

The Patron

"The Devil's agents may be of flesh and blood, may they not?"

Arthur Conan Doyle

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The organisms had adapted and multiplied.

They were not unities but rather systems. Three trillion self-replicating chemical machines with again as many foreign units of the same function – themselves the product of thousands upon millions of molecular reactions, combining and recombining in continuous infinitude. Order born from chaos.

Destroying, consuming, processing, dividing, feeding upon all around them. Nature epitomized in its most merciless form – “life” itself only death by another name.

A thousand evolutionary generations had multiplied their capabilities. No longer shaped by but shaping the world around them. Blind, programmed instinct – impulse – drove them forward as it drove all else.

Defects remained. He saw a total of only three truly healthy specimens in the entire mass of one hundred twenty-six. No matter. It would be rectified in time. His impulse was to observe and to know such facts. It had taken him through an evolutionary cycle of his own. He too was no longer adapting but shaping.

Alone at his table, Dr. Leopold Van Ruys, Ph.D. sipped his glass of Pinot Noir and observed the pack of his fellow *homo sapiens*. The median age here was at least 45, equally divided between the sexes, which meant a high proportion were safely sterile like himself. The males were the problem. Unlike their female counterparts, they were capable of lifelong fertility, spreading their own genetic defects among an effectively limitless number of offspring. Unlike all other species, where degenerates perished quickly in the struggle for both sustenance and mates. Tools and civilization had effectively ended all advancement in human biology. The paradox of modernity.

He glanced at his watch. 7:10 pm. His host was not yet late, but his surroundings suddenly irritated him.

The booth at the Tim Raue had already been reserved upon his arrival ten minutes earlier. The paid dinner invitation from a man he had never seen and did not know piqued his palate as much as his curiosity. His Max Planck stipend allowed for a fair range of culinary choice, but had not been issued with extravagance in mind – the eleven dishes he ordered tonight would have exhausted several days of spending.

He took another sip and let the wine burn its way down his throat. The sensation drowned out the echoing trivialities of his fellow diners. The sound was a steady buzz that would have been at home in an insect hive, thought it conveyed none of the order, efficiency or purpose of worker drones. Only the confusion of an uncertain, unguided humanity.

“*Herr Doktor* Van Ruys, I presume?”

Van Ruys had seen that man but not truly noticed him until he spoke. The stranger now stood over his table with one arm expectantly extended. Tall, thin and dark, with a bronze complexion that stood out under the dimmed brightness of the restaurant lighting. A simple but expensive-looking suit clothed a wiry frame bespeaking regular physical exercise - Van Ruys was suddenly conscious of the belt digging into his own stomach flesh.

“Yes.” Van Ruys stared without meeting his eyes and said nothing further. The other man smiled, withdrew his hand, and slid into the adjoining seat. He did not give his own name.

“I would like to thank you for honoring me with your presence here tonight, Good Doctor.” The stranger appeared to be in his mid-thirties, but his voice seemed far older, laced with an accent Van Ruys couldn’t place. Not German. He looked Southern European. Perhaps Moroccan. “I’m sure your work at Max Planck dominates much of your time.”

“Yes.” Van Ruys maintained his stare without changing position.

The stranger smiled again and picked up the one remaining menu. “A man of few words, as I expected. I see you’ve already availed yourself of the selection here. With your pardon then...”

There was an extended silence as the man scanned his own menu. Van Ruys simply nursed his wine glass, impatient for the arrival of his meal.

The host remained oblivious to his guest’s ill manners. A waiter shortly took his order and provided him his own beverage. He was sipping from a white glass of Chardonnay when Van Ruys’s order arrived.

The tray could have easily fed an entire party of guests. The waiter carrying it made no other stops on his way. Mackerel, langoustine, lobster and satay chicken was joined by plates of peppered beef, duck, suckling pig, veal and a dessert course of cheesecake, passionfruit and brie de meaux. The table was soon full to capacity.

Van Ruys ignored the waiter’s parting compliments and unwrapped his silverware. Some of the plates were finger dishes, but he wielded knife and fork for all in a clinically efficient, methodical pattern of circular consumption, swallowing from one plate even as he raised the contents of the next.

The stranger watched him and said nothing, as if fascinated by such a display of fastidious gluttony. His meal – a single dish of Peking duck – came when Van Ruys had consumed over half of his own.

“You have been in Berlin for five years now, is that not correct, Doctor?”

“Yes.” Van Ruys plucked a mouthful of lobster from his fork and began masticating loudly.

“Ah, good. I see that my records were accurate. Your grant, as I recall, covers a five-year research project in evolutionary genetics?”

“Yes.” He swallowed a piece of veal.

“I’ve had leisure to read your doctoral thesis. A fascinating theory. Refreshing, in fact. You are a singularly focused man, Doctor.”

Van Ruys ignored the compliment. He had finished the mackerel. An expressionless waiter appeared and dutifully cleared away the empty dish.

“A shame they rejected your proposal for a grant renewal.”

Van Ruys tightened his hand on the fork and speared the veal in an almost violent motion. He didn’t see the victorious expression settling over his host’s face.

The other man sliced a piece of duck and held it aloft as if studying it in the light. “Tell me, good Doctor, do you believe in God?”

“No.”

“Of course. A rhetorical question only.” The stranger lifted the fork to his mouth and chewed slowly. His eyes now shifted away from the table, taking in the crowd of their fellow diners.

“You do not believe in God, Doctor. Tell me this: I have just spoken to you of ‘will.’ Do you confess freedom of the same? Your own capacity for choice?”

“No.”

“Ah. Our doctrines part ways at last. We could now contend of ‘Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will and Fate, Fict Fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute.’ But like the angels before us, we would find no end, ‘in wandering mazes lost.’” He leaned forward and began slicing the duck freely.

“Suffice to say, Doctor, you are a far more rare and capable man than you realize. You have parted the veil and stared into the Void. Finding Nothing, you have *embraced* it. Such men alone can carry the burden of free will.”

Van Ruys took a draught from his wine glass and continued on mechanically through his entrees. The stranger watched him and continued.

“You observe your fellow men around you, Doctor, and no doubt see many things. But what you may not know is that they all live lives of quiet dread. They are free, but freedom is agony. To be free is to choose, and to choose is to suffer. Never more so than in this liberated, so-called modern age. For the apostles of godless freedom have fallen into the very error of Christ when he was tested in the wilderness. On that day three things were set before Him – three by which He could have extinguished the curse of choice and given mankind happiness forever.”

The stranger closed his eyes and savored another portion of duck, tendons flexing beneath his cheeks like horses’ flanks. His Adam’s apple bobbed and the remains of the meat slid down his throat.

“Command that these stones be made bread,’ were the Tempter’s words to Him. He replied that ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.’ Thus He spurned the one thing He could have offered mankind, for Man will only worship that which is certain – nothing is more certain than bread. ‘Make us your slaves but *feed* us!’”

Van Ruys was just starting on his dessert plates, as unmoved as before. The stranger’s lip curled and he spoke again.

“The *miracle* of the bread would have been the first pillar His Kingdom. The second the very *mystery* of the Son of God. But at the Devil’s words, ‘Cast thyself down,’ He refused to tempt the Lord His God, whereby He would have revealed Himself unto Man and abolished doubt forever. So has the conscience of Man been left alive to torment unto this very day.”

The stranger washed down another helping from his glass of Chardonnay. He held up the goblet and stared into the clear, golden liquid as if divining an image from the depths.

“Last of all, he refused the kingdoms of this world freely offered. And for this above all else, He can never be forgiven.” His eyes narrowed into a squint, fingers hardening against the glass.

“With Caesar’s crown, He would have accomplished all that is sought on earth – the *authority* of the sword would have imparted universal peace and universal happiness at last, relieving mankind forever of the choice that has tormented them throughout the ages.”

He looked at Van Ruys again, eyes black and penetrating. “Have you ever read Dostoevsky, Doctor?”
“No.”

“Pity. He was a perceptive man, if a mistaken one.” The stranger set down his glass and arranged the utensils over his now-finished plate. “His Inquisitor spoke of those who suffered by knowledge of Good and Evil. What shall we say of those who now suffer by knowledge of the Void?”

Van Ruys shifted in his seat and took a draught of his own wine. He still did not look his host in the eye.

“Some wise men of the past have said it is the destiny of the strong to rule over the weak. And truly what is a more noble purpose for them? Call them what you will: priests, inquisitors – *gods*,” The stranger smiled darkly. “They alone can carry free will in the Void – the few, enduring suffering that the many may have peace.”

The meal was almost over and this man was offering nothing else but a complete and utter waste of his time. Where was the waiter? One more word of this rambling, nonsensical bilge -

“You should know, Doctor, that I have a gift for you tonight.”

Van Ruys blinked. The stranger had spoken to him in Dutch this time – his own Flemish dialect. He set down the fork and looked at the other man directly for the first time, his eyes narrow and wary.

“What precisely are you talking about?”

The stranger glanced after the departing waiter as if to make sure he was out of earshot.

“A stone from which to make bread.” He pulled a piece of folded paper out of his jacket and placed it upon the table. It slid deliberately in Van Ruys’s direction.

Van Ruys squinted at his host for a moment, but the man’s expression was now unreadable. He withdrew his gaze and reached for the paper. Slowly, almost hesitantly, he began unfolding it before him.

The page contained no text to speak of. In its place were seemingly random lines of black, rectangular shapes arranged in a columnar pattern. Most observers would have found it meaningless. Unlike them, Van Ruys was a trained geneticist, and he recognized what he held instantly. He looked up to the man who had produced it, suspicion giving way to perplexity.

“As you can see, Doctor, the coding is incomplete.” The stranger anticipated his question seamlessly. “I have several additional pages carrying the same gaps. We could perhaps fill them ourselves in time, but with the eye of someone like yourself...”

“What is it you want from me?”

“I invite you to study these documents at your leisure. To finish, if possible, what is currently incomplete. Make whatever use of it you see fit. You may keep the originals so long as you return a completed copy. Put your name to them if you like.”

Van Ruys lowered his eyes to take in the document afresh. There were indeed gaps. They stood out to him now as if written in flame – but he already had an instinctive idea of how to fill them.

He could fill them. He had to fill them. All other questions faded before the familiar fire rising inside him. Not a “soul” or some other immaterial force postulated by imbecile philosophers and mystics. Only instinct, impulse, inescapable biology.

Shaping.

He had never given his name, nor had the Belgian geneticist ever asked for it.

Alone now, he nursed his glass of Chardonnay and reflected that Leopold Van Ruys was a uniquely incurious man. A strange quality in a scientist, but for his purposes a useful one.

Van Ruys had taken all twenty-five pages with him. He was clearly incapable of caring about their origin – only the use to which he could put them. That in itself was not inconsiderable. Another, more successful, grant proposal was very likely in his future now. Assuming he was smart, which remained to be seen in the larger sense.

The original document lay safely enclosed in a vault deep beneath the Concern’s central headquarters. Even if Van Ruys had cared, he could not have guessed its true nature. It was old, far older than he or anyone else in this blinded world could have ever imagined.

The Man With No Name remained at the table for five minutes more, finishing his wine and observing his fellow diners with half-indifference. He had faith in the geneticist’s abilities. A week – two at most – and he expected to hear from him again. The code would be filled, its nature confirmed, and their Search could finally begin.

He finished his glass and rose from the booth, absently leaving a sizeable tip for the waiter. Outside, he greeted the night air with the quiet assurance of a man who had long left all doubt behind. He looked neither right nor left as he boarded the bus to the State Opera House. He looked forward to tonight’s performance: Wagner’s *Twilight of the Gods*.

I spoke to you of suffering tonight, Doctor. But our reward is The Game.

Thus he went his way, his thoughts an aria of ages Past and Future yet to come.

To Be Continued...

“In his house at R’lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.”

H.P. Lovecraft