dam collapsed.

-Py-hey, look there… I think I'd better help you.

The locals... they are all walking to the laboratory, some of them stare at us for a moment but continue on their way, after all we are not their main priority... maybe they are already preparing for the inevitable...

I look into the distance, in the direction of the dam and although I can't quite detail what I see…I don't like it, String is jumping around with his tools while the locals are shaking that scaffolding like crazy…maybe we should also speed up rhythm.

-As-I should have brought better tools.

We accelerate our pace even more and throw everything into our backpacks as if there were no tomorrow, which technically there isn't... at least a couple of individuals of each endemic species... until, we see how the locals run from the laboratory directly to their homes and behind us comes the biggest one from a while ago... What will he want this time?

-The matriarch wants to see them now!

-Py-are you already preparing the evacuation?

-Yeah.

That's a good thing… we run back to the lab and go inside:

-It's all ready.

-Py-and how did they take it?

-The truth is not very good, although everyone knew that this day was going to come sooner or later, at first they were just small cracks, then some leaks and you can see it…

-Py-this… is goodbye, right? No choice? There are too many things we would like to ask.

-Look at me, as you can see I can't move much... it may sound irresponsible but the truth is I also want a break, it's been a long time since I could really do it.

-Py-well… we will do our best for… your children… I just hope they can adapt to our society.

-Before you leave, I would also like to ask you many questions but... I only need to ask you one.

-Py-Which?

What do you think of humans? Or what do you expect from them?

Python and I looked at each other... well...

-As-one of the reasons for our existence is to assist them once they return with everything they need.

-Py-but the truth is that we don't think much about them… well, at least not directly.

-As-and one of the reasons… that we have such a flexible and complex AI is… that…

-Py-the original AI gave it to us to be a replacement humanity... it's not a fact that we're really amused.

-As-our technician says she did it because she was bored and lonely... and she's possibly right.

After saying that... anxiety levels increased enormously, no, we're not amused to say it, it's one thing to know... another to hear it come out of your own voice.

-oh... I'm sorry... but anyway... what I was going... their search who knows where it could take them but, my master's companions... my companions... eh... I mean... if they got far enough I wouldn't be surprised if they eventually found someone one, I'm not saying they're all bad but… look outside, look at that lifeless wasteland that our world has become and ask yourself, who is responsible? If you see them, ask yourself those things before acting.

-Py- Is there any real possibility that there are humans left on this planet?

-What took them so far was their ability to adapt, perhaps this wasteland put their skills to the test but I doubt that it was enough to overcome them... I may only think this because of the time of so radicalized thinking that I saw but still keep it in mind .

A few seconds later... the place from a while ago arrives:

-matriarch... now, everything is ready... everyone is ready.

-Well… please, follow these machines, they will take care of taking you to a good place, a safe place.

-are you sure that-?

-No… we already talked about it.

-So... thank you, thank you for everything... I'm going to look for those who are missing from the dam.

Gone... this is not pretty to see... it's hard to ignore cases of emotional dependency when you also suffer from them...

-As-we're leaving too, thank you for your collaboration for our operation... and... rest in peace.

-I appreciate it... but listen, we were saying that someone had to complete the project, whoever it was, what if you finally completed it? It would be something wonderful.

Immediately, we left there leaving the door closed and we met with the locals, they loaded their belongings into carts made with vehicle parts and covered them with black tarpaulins, but… there are about 30… is all that really necessary? Or perhaps it is too little for so many individuals.

-Py-listen up! Is someone wearing chains?! We can help you carry your things if you have them!

One quickly walks away and takes a few meters of chains from one of the cabins…for a moment I thought they were going to take them from a wagon…I mean why would you carry that in the middle of an evacuation?

He hands it over to me and with the help of Python I cut it in half, then I hand one of the halves over to Python and we start attaching them to the wagons as if it were some kind of train, so it will be much easier to pull these things.

-Py-okay, let's stay in sync or these things will roll down the slopes.

-As- let's follow that path, it should take us over the valley… the dam team!

-Py-hey… yes you! You the high! And those who were doing repairs on the dam?

-They have already been warned, they will buy us the time they can and they will leave the dam.

-Py-okay push too! It's your stuff!

We put the servos in gear and we begin to move the load, slowly but constantly, then the other locals begin to push as well, making us speed up our pace:

-Py-wow, this group of organics is stronger than I expected... to be so... organic.

- As-concentrate, if we follow this step in a few minutes we should reach that hill and from there continue towards the base safely.

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

As expected, a few minutes later we made it out of the valley with no problems except for the occasional bump in the road... and just in time, String called us at the last minute in total despair shortly before the dam finally cracked and collapsed, from the altitude that the hill afforded us we could see them working like crazy to buy us more time by throwing plaster and tools back and forth…and what looked like extra large coils of duct tape…just like there was no tomorrow.

As soon as the cracks exceeded the repair efforts, what came out at first was only water... and shortly after mud that quickly spread through the valley, among all that mud I came to see the remains of the bomb that the matriarch mentioned... with this quickly the radiation readings increased in such a way that I could feel them up there... that view made it absolutely clear that the valley's time was over... and the matriarch, she was buried in all that mud when she arrived at the facility... if we hadn't arrived in time we may well have lost the information.

And the locals... the last sight of their old home and of their progenitor was an immense radioactive quagmire that quickly consumed everything, leaving almost no trace of what was there until a few minutes ago... I wonder what will be in their heads in this very instant? Fear? Sadness? Maybe hopelessness?

-Py-should we tell them to move on? We still have a few kilometers to go.

-As-I know… I know.

We kept walking until we came into sight of the small bridge where the rocket was fired... and nearby was String on top of the vehicle waiting for us accompanied by some locals who quickly noticed us and came running in our direction.

String had put on the spider support and 2 more pairs of arms, one pair below the standard position and one sticking out of the back… and I must say that for me… not exactly a pretty sight… it's like… like a spider… a spider that makes strange noises when speaking, taking away the seriousness of the scene:

-St-me-me-me--- \*interference\* glad that lo-lo-lo \*interference\* did it… did they \*beep\*?

-Py-yes, here on top we took what we could get from the laboratory… we were even able to take biological samples.

-St-well \*interference\*… \*sounds like it's picking up an old radio transmission\* board… I like your idea with the chains-chains-chain-chains-, let me attach them to the… vehicle… for… \*interference\* tow the wagons.

-Py-Why do you sound like that?

-St-\*writes a note\*"yes, the driver is not completely stable yet... it's uncomfortable... but I've never worked with such speed"

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.

We let the locals rest and continue on our way upstream towards the base, the vehicle has more than enough cargo capacity to pull the carts... although I don't like this... What about the locals? The coaching staff is more than capable of building the infrastructure they need, but will they be able to adapt to such a change? I think it goes without saying that our societies are different... and I don't think our lack of sociability helps.

-Who-you-know… Shall I tell you something ironic? I don't want to keep it just to myself.

-As-what?

-St-don't tell… those things, but that dam could have resisted at least 30 more years, it was quality construction.

-Py-doesn't look like it anymore.

-St-let me finish old man... but... it was that rocket that shot us... it shook the bomb behind the concrete and the pressure of the water pushed it through the crack.

-Py-oh… that means that… it was fault….

-As-let's take this to the grave, for everyone's sake.

-St-fact, I don't want to see a lynching either... and regarding our mission, did you find anything useful?

-Py-we have a very long story to tell you about what happened in that lab but… for now let's review this:

I take out the photograph that I took of the note and place it on the board... if I had not photographed it, we could have lost our only clue:

-“The trip was complicated, we had to move almost blindly in those tunnels… the Nazis left them a bloody maze while they figured out how to get to Moscow but at least we managed to find a way out in a city near the border with Poland… it's surprising that although they have been there since 1944 the tunnels have survived so long, although the city and all that was Poland were not so lucky... there is no such thing as Poland there anymore... there is nothing left... well, shortly after they emerge we continue to move and we managed to make it to the small village at the foot of the dam which has now been turned into a refugee camp with some order still in place and the resident scientists used some of the developments to keep the local crops safe from the ever worsening weather conditions so at least we have a source of food while… yes, finally we will be able to rest for a few days… but we won't be able to stay for long, it seems that it was not only France or Germany but maybe the whole continent, or probably the whole world, temperatures are dropping fast here as well so we plan to evacuate again in the next few days to another facility and until then we'll be doing what we can with the local facilities… but we don't know where to go yet, it's probably north to the facility Belarus or Finland... or to the east... in the worst case we can reach distant Asia if it still exists... but on the other hand, there is something that is starting to worry me, something more personal... as soon as I was able to take off my suit after When I arrived I discovered that I am losing my hair and I feel a couple of loose teeth, I think there will be some more with the same symptoms but we will probably not say anything, it is not like much can be done in these conditions ... now we will have to concentrate on doing everything that we can for these people and for the project before our time comes… I just hope that we manage to achieve the mission that we face, out of mercy for humanity we must achieve it”

And there it ends…with the writer with initial symptoms of radiation poisoning…as he and his group desperately pursued a last hope of salvation if they managed to complete the prototypes…although…seeing what we are behind, what we are leading at this moment makes me wonder how far they could go? There are barriers that cannot be jumped only with will, but we already know what they were working on. How far could they push that possibility only with will in a world that was coming to an end?

-St-look there.

They are units... they are still working on the construction of the new dome:

-Py-now…

-St-now we have to think about how to explain… well… explain everything… this is going to be complicated.

-As-…

Unnoticed I hide in the cargo compartment… this is not the task I was designed for, I want nothing to do with it.

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-