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DRAGOȘ C. COSTACHE

ULTRA
A

MARINE
NOVEL

TRANSLATED BY
VLAD CRISTACHE

TYPE - M

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ALIENATION



*Man remains ... a biosystem with a limited capacity
for change. When this capacity is overwhelmed,
the consequence is future shock.*

— A. Toffler

DAVAO

The waiting room was drowned in light the color of stale piss. It bled down from the skylights, funneled in by roof shafts after squeezing past the solar panels, AC units, microwave dishes—the modern world’s extensive technological debris. The idea was noble enough: pipe a little natural sunlight down into a bantam building swallowed by Davao’s endless towers. In practice, though, the room was bright with morning-after piss.

Which was fitting, since for Marin it was the morning after. He propped himself against a slanted plastic bench—designed to keep off dozers—and waited for his number. Anime posters in Tagalog and English decked the walls, urging bystanders to SQUARE UP TO THE FUTURE and to SEIZE YOUR FATE. They were lined with AR codes that, on command, would make the characters leap out and break into a dance and speak their corporate pitch. But Marin didn’t know what they actually said or what the animations looked like. He couldn’t. His subscription to the interface had lapsed.

Back on the ship, the company had covered his Premium-Lite package so he could communicate with the rest of the crew. No matter how minutely shipboard duties were dissected, analyzed,

and pigeonholed, no matter how much of the navigation and control you outsourced to AI, some things still had to be done by hand. You needed guys like Marin. Unstandardized guys, whose only version of “interoperability” and “synergy” came out when they got drunk and started singing. The rest of the time, they had to talk, text, and actually understand each other to get anything done. That’s why the company paid for the visual interface with the Premium-Lite translation tier. Enough to plan the cleaning rota, but way too “lite” to explain a joke or to recite some Eminescu to Crisanto. Not that Marin actually knew any Eminescu—maybe a little Eminem—but he could look anything up in seconds, since the company footed the network bill as well.

In theory, the company was still fronting his network connection for another week and a half. Marin was burning through his grace period: land a new gig in ten days, or they’d terminate his work agreement. After that, not only would he have to hustle for his own access—grinding through a million ads and surveys just to get online—he’d also officially become an illegal immigrant in the Dominion of the Philippines. Marin used to be a cop. He knew exactly how ugly things got for illegals, especially around these parts. Best case: six months on an automated work barge, then deportation.

So there he was, hungover and propped against that miserable plastic bench, waiting in the jaundiced light of a Davao morning for his number. It was day three of waiting, and the heat was already unbearable. By all accounts, the placement center was climate-controlled. Marin could see the AC units bolted to the walls; he could hear their relentless rattle drilling straight into his pounding skull. Yet somehow, it was hotter inside than out on the street. Marin figured it was a deliberate filter—a way

to sweat out anyone who wasn’t truly desperate. Anyone who wouldn’t do whatever it might take for one more six-month tour, the Premium-Lite interface, a network connection, and a Level-BAS Cultural Sensitivity Module.

“Number 4-0-3 Mary Bucea to desk number 21, please,” mewled an automated voice, engineered to be so algorithmically inoffensive that it drove Marin into a sudden fit of rage.

He got up and threaded his way through an archipelago of the terrified and soon-to-be-unemployed, heading for the plexiglass partition marked 21. The digits were practically eaten away by time, heat, and disinfectant.

The booth consisted of a stool bolted to the floor and a narrow ledge with a multitouch surface, scratched to hell by the applicants before him. A plastic pen on a coiled cord and a fingerprint scanner rounded out the setup. Above the security glass, a reflective decal chirped: LET’S GET YOU BACK TO WORK! Right next to it was the company logo: the smiling head of a—mouse?

On the other side, a plump Filipina adorned with a large cross around her neck was swiping mindlessly at a tablet. She pulled her Doraemon sweater tighter—indeed, the temperature was not the same back there!—and gave Marin a practiced smile.

“Four-oh-three? Mary Bu-cha?”

Perversely enough, her utterly exasperating tone was far more calming than the algorithm’s filtered voice. He answered as politely as his hangover allowed.

“Is Marin. Like sea. And Bu-cea.”

The woman smiled her courteous smile again, the way you’d smile at a small child or at a dangerous animal.

“*Maaari mo bang i-on ang iyong interface ng pagsasalin?*”

“I am sorry, no Tanga-log. English, yes?”

"Can you please start interface?" the woman repeated.

Marin exhaled and leaned his face in, as if physical proximity—interrupted by only two centimeters of laminated glass—might buy him just a little more connection, a drop more of humanity.

"No interface translate, expire. English official language here, yes? I speak."

The woman gave a disappointed sigh, then moved her fingers quickly on the tablet's haptic zone. She held her smile in place, but to Marin it started looking like a rictus.

"Mister Marin, you are finished on your third tour with AMTC Shipping? One year then two tours of six months? Maintenance and ... *serbisyo sa paglilinis?*"

"And what?"

"Cus-to-di-al serbis?"

"Custodial, yes, clean! Custodial and maintenance on company ship, yes."

The woman smiled, as if delighted to have cracked this difficult exchange. Marin shifted on the stool.

"And you are looking for another ship-based tour?"

Marin would have preferred a ship. He was used to it; there, they didn't bother you so much, and it was better money. You didn't have to pay for lodging, and the food was standardized. On shore you had to tend to cleaning robots with spiky, filthy brushes, work with the sort of potent toxins and nanopoisons the roaches hadn't yet adapted to. But he'd have taken anything, right then and there. Just to shake the fear of deportation or of a temporary prison term on a fish-processing barge.

"Yes! Anything. Is good on land also but prefer ship!"

The woman kept typing. Even the light seemed better, gentler,

on her side of the glass. Another time—ten years before, say—this sort of thing was liable to make him snap, to get him on his feet proclaiming the injustice of it all. Now, though, he was willing to shut up indefinitely, to put even his last scrap of humanity on a plate, just to be on the other side of that glass. As one minute stretched into three, then five, the woman's good cheer and placating smile began to curdle into boredom and into that all-too-familiar look he'd come across more often than not throughout his life. The one that said *I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do*.

"Thank you for waiting, Mr. Bu-cha, but I see that, unfortunately, the company has no opening for your skill set right now. Maybe in a few more months, when the shipping lanes to India reopen—"

"No, please, I no have months, days until expire."

The woman gave him a confused look, then kept typing and nodded in sympathy—in sympathy, but with the same expression. *I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do*.

"I understand your pre-dic-amen ..."

She glanced up to see if he'd understood. The interface was probably feeding her the words phonetically. She went on:

"But there are no jobs by sea for your qualifications or in one of our land-based facilities in the country."

Marin's heart was pounding in his ears, part hangover, part nerves. No, not nerves—fear. He didn't know if it was the woman's personality, the behavior-filtering algorithms used by the company's HR software, or the desperation of ending up jobless halfway across the world. But he couldn't get angry, couldn't run amok—his dread was stronger than his rage.

"What about other country?"

The company had branches across the region, after all. He wasn't holding out for a post in Perth or Wellington, but it ran processing centers in Palau, Samoa, and—

"Mister Marin . . ."

"Please! I am *disperat*," he pleaded, his English breaking at the end into Romanian.

The woman sighed again, now properly annoyed, but something in his unshaven, hungover face tugged at her heart just enough to make her risk a reprimand from her AI supervisor. She opened a new window on the second tablet. Marin imagined the streams of data dancing across the woman's interface, the software calculating success rates, the AI's sinister monotone telling her, most likely, that she was wasting her time on him, slowing down the process and upending her chances at a good rating.

"I will need your fingerprint to confirm query."

Marin rubbed his thumb impatiently on the orange square that had appeared on the tablet's haptic surface. In his visual interface, guide lines and little 3D arrows pointed out where to put his finger, as if he were an idiot. The woman needed access to his visa file, probably. Hence this little theater of consent. The AI—and probably the woman too—already knew his visa file had long been empty. The last to lapse had been a three-day Australian visa, back when they'd put in at Darwin, months before. The woman confirmed his fears.

"Unfortunately, I see you do not have any of the visas or modules req—"

She stopped and frowned. It was never a good sign when officials pulled a face, but Marin was desperate—by now, anything beat nothing.

"Wait a minute, Mister Bu-cha. I see you have some other qualifications too."

Other qualifications? Like what? Marin had the basics: Able Seaman Level-1, plus incident-and-rescue training for when a hurricane hit, or the ship caught fire, or something else cropped up that the AI constellation couldn't handle yet. That, and three cleaning-and-maintenance modules he was still paying off from before he came to the Philippines. What else could there be? He'd never paid for anything extra. The woman smiled, pleasantly surprised. He preferred her frowning: a smile was never a good sign when you were dealing with the company.

"Mister Marin, I see you have security training?"

"What?"

"Security training? Ten years as . . ."

He was confused. What was she on about? The woman squinted at the screen, mouthing the word to herself syllable by syllable. Then she raised a finger and tapped something. Security? Like the mercenaries aboard ships? What the hell was she talking about? Then Marin's eyes went wide. Through the fog of his hangover and the pissy light seeping down from above, he finally understood.

"No, iz no security iz—"

Something clicked within the interface,¹ and he felt that old synthetic *understanding* washing over him in waves. The translation kicked in all at once. The woman had switched his Premium-Lite subscription back on.

¹ Account credited for 30 days. Services active: Premium-Lite (PL) Translation, Interlocutor Visual Sync, Subtitles, DEF Filtering, BAS Sensitivity, Suggestions, Contextualization. The notification flickered before his eyes, and Marin instinctively dissolved it with a glance.

“—local police.”

“I beg your pardon?” said the woman.

“I was with the local police, ma’am. Not security. I mean, it was mostly directing traffic and chasing off drone pirates. Not what you need.”

The woman stared, confused.

“Pirates?”

“No—kids, ma’am. Kids who steal delivery drones. Poachers. Not security work. I never served in the army, I’m no good at it. I came here to clean—”

The woman looked from the screen back to Marin. She still didn’t understand.

“Mr. Bucea, I’m seeing twenty-two qualifications now, including these new ones for security. European certifications, valid for twenty years and accepted by the company software.”

“Yes, ma’am, but that’s what I’m telling you—those are just, you know, little *scams* the boys back home cooked up to pad their records and collect extra *bonuses*.”

The interface flagged *scams* and *bonuses* as untranslatable at his current tier, prompting him to purchase an upgrade. Indignant, Marin dismissed it and pressed on:

“Look, if my file said I could fly planes, would you put me behind the *stick*?”

Another translation pop-up, another refusal. That was how the bastards bled you dry. They sold you the exact thing every human being craved: to be—to *feel*—understood. You either paid up, or you sounded like a lunatic speaking in riddles. They forced you to speak more simply. To dumb yourself down. To just stop trying.

“Well, if it says here that you know how, it means you passed

an exam certified by a quantum guarantor, filtered by an independent AI testing algorithm from the international association—”

“Ma’am, I worked at the local constabulary in Balș, a middle-of-nowhere Romanian town, after university, because I got pulled in by—wait—constab—const—”

Marin shut his eyes and tried to picture the word. His brain had lost the knack for it, what with the auto-translate doing all the heavy lifting.

“—the local police. I wouldn’t say that makes me properly qualified. I mean, I don’t know what the job is, but don’t go sending me off to trade shots with pirates around Sulawesi or Kalimantan, because I can’t! I’m no good at it! I’m begging you, please . . .”

The woman was starting to lose her patience. Sooner or later, Marin had this effect on everyone. At first glance, he seemed mysterious, wise, erudite even. But then he had to go and open his mouth.

“Mr. Bucea, you came here today seeking to extend your work agreement, correct? Do you wish to accept what the algorithm is offering, or would you like to pass and let me move on to the next applicant?”

“Ah—no, of course I want it! I’m desperate, ma’am, please! I’m just saying, so you know what to expect.”

The tactile surface beneath his elbows lit up all at once. He jerked back, shattering the illusion of closeness between them. Even though they were speaking the same language now—each using their own, but hearing the same—every illusion of friendliness, of openness, was gone. Now she just looked like what she was: irritated and bored. He turned toward the screen and read over the job offer.