

## PART II

A presidential election,  
two colours,  
and the sky



**- CHAPTER TWENTY -  
OXYGEN**

*February 24, 2021, 10:00 p.m.*

*Somewhere in a village in the Loir-et-Cher.*

*On the eve of the U.S. presidential election.*

Sagen's alive.

Sailing between Tours and Orléans, he travels in a self-contained, unmarked, telemonitored, and tele-communications-equipped cabin, which serves as his home. His lungs are operational and in full activity, but they have not recovered from his passage through the Darwinian "selector": ten metres of walking is a test, it is impossible for him to go further without gasping.

It doesn't take a genius to pose the diagnostic of post-Covid respiratory failure.

As a result, he has equipped his van so that he can work effortlessly. Sagen spends most of his time lying on a bench in the middle of his electronic junk. Weary, tired without moving, his legs taunt him: physical frustration pushes him to the edge of his bunk to stretch. He massages his thighs and calves.

The man sighs, for a long time, forgetting illness and work for a few moments.



## *Darwin 21* by Henri DUBOC

*What the fuck... Beagle. Darwinians. What a bunch of lunatics. And to think that similar currents are emerging around the globe... who would have said, a year ago, that anti-masks were altar boys? And that we'd have lunatics like these? I shouldn't have played with them... but they're the only ones I've got. And I have a job to do.*

His recent misadventure with the Darwinians has put him on the spot: intelligence is his life, as long as it's behind computers. Sagen has never been trained for the field, but this world is changing too fast. And the big deadline is coming.

The U.S. presidential election is tomorrow.

For the past month, almost paralyzed by his respiratory capacity, most of his activity has consisted of sifting through wire-tap data and computer hacking. In search of the slightest piece of information about the untraceable Archie Sandwill, the American presidential candidate whose head is now worth more than gold.

Dark web, television channels, social networks, radio, and even a novel that came out two weeks ago<sup>1</sup>, is all we talk about now. Not a day goes by without a channel announcing that Archie Sandwill has been found dismembered in the middle of Missouri, or that he is brain dead in a resuscitation unit in a hospital in Costa Rica. Two hours later, a media explains with the utmost seriousness that he would have become a mathematics teacher in New Zealand... and late in the evening, a denial from Buckingham Palace arrives. Signed by the Queen, the missive explains that no, "Archie Sandwill did not take the place of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who recently died on Covid 21". It must be said that between the tall, slender silhouette, age, wrinkles, pale blue eyes, grey hair and mother-of-pearl white skin, the resemblance is disturbing.

Sagen's life is a race for usable information amidst a huge cacophony. But beyond this mission, it would be better for him to find solid information.

Sagen knows two things about his employers: first, that they are not soft. Second, that they'll be generous if the job is done. From now on, for him, it overcomes money or conviction,

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<sup>1</sup> Beta Publisher editions of course! The paper release of *Darwin 2021* will be for November 2020. Just before the American election, if it is maintained...



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because he has been promised something that will soon be rarer than gold and just as expensive, in this coming "New World".

This product that is traded on the dark web bears no resemblance to the mafia gold standards of the past years. Sagen thinks back to the words of Thomasson, the Democratic puppet who took over the White House, when he described the live traffic on American TV:

"Grafts disappear faster than air conditioners in hot weather on Craigslist... You have to see the auctions, it's monstrous".

It is no longer weapons, drugs or bank card numbers that are the most valuable on the big black markets of planet Earth.

It's the organs.

One, in particular, that works in pairs. And one that pays even more if you're a survivor of Covid-21. Because the only effective treatment for post-Covid respiratory failure is lung transplantation.

Countless survivors are looking for new lungs, and some can afford it...

Criminals, diplomats, politicians, clerics, military, superstars... to simple people willing to spend their life savings to survive. Countless parents looking for lungs for their children. All over the world, ambushes, stalks and murders are perpetrated for the reason of wanting to breathe again.

Often to no avail. For, although countless bloody video tutorials are circulating, sacrificing both animals and humans, exploding and properly and sterilely delivering a pair of lungs is not within the reach of the first man with a knife in his hand.

As the months went by, the market has therefore become more and more professional.

In South America, two Amazonian tribes, perfectly insensitive to Covid due to a genetic mutation, have disappeared. After a wave of transplants, it is estimated that two hundred individuals survived. The untraceable genocide survivors are probably holed up somewhere: rumour has it that they were bought alive by a few billionaires who had their lungs put aside, with the right blood type, so that they could be sacrificed the day their wives and children came to get them.

Other countries are more openly showing the colour. Sagen walks around on the dark web, he makes an inventory of the



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available lungs of his O+ blood group, which concerns only 9% of the population. China, Iran, Somalia, Russia, United States, North Korea... appalled to see the prices, he knows he can't afford these "lungs on legs".

But if he achieves his goals, things will be different.

Sagen reopens his phone and consults his messages. He quickly finds this photo he received a few days ago: the face of a young teenage girl, handcuffed and surrounded by two uniformed guards. Chinese military. The girl is probably Uighur. In her hands, she is holding a blood type card with "O+" written under her chin, as well as blood tests indicating the presence of Covid-21 antibodies. She would be cured.

He reads and rereads the message.

SMS - Mac Coy

Find Archie Sandwill and she's yours.

Sagen broods, holds his head in his hands, and turns off his phone.

*Fucking Sandwill... How does he hide so well? It's a shame... if it wasn't for that selector bullshit and those fucking Darwinians, hopefully I could have found him on my own... A hundred and fifty million rewards. Enough to build a gleaming clinic in Mongolia, put in a couple of transplant surgeons, and take over the respiratory industry.*

Like many agents of the famous American spy agency - the CIA - Sagen is in the same internecine struggles as his country. Correspondent for Europe for years, this Civil War has brought the entire official field organization and agent network to the old continent.

It was already difficult to know to whom to devote oneself before, it became impossible even within the house. In order to work quietly, Sagen had to get rid of his field relay, a young colleague who felt a "soul of a democrat, protector of the unity of the USA".

Pensive, as time went by, Sagen decided to go back to work. He lies down, tunes his computers, parameters the two A.I. research software programs that scan the entire local telephone



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network for him, launches his programs... and goes back to his good old paper notebook.

Beatnik, Darwin, Rock, Margaret, OPOV, Yellow and Blue, Parmiggiano Regianno.

The list of "Key Words" from the cross-checking of all his sources. No matter how he mixes them up, it is impossible to turn them into something usable. These words have emerged because they have no place in the scenery and were used several times on different and untraceable channels.

The only thing he's convinced is that Sandwill is around. Twice, the programs he designed identified the candidate's voice - and the funny thing is that the old senator was speaking in Italian.

Other than that, nothing.

Nothing comes to him in the face of this succession of improbable words.

Nothing at all.

In any case, Mac Coy, his boss at the time, is as frightened by his lack of progress as Sagen is by his uselessness.

*Fucking bureaucrat... the poor bastard doesn't even realize we're the same... He's in the middle of the action, and if he's angry like that, he's not getting anything out of it...*

All he got from this Mac Coy is that he's a Camacho man who works in close proximity to Acting President Thomasson. That's the only channel of information he's got, and this Mac Coy can't get any good information out of him. On the other hand, it's a gold mine for equipment.

The man has given him access to two weapons storage points within a radius of 200 km and quite a bit of currency. Better still, he promised him the rapid dispatch of an extractor, a small device that concentrates the oxygen in the air and will enable him to breathe better, and even to recharge his own bottles, which will give him greater autonomy.

Sagen listens, concentrates on the blabla that his headphones give him, randomly targets private conversations from cell phone to cell phone: nothing special. Lost in his thoughts, he imagines an Archie Sandwill probably on the run helped by people as competent as him. But he is certain of one thing: if, as he thinks,



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Sandwill is somewhere in the region, it will move soon. The elections arrive.

*Speak of the devil...*

Bingo.

A radio transmission.

The analysis program prioritizes it for him and flashes it on his monitors.

It comes from the French army, which transmits on its frequencies and those of the police and gendarmerie.

Military voices. They speak fast and loud. They're reporting an attack at the Tours Hospital Center. Directly within the security perimeter. Heavy damage. Fire. Shots fired. Explosions. Destruction of buildings, evacuation of patients... Injuries. Multiple KIAs.

And finally, the information he's been waiting for so long. Sagen smiles with a carnivorous grin. In an hour at the most, he'll have it all figured out.

"We picked up an injured doctor, a professor of cardiology who got beaten up and described the attackers. There's a young man, also a doctor, we don't know more. The man is dressed in a "Santé Réunion" health-care uniform. The victim thinks it's odd that he's involved in this, it doesn't matter, the man's name is Guy Lafaye. He is 1.75 m tall, chestnut brown, inexperienced at first sight, but he is to be considered extremely dangerous. He is accompanied by a woman in her fifties with a very strong American accent. She introduces herself as "Margaret Thatcher". Armed, very dangerous. She threatened the doctor with a handgun and then violently assaulted him. Based on the wounds and the surveillance footage, we think she's a professional. She's proficient with handguns, sniping and close combat. The two assailants shot several of our men before setting fire to the perimeter. They escaped in an EMS truck. I repeat. EMS truck. Do not chase them alone. Repeat, do not chase them alone. Do everything you can to accommodate them and await further instructions. »

Sagen pulls out his phone, digs into his contacts. A few rings, and someone picks it up.

— Mr. Beagle?



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— Here you go. But it's dear Mr. Sagen... the mysterious man who wants to give us Darwinian people tomahawks... What's up? How do you breathe today?

— Not well enough to come in here and punch your glasses out, Mr. Beagle. However, the brain is there.

— It's not very nice to talk like that, and I'm offering to help you...

— It's Darwinism, Beagle. You taught me that very well.

Beagle laughs on the telephone:

— Very funny, Mr. Sagen! I'm delighted to see our doctrine radiating all around us. What's up? What can the Darwinians do for you?

— Now is the time. I've found my targets. Don't shoot them down, but find out where they're going, and wait for my directions.

— How about that... But what do your targets look like?

— They're in an ambulance truck and they've left Tours Hospital.

— That's very interesting, Mr. Sagen, what you're telling me... Because I have something you're going to like. That will make you... very happy. You asked us to keep an eye out? Snoop around? Find a woman with an American accent? Well, a relative of ours who works at Tours University Hospital identified her as soon as she arrived, before she blew up the place. You see, all the Darwinian domination of this region? This is just the beginning...

— This is excellent. Well done, Beagle. And thanks to the Darwinians. Do you have a record of her?

— We're following her. Actively. The lady drives fast... And I think we're not the only ones looking for her, but as far as I know, right now, no one knows where she is except us. We've had to break our principles and the men following her are as much on bikes as in cars.

— I don't get it, Beagle, be clear!

— Remember! Nothing we "can't fix with our hands". Here we are, to please you, having to ride a car? It's a shame for us, Sagen, a breach of our principles... our beautiful doctrine requires us to do everything by bicycle, normally...

Sagen takes the phone out of his ear and blows long and hard so as not to scream in rage at a guy who talks to him with a





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phone that he would be quite incapable of repairing with his bare hands... the characteristic of madmen is to drive people crazy.

— Okay, fine. I get it. And thank you, Beagle. Anyway, do you have them in sight?

— I'm getting messages every five minutes confirming that.

— Oh, good. We'll probably do business! I've got some more that I can negotiate with you. I've got some fabulous tactical slingshots to offer you, accurate and silent and...

— Tutut... let me stop you there. If you want us to do business, we need better than that.

*Here we go again...*

— What the fuck is that?

— Sagen, find a reason in accordance with the darwinian values. Because we will not harm these people without a reason that is in perfect accord with our ideology...

Sagen is stuck, speechless, unable to think.

— ...because, Sagen, those two people who look very resourceful to me in that ambulance truck could make excellent recruits for our people, right? So it's only if you can find me a reason compatible with our ideology that we'll let you know of their destination. With that, I'll see you soon.

And Beagle hangs up, leaving Sagen, his phone in hand.

*Oh, for fuck's sake! What an asshole, what a lunatic! He's completely sick!*



**- CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE –  
END OF THE ROAD, BEGINNING OF THE PATH**

*February 24, 2021, 9:58 p.m.*

*U.S. Presidential Election Eve*

*At the same time, on a road, in an EMS truck...*

— Wow... my little Froggy... Did you hear that? Hey, we're stars, my dear! Luckily, I have incredible eyes. Have you seen how I can drive in the dark? Without the light? And did I ever tell you that I know how to fly a helicopter?

Of course I've heard. I'm mortified.

The implacable words of this radio conversation between French military men drown out Margaret's impossible comments. It's like I'm cut in half, the world is collapsing around me.

We are both at the front of the EMS truck, driving through the night on side roads in almost total darkness. The icy panic is even worse in front of this black wall. I can't see anything, so I take a look at the speedometer and don't understand how she does to drive at 50 km/h. Margaret turned on the dashboard control radio and, in a few seconds, connectd to the gendarmerie's frequencies.

Until we heard this.

*This is real, for God's sake... it's not a nightmare. How am I going to deal with this? Soldiers... she took out French soldiers*



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*on French soil, destroyed a hospital... in the middle of Covid 21... I'm involved in those murders... And everybody knows what I look like now.*

I'm done. Floundering, decomposed, I feel like I'm liquefying in my seat.

— Hey... smile, kid! What's with the face? Is crying going to help, baby? Or do you want to get out of this deep shit we're in?

And Margaret shakes me like a plum tree.

— Wake up, Froggy! You listen to Margaret if you want to see your family again! So... did you hear the man? It's me, public enemy number one... well, there's your teacher who even tried to cover for you a little... That's not enough, okay...

Nausea, discomfort.

— Anyway... You want to know, my dear? In twenty minutes, the whole French army will be behind our ass... and they'll be in a very, very bad mood!

The nausea turns into a tidal wave, I feel my stomach going round and round. I roll down the window of the truck, stick my head out and try to vomit. Nothing helps. Nothing comes out and the icy volley of air in my face doesn't bother me at all.

— Hey? Hey! You could ask! You want to leave the clues behind, Froggy? Wait, I'm kidding... anyway, they already have your picture, DNA, fingerprints... well... you can leave the vomit if you want, Frog! Come on, I'm stopping, kid, you're not going to mess up our nice truck, are you? There you go.

And Margaret to pull over quietly to the side. Open the door, get out, miss the step, fall into a ditch, wallow headfirst in the grass, suffer, get up.

And throw up.

Guts and guts.

Margaret comes in and patted me on the back, talking almost nicely to me.

— There you go, good... Come on, empty out. It's going to be okay... Take it easy, huh? You'll get your strength back after... I'm sure there are glucose ampoules in the truck's medicine cabinet? Maybe, some little orange juice, for diabetics with low blood sugar... And breathe! We're going to make it! I'm a professional...



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Answer with my head between my legs, coughing, my nose atrociously burned by the contents of my stomach which didn't go through where it should have. I evacuate the remains of my snack through my left nostril.

— Fuck, but Margaret, fuck... I don't get it, I'm sick of what you're saying... I don't even know if I want to see what you're really like...

— Me? But I'm James Bond, Froggy! But as a woman, you see! My dream, since I was a child... but I never got the super gadgets. Come on, now. You're breathing... I had to stop the truck anyway, kid... Cheer up, you'll be fine... and I'll be watching you! If you run away, I'll shoot you in the knees, okay?

I can't believe it but I hear myself say "okay", motivated, I think, by the idea that she'd leave me a minute alone.

*Breathe... you've got to stop putting up with this. Get a hold of yourself. Get your hand back on something. I don't want to know, but you're going to have to ask her what she wants from you at some point, old chap...*

Breathe, swallow, concentrate. A few moments later, I'm feeling better. I get back in the vehicle and watch the enigmatic ballet of this insoluble person that I accompany against my will in this completely crazy escapade.

This woman terrorizes me as much as she fascinates me. No Stockholm syndrome. Just that in the medical profession, the esteem of colleagues is built on their ability to solve problems.

She still managed to pull off an impressive feat by extracting us from the CHU in Tours.

Margaret opened the hood. She first went shopping in the truck and pulled out no less than ten metalized survival blankets - the famous golden first aid blankets with which firefighters wrap accident victims. Carefully, she's spreading them out and stacking them one by one above the engine, without me having the slightest idea of what she's doing.

— Well, that'll do it. It's going to get a little hot, but it's so cold... let's go! See, Frog? It's for the GPS tracker. All these vehicles have them in there, I found the case, but fuck, you can't get it out because it's so attached... It's expansive, this nice truck! Anyway, with this, the signal is blocked. We'll be able to go on in peace with nobody on our asses.



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— That's great news. And where are we going?

— Not far. And we're going fast, kid. You'll soon find out.

When she's done, she closes the hood on her work. The golden edges stick out on all sides, it doesn't matter, she seems satisfied and walks towards the driver's seat, climbs up, handing me a small medicine pad while taking out of her pocket a little orange juice that she miraculously got.

*Resourceful... Does she ever get it wrong from time to time?*

— Frog, you see? I knew it, orange juice! And I got you some steroids in the back... come on, you eat six pills, you'll wake up with that, and on top of that... it calms the nerves !

— Honestly, I'd rather have a drink, Margaret.

At this point, why not. I'm going through the blister pack, 20 milligram prednisone equivalent tablets.

— You want me to swallow 120 milligrams?

— Okay, that's a lot... But I just swallowed the same thing Frog, I'll remind you that we've been up all morning, you and me, we did the work in the ER today, and since we're still playing James Bond...

— Is it gonna be a long night?

— Well... if in an hour the problems are not over, I'm not lying to you my little Froggy, it will be very, very long...

In Margaret's eyes, I can only guess at an agitated, violent, terrifying night and feel a whiff of anguish gripping me from bottom to top as my heart accelerates violently.

— Come on, swallow this, you know Frog... in my school they say it stimulates well when there's danger, corticosteroids.

— It's a wake-up call, I can confirm that, but it also makes you very angry! And seeing the corpses behind us, I think you're angry enough as it is!

— Perfect then ! she says as she starts up and puts the truck back on a deserted road in this night darker than coal. Because if we don't hurry, we'll have to make even more corpses... So, take this phone and deal with my GPS.

She hands me a smartphone of unknown brand, not very bulky, but whose massive and reinforced edges make it look indestructible. On the screen, she opened a guidance interface that has nothing to do with the Google Map or Waze apps I know.



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— You type in that address, please. 1, chemin des Griffes-raies, Saint-Martin-le-Beau.

— That's it, I said, placing the phone on the dashboard, so that she follows the guidance. Where is it? May I know what we're going to do?

— Well, well... you'll know... in 15 minutes, the GPS says. Do you mind if I speed up? The light is good !

And Margaret to step on the gas like a madwoman, while I hold on to what I can and the moon lights our way again.

*Ten minutes later.*

We've turned and gone off the road, and the truck is now on a jolting dirt path in an impenetrable undergrowth. After a few hundred meters, moving forward is impossible: Margaret finally turns on the vehicle's headlights, and again, barely the nightlights. The discreet glow unveils the contours of a dirt and pebble path, poorly maintained and full of potholes, some of which are filled with puddles of frozen water.

It would not miss that we get muddy.

We finally stop. The moon doesn't pierce through the trees, and no matter how hard I look, I can't understand what Margaret is looking for.

Flash of light.

In front of us.

Three shots.

Three small, discreet but clear flashes. In a clearing, about 50 metres from us, at the end of the path.

— Frog, we're here. Come on, I'll light it.

She responds with three sets of two headlights.

All clear.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a face appears at my window. A man in a hood, dark gray and guns in hand. He may not be a threat, but he scared the hell out of me. Margaret seems to greet him. He nods, taps a phone screen and waves Margaret forward. As I turn my face, I can see a lantern lighting up in front of us, in the background, and illuminating the porch of what appears to be a small hunting lodge.



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We move forward.

For the region, the house is neither big, nor beautiful, nor very welcoming. No Tuffeau stone, not even the charm of brick or lime: a modest dwelling, covered with a worn white roughcast and exhilarated by time.

We park in front of it.

— My little Frog, you get out and help behind the truck. It's going to be all right. You're a good boy, Guy Lafaye, you know that? I'm glad you're here. I'll see you in a minute. I'm gonna get a machine out back, go in the house and come back.

Margaret goes downstairs, opens the back doors, comes out with a machine in hand and runs home.

Silence.

I'm not sure.

I look at the steering wheel.

Unreasonable. I don't feel it and, anyway, the man with the black truss gun just joined me, quietly. I don't even have time to breathe, he takes off his hood.

And waves me down the window. I do it.

The face of a friendly, bald sexagenarian unveils itself: friendly, debonair, clever, a festival on this head that I can barely see in the light. The man gives me a gigantic smile and tells me everything out of the blue, with an Italian accent that can be cut with a knife.

— Ahh... *Buona sera!* My name is Sylvio! And even if it's not true... we'll pretend it is, eh! Right, *Dottore?* Are you the *signore dottore?* Because if it's not you, I'm going to have to kill you, right? Right here, right now!

I'm as stupid as a couple of ducks.

— If, uh... *Si.* It's me. I'm the *Dottore*... Well "Doctor" Guy Lafaye, uh... Cardiologist of his state. Graduate of the Faculty of Paris. I swear to you.

The man bursts out laughing.

— Eh... We won't laugh too hard, but it's a joke! Of course you're *Dottore* Lafaye, *il grande Cardiologo* ! The illustrious *specialista*, she said Margaret, you think she's an amateur? She'd have sliced you up long ago, otherwise!

— Or burned alive. Or shot, or even stabbed, I don't know.



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— Ah! I see you two have met! Come, come, come out, *dottore*, he said, opening the door. And Margaret, did she tell you why you were here?

I get out of the vehicle while the man keeps on talking to me, pulling his hood up under his nose, as if to "put on a mask", but putting my hand behind my back to lead me to the back doors of the ambulance truck.

— Ah well yes, so what! We're serious people, I'm not going to do *mierda* in front of the *dottore*, in the middle of Covid! No, we put on the mask... So, what about Margaret? Did she tell you why we're giving you a hard time? And did you see the photo, by the way? Of your house? I took it! But it's all right... the *famiglia*, the little ones... everyone's safe and quiet now.

I stop. Without meaning to, one of my hands got on his chest and forces him to stop. I'm about to tackle him against the truck, but nothing: no blows, no hand up, this man has a great control over himself and would rather look me straight in the eye than put a hand on his machine pistol, when he sees that I'm ready to punch him in the throat.

— Where are my wife and kids!

— *Dottore*, look at me, I'm here, I'm calm and I'm going to tell you everything and even show you, listen carefully to Sylvio. Did you see the mess you've made in the hospital? *Ma che cosa*, what did you want? To let the army come to your house and bother them? What about the kids and your wife? Your family, we got them out of the house!

— What did you do with them? Where are they?

— Well, we thought the *Dottore* should be in good shape! Calm. Ok, they're a little shaken up... but we got them out, they're in a hiding place, and even I have a photo for you, look, do you want to see it?

Barely had time to see a picture.

I don't know where they are.

All I know is I see my wife and two kids sitting on a couch in a strange house. They're around a coffee table with some food on it. No one's threatening them.

The big one's in his mother's arms, uncomfortable.

The little one is playing with brand new Lego boxes and says hi, I don't think he knows what's going on.





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And that makes me feel better. Our little one hates tension, he needs to feel safe.

No one's been roughing them up.

And my wife, with a worried but solid face, holds up a sign that says:

"Guy. I do love you. Do your job and come back. »

I'm looking at the time. The photo was taken 35 minutes ago.

The tears are coming up, I'm not holding them back.

Who are these people? Who the hell is capable of doing this?

Keep my dignity, blow, hold back the tears, and try to find out more from this famous Sylvio, who takes the photo out and gives me an empathetic pout, at the same time he urges me to go to the back of the truck.

Empathy, but pressure. Other style than Margaret.

"I do love you."

An expression that's been all ours since we met, and that we still text each other, to make us laugh.

Here's the number of Sylvio again, in his flowery verb all dressed in Italian.

— *Ma, Dottore...* she told you, Margaret, why you are here? Or not?

— No. I only know one thing, I have to go with her if-no, I'll lose my kids and my wife.

I don't know if the guy's Italian, but he talks a lot with his hands.

— Yeah, well... we have to, don't we? You have to be convincing. Great professionals like you, we don't bother them in the middle of the night for peanuts! Ah here it is! That's why you're here!

I turn around. We're standing in front of the back doors of the ambulance truck. A woman I don't know, armed and wearing the same equipment as Sylvio, has taken the stretcher out of the truck and brought it to the forecourt of the house from which Margaret comes out, whose voice thunders, recognizable among a thousand people.



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— Sylvio! You talk too much, as usual... Help us instead, stupid guy!

— I didn't tell him anything! I'm making conversation! But you, you're not serious, you didn't tell him anything at all!

— Well, so what? Do you think he would have believed me? Frog, look at this again, and tell me honestly? Would you have believed me?

On the gurney is a man behind a mask, connected to a non-invasive ventilation machine, the device that Margaret pulled out of the truck. One of those handy little portable NIVs that save lives on shift in case of Covid's, decompensating bronchopneumonia, or heart failure. At his side is a man in a suit who passively accompanies the stretcher.

No time for introductions: back to the old doctor's reflexes, the man is not well. Polypneic, he's getting worse fast and, the way he's standing, I make the immediate diagnosis of acute heart failure. Margaret has made the mistake of lying him down and the man is struggling like hell to stay in the sitting position.

— Margaret, stop, let him sit.

Bingo, once he sits, he's better.

Orthopnoea.

It's typical of heart failure, the lying position increases the return of blood to the heart and therefore increases the workload of a heart too tired to pump. Pressure builds up in the pulmonary vascular system, water in the blood passes through the small vessels and into the alveoli, preventing patients from breathing by literally drowning from the inside.

— He's having pulmonary oedema! Get him in the truck now! I'll take care of it! Margaret, get me the monitor, furosemide, nitrates, get a BP! And hook the damn machine up to an oxygen tank, goddamn it, he's ventilating on room air, he needs oxygen!

— Yeah, I told you, didn't I? That's my Froggy!

Here we go.

I'm the mission.

I get it.

They needed a cardiologist. I don't know who these people are, I still don't know if I'm going to make it, if my family is going to make it, I don't know who this man is... I didn't even see his



## *Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC*

face behind the NIV mask strapped to his face, but I know why I'm here and I know exactly what I have to do.

Acute pulmonary oedema. An impressive respiratory emergency whose treatment is perfectly codified, and whose management depends on the cause.

Here we go.

I'm getting in the truck. The gurney's set up, Margaret's going through the onboard pharmacy cupboards and pulling out the requested medication. I check his pulse, he's fast, get the BP cuff, take a reading, we're 90/60.

That's not good. It's too low.

— Hey, Margaret. You get out a drip, put in a five percent glucose.

I'll signal the woman who didn't introduce herself to hold the LIFEPACK scope and help me hook up the electrodes. I scan the face of the man who says nothing and breathes noisily, mouth wide open... I can see in his eyes: he is holding on, but it won't last long. I unbutton his shirt; he understands and raises his arms. We take it off by taping the electrodes to his chest.

This head... Even if I can't see him well, his features remind me of someone.

— See how great I am, Frog? Wasn't it a good idea to jack a paramedic truck? It's like a small hospital in here!

— In the meantime, if you want to help me with the electrodes...

We're in business. It's all about moving fast. I'm watching the EKG and trying to concentrate when, once again, I'm disturbed.

— Excuse me?

— What, again! Silence!

No time or desire to answer nicely or to put a face to this new voice coming out of nowhere that I don't know. I'm checking on my patient. I want peace. I am listening, bilateral crackles are typical, it is indeed an acute oedema of the lung and it crackles up to the middle of the lung, and on both sides. Yet, the voice continues:

— I'm sorry to rush you, doctor... But... do you think he'll survive?



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— Excuse me, but I have to concentrate, and I'm not going to answer this kind of stupid questions, I'm not the Lord, I'm a doctor.

— Of course, I understand... Because, well... tomorrow we have an election, you know, doctor? And it's, how can I put it... Very important for the future of the free world! For you too, then! France is a great democracy!

*What the fuck are these stupid fucking questions?*

— I'm, uh... I've got work to do, it's usually a good prognosis, but... well... I don't know.

For some reason, it's hard to answer that question honestly. Even the guy who's breathing like a sock holds his breath to listen to me. Well, never mind, it'll be quiet until I can read this EKG properly.

— I'm sorry to insist... but it would be a good thing if he lived! Because this gentleman here, he's nice as hell! I like him very much! And he's the future Vice President of the United States!

*What the hell is that?*

I turn around.

And there, the surprise is big.

Amazement.

Compared to everything I've just experienced, I think it's apotheosis.

It can't be. It's unbelievable. Insane.

I'm standing still, clinging to my stethoscope, leaning on the patient's back.

Seconds to realize.

That face, I saw it on television again this morning. Tall. Old. Slim. Straight as an "i". Speaking impeccable French with a dreadful American accent. And continues, as if nothing had happened, to talk to me, Guy Lafaye, a cardiologist on the go. To top it all off, the little finger is inserted in his ear as if he wanted to unclog it and scratch his ear canal.

— You're a... Archie Sandwill?

— Of course, I'm Archie Sandwill. So? Is he gonna live or not, my future Vice President? I need him to get elected!

