

**- CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT -
CONNECTION**

*At the same time, 8000 km away
1 Mansion Drive, Santa Fe,
Around 3:20 p.m., New Mexico time zone
Lobby of the Official Residence of the Governor*

As at every one of his press conferences, cameras from all over the world thought they had seen and heard everything: victimized diatribes, nationalist flights of fancy, minimization of the epidemic and boasts about its management in the camps, as well as security exaltations glorifying the AR-15 tinged with a racism that no longer even hides.

But going out and consulting one's phone in the middle of a speech, stopping, cursing dryly, then writing an angry text ignoring the public and the cameras, that the journalists had not yet had the right to do.

Even the ranks of millionaires, various evangelists and generals who have pledged allegiance to him do not appreciate it, and some supporters are beginning to tire of such outings - especially as the leader of the Second American Civil War gives his "final



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campaign speech" on the eve of the election and in front of thousands of people.

Dennis Enrique Camacho, after sending his text message to Mac Coy upon learning of the presence of ALM in the game, realizes the astonished silence in the face of his impropriety. Thousands of faces staring at him, astonished. Without mask, it goes without saying.

After a blank, he looks for his words, mumbles a "sorry" and, pulling himself together, does what he knows how to do: a pirouette, a sneer, a gesture of disdain from the hand, a big "Pfff...". ", while putting his elbow on the desk and finding that false smile that he would like burlesque. A combination that systematically makes the happiness of his supporters:

— Oh, excuse me... you know... The real life... the fake life... It's important! And I want every American to know that I have a family, and that I live normally! You know what I mean? And that I ask myself the same questions they do...

Sneer, the audience acquired at the Camacho vote appreciates this little warm-up:

— And then you say? He was answering either his mother or his wife, wasn't he?

Even a generalized murmur of laughter, tinged with big "Camacho! President for life!"

— Is there a gynaecologist among you? No... Because I have a real question for him, and like millions of American men ask themselves... and it would be very, very, very expensive to go through a doctor to get the answer... Who can explain to me how my wife can still have her period, when she is menopausal? It is especially when it is a question of preparing dinner that she gets her period...!¹

A generalized burst of laughter that drags on and on.

— ... but it's OK, it's OK... because tonight's dinner, before tomorrow's victory, is a gigantic dinner, so I don't blame her! Thank you my darling! We'd invite all Americans, but... Except

¹ No imagination. A future American Republican president in the campaign - Donald Trump in this case - suggested in 2015, that the journalist Megyn Kelly had her period, because she had asked her some nasty questions? That's what this novel is all about. We see misfortunes coming, we only wake up once the damage has been done.

Editor's notes: See the film Scandal of 2019.



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one? Maybe one? You know that guy there... the assassin.... Sad and not funny... Oh yeah, that's it! But shout louder, I can't hear! Yes, you say, sir? Tho... Tho-ma... Thomass what?

For five minutes, Camacho excites the crowd like they do in the circus. Then he brings this excited popu-lace to shout and repeat big "Vote Camacho! "in unison, before leaving the stage under the cheers and confetti, not without waving to a few lucky people to follow him to his official residence for a reception.

A reception where he will only be seen for a few moments, after he explained to his guests and generous supporters that he "thanked them, left them with his good friends and his dear wife, but that they would see him enough in the coming years at the White House, that he would invite them every weekend and that he would take them for a ride on Air Force One, and that he needed some time with his advisors to hammer the nail in".

And a minute later, in a wooded reception room converted into a staff room where he had urgently convened a mini council of war, the meeting began with a bang, with a dozen high-ranking officers waiting for him, wisely seated at tables.

— Fuck! Everything was folded, it was locked, it was good, it was FINISHED, this fucking race of his fucking democratic election! And all of you, all of you, you incompetent bastards of my balls! You know who the future VP is? Do you?

Ten pairs of exorbitant eyes are staring coldly at Camacho:

— Well, it's ALM! That motherfucking Aaron Louis Mandala's mother! But FUCK! Do you realize that this asshole is more popular than Jesus? No, but none of you were able to get me that huge info?

Frosty silence around the table. Stiff, straight shoulders, eyes on Camacho.

Sideration.

A white-haired man in his fifties, in his Navy uniform, coughs and speaks in a high-pitched, nasal voice:

— Let's calm down and think. ALM as vice-president, no matter if it's legal or not seen where we are. But where did you get this information from?

— I got it from my man of my confidence! The one that I placed, me, like a big all alone in Thomasson's ass! Whereas it is



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you, bunch of limp dicks, who are supposed to be my eyes and ears!

Piqué au vif, the soldier keeps his aplomb:

— We willingly agreed to be your eyes and ears, but I think we'll be careful not to be your mouth, given the way it expresses itself. Calm down and please lower your voice.

It doesn't matter. Dennis Enrique Camacho comes up to the gra-de, screaming and sputtering more beautifully:

— Oh, yeah, Willis? You want me to lower my voice? Hey, toto, did you look at the calendar? You know the election's tomorrow? Fucking military! You don't know shit about politics! There's going to be a surprise, there may be votes for Sandwill with this big ALM motherfucker getting in the game! And I'm going to look like an asshole! An ASSHOLE, for not seeing it coming!

Without batting an eyelid, calmly, the man answers him straight in the eyes.

— Fucking politics, it seems to me that you don't understand anything about the military. Camacho, you calm down. Now. I think you're really going to look like an idiot at your inauguration speech after I pull out your tongue. And you can believe what a former combat swimmer I am. I've done it before.

In deciphering the look in the eyes of this elderly man, the renegade governor finds as much determination in it as in himself. He swallows laboriously, grumbles, takes his head in his hands, blows for a long time, and pulls himself together.

— OK, my apologies Willis. But it's enough to drive you crazy! All I can tell you is that the info is confirmed, I got a second text, Sandwill and ALM are together. Somewhere in France, we knew it for Sandwill, now we know it for ALM. But we have a map, even Thomasson doesn't know exactly where they are.

— Is your contact, Camacho, reliable? From memory it's this little pretentious Mac Coy, Warner Lee's former rocket scientist, who keeps kissing asses to get his stupid advisor's salary. And let me remind you that ALM's retirement as president is taking place in his Massachusetts home. We've checked it ten times.

Here we go again, Camacho raises the tone:

— And did you check his lining, you No-bels prize bunch? You know as well as I do that all presidents have them! And for



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Mac Coy, of course he's reliable! Since it's always the last one who presses his balls that's right! The only question now is how to kill ALM and Sandwill! Do you get it, or what?

Dubious, Admiral Willis tries his hand at politics:

— Frankly, I don't think that ALM represents an electoral danger, given the way we've locked the possibilities of going to the polls. And in non-secessionist states, people are too afraid to go to the polls because of the virus. And Americans won't vote for a guy who's hiding out in their own backyard...

— Listen to me, people. Military, politics, it's all the same! When you put a bullet in the head of a target, well? The mission is BORN! Well, imagine the same thing, no more Democratic candidates, no more lost elections! There'll even be nothing to contest! We'll have won, and I remind you that if we lose, we're going to enter into a conflict that's much harder than this peaceful squabble we're playing at right now. I know that all of you are dreaming of playing Appomattox, the Alamo, Little Big Horn, and turning it all into Bull Run ... But hey, wouldn't it be better to take back our fucking country from that Thomasson assassin? So now, you're going to work on that! There! Right now, all night and all day tomorrow! How can I do that? With what? I don't give a fuck, but you kill Sandwill and Mandala in France, pain in the ass!

There, the various heads of the ranks turn to each other, and start consulting each other. After a minute of hubbub, Camacho, overexcited and biting his nails until blood, can't help but react :

— Well, glad to finally have your attention! So, from what I know of this little thirty or so five hundred thousand dollar toys flying the New Mexico flag, we have them in international waters, don't we? Destroyers, cruisers, things full of ballistic missiles, right? And off the coast of France we have positioned nu-clonic submarines, right?

And hop: heads turn towards the governor, time remains as if suspended.

— And what do you want to do? Shave France? Do you seriously believe that all of us here don't realize what will happen if a military power like France is heavily attacked? And how will Europe react? And do you want to add an extra-territorial conflict to the rest of the mess in order to start your mandate? Bravo!



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Camacho, stop opening your Pitt Bull mouth if you're going to say such bullshit!

Another soldier stands up and outbids:

— Especially since you promised my wife the post of ambassador in Paris. Let me remind you that we have largely financed your campaign, Camacho. My wife wants this position!

Back to the wall, Camacho goes down:

— Okay, but no, come on, we're not going to get angry, right? OK, not heavily, we're not going to raze France to the ground... I mean... with one of your specific things? You know, like our Ninja missile... the "flying carver", the thing that doesn't kill civilians... The CIA thing! I don't know, like when you kill a terrorist?

Amateurism. It's with this word that shines in their eyes that the soldiers stare at their "leader". Admiral Willis, dejected, blows, rubs his eyes.

— Good. So, then. The R9X missile has a range of 8 km, and it must be launched from a drone, not a submarine... And discreetly penetrate French airspace without being seen, it's no piece of cake. But hey... We get your point. Let us think about it. We'll go to Fort Hood HQ, analyze the options and get it on its feet. And get your source's ass out of the way so Mac Coy can finally give you the location so we know where to look. And then... we'll know how to hit the target. That's what we do, and we do it well.

February 24th, 2021,

Around the same time, French time, 11:17 pm

U.S. Presidential Election Watch

Château de Chambord, On the first floor of the Keep,

It's no longer tension.

It is much more that runs through the four huge cross-shaped rooms around Da Vinci's grand staircase. No one feels the biting cold of winter anymore.

The book was brought to him.

The book of the Darwinians, the book they have been writing laboriously since the creation of their clan.



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And, the voice of a thundering Beagle resounds in this place, as he utters like the litany of an exalted preacher, a passage from the book on page 12, fourth text:

"The Darwinians are led and guided by a member of the colony, male or female, whose mental and physical abilities exceed those of others. He or she cannot be designated. Power is not transmitted. It must be conquered. A contender for leadership may challenge the incumbent leader, but must defeat him physically and/or intellectually. If by any chance, the leader is physically or mentally flawed, he or she may, however, act as a guide, under certain conditions. The dominant skill will have to be so hypertrophied that it compensates for the deficiencies in the other skills. Then, this leader will never be allowed to reproduce. Any eventual offspring, acci— lace as desired, will have to be eliminated. For the rest, his orders and directions can be discussed, in accordance with the principles of the first three texts: evolution, selection, pressure."

— So what, huh? You want to discuss my orders? My legitimacy? We all approved those words! Those words are our blood! And you all know I surpass you!

Christian, said Cricri, the former driver of the chan-tier machines, advanced holding an arm, a bloody hand.

Beagle didn't leave his staircase, scanning the intruder through his wide glasses, but as the tone rose, Cricri crossed the crowd and came towards him. The two men harangued each other, at the same time as the anger in the crowd was rising.

— Yeah, well, our blood isn't meant to be smeared on the walls either, Beagle. Including mine. Because of you, I'm wounded, and I had to kill Stephen, who was responding to one of your crazy orders!

Silence, barely disturbed by the sound of Cricri's shuffling, shuffling footsteps.

— But what the hell, 150 million? And you're negotiating Swiss Army knives? Fuck, but isn't life here hard enough?

Christian stops, under Beagle perched a good two meters above him, on the banister of the stairs.

— All right, you leave me no choice. If you have the pretention to direct all our ideology... Have you heard the text of the Book? Have you understood what it implies?



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— I won't play your stupid game, Beagle! I don't want to challenge you! What do you want me to do, huh? I'm hurt anyway! I just want people to know that we can get the colony off the ground with all this money! We need it, we're gonna die! They have a right to know! All we have to do is vote, right?

— No, we don't have to vote. No vote when we have laws. If you don't trust me, you die. According to Darwin's laws.

No respite. The crowd is shouting "Hooouu", the Beagle's sons, with knives in their fists, are moving. But they stop, entangled in the crowd that prevents them from approaching Cricri.

And then, a voice.

— I challenge you, Beagle.

Strong, clear, a woman's voice. She repeats distinctly, several times, until everyone has heard. A lifetime of giving orders in the kitchen to her brigade, she knows how to make herself heard.

Silence returns.

Beagle, arms folded, doesn't even bother to turn around.

— Bettina, I know your voice too well not to recognize you again. I don't want to kill you.

The whole room stares at the respected head canteen woman of the colony, who has stepped forward and is standing behind Beagle's back. She is two heads shorter than he is.

— I challenge you, Beagle, according to our laws. May Mother Nature protect you.

When Beagle hears "protect you," he laughs as he turns around.

It was very bad for him.

He took it badly. Slowly.

The gesture is almost natural. Accompanying the movement of the leader's shoulders, Bettina throws a hand towards his wise turn, pushing, while advancing one foot.

A hook paws while pressing her head, straight towards the stone steps.

Beagle rocks.

He falls, quickly.

The room is taken by a great "Oh!" of astonishment.



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The guru literally wallows down the double-revolution staircase, tumbles down the steps, and ends up on the floor. Stunned, face down on the floor.

In the middle of the astonishment, when he reopens his eyes, Beagle sees troubled. Very troubled.

And red.

First he realizes that he has blood on his eyes. He wipes the scarlet veil from his forehead with the back of his sleeve, and while crawling on all fours, he blinks, but nothing helps.

He realizes that something is wrong. His wrist has wiped his face, on which something is missing.

Beagle no longer has his glasses.

— Fuck... it's fucked up... sisters... brothers... who can be so kind as to give me my glasses?

There's something sad and pathetic about contemplating someone who has known glory and strength, taking on weakness and physical impotence. On the ground, on all fours, hands groping, the founder of the first colony of Darwinians on earth, is looking for his glasses.

Above, as the crowd is taken aback by this scene, Bettina quietly picks up the Darwinian book that has fallen down one of the steps. She dusts it off, caresses it, then opens it, ostensibly looking for a precise passage.

— Ah, here it is... " Second text ". "Of technology "... Listen carefully, Beagle. Listen, Beagle.

As she reads aloud, she sits on the banister, quietly in the exact spot where Beagle was standing.

"Second Text: Technology. The tool is an extension of the human hand and brain. The tool is part of pride. But if the tool replaces man in simple tasks, and man forgets his know-how, this techno-logy must disappear. The Darwinians maintain that technology must come directly from manual work; therefore, no machine that cannot be repaired by the hand of a Darwinian, can be used by the Darwinians."

And there, a dramatic turn of events.

The Beagle glasses are not on the ground.

Bettina waves a hand, clutching the wide black frame that everyone here knows.

— Beagle? Listen to that noise!



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The canteen lady lets the glasses fall to the floor. Then, with an ostensible and violent heel blow, she bursts them.

Sound of broken glass.

— Try to fix your glasses without a machine, Beagle. I believe that, in full agreement with our laws, it is time for natural selection.

Beagle screams in anger, stands up. He gesticulates in vain, trying to hit everything around him. His fists meet only emptiness. The crowd watches Beagle's close guard, who dare not move, and does not come to his aid. The dozen or so men and women look at Bettina, who shakes her chin positively. The gesture means both "I'm keeping you safe" and "be careful what you do".

— Cricket? Can you put into practice, as our leader taught us, the great law of nature that defines us, please? Next, I want two of you to take his body to the smokehouse. You will dismember him. You will drain him of his blood and put his meat to dry. This will make excellent slow bait for hunting foxes. And then I'm short of meat for the dogs... And thank you for getting back his mobile phone, to Mr. "you have to be able to fix everything yourself".

Neither one nor two: Cricri advances towards the staggering figure, takes care not to be dazzled by his pugilistic energy, breaks a knee with a kick and puts him down. In the crowd, someone passes him the first tool he comes across: a large gardening shovel. With his able hand, he lifts the tool up, but he starts again twice as it is so heavy. Then he strikes a great blow and splits the skull of the one in whom he has seen a long time, a master. The eyes come out of his head when he mumbles incoherent words. Cricri finishes the job with a heel.

Beagle is no more.

Bettina raises her arms and shouts:

— Let's get going! People of Darwin! In 20 minutes, I want to see 500 of us armed, on bikes, in trucks and in reserve cars! We have \$150 million to go get! Money is not an end, it's a means, and this means will allow us, at last, to take our momentum! And yes, yes, we will grow and swarm, serenely! One man to kill, that's all that separates us from that!



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The cheers, shy, quickly resume. The king is dead, long live the queen. Bettina, a subtle mixture of exhalation and serenity, calls for silence with both hands.

— Cricri, now that you're done, where are we going?

— I don't know, I was on my bike and got sidetracked, before I got into a fight with Stephen? But all I know is that Beagle had authorized a vehicle to follow them... Bettina, look in his phone, we'll know.

And as if that wasn't enough, another voice rings out from the back of the room, right at the entrance of the big wooden doors. Weaker, coughing, you can feel that she is looking for power, but she can't find it:

— Especially not. If you kill it... you'll get nothing. You have to take it alive... or else, kill it once you have been paid. And there... for that, believe me, I can help.

Not everyone has seen this before. But some of them recognize this stranger who had gone through the selector.

Sagen.

— And in good faith, I can also provide you with something other than the axes and bows I brought. I went through the selector, as you did. And I survived. And I came back. I hope you will see my sincerity in this.



**- CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE -
CORONARY ARTERIES**

*Around the same time,
Tuffeau Clinic, on the edge of the Village of Mosnes, on the out-
skirts of Amboise.
Coronary angiography room
11:11pm*

Remembrance.

As a student, having lunch in the on-call room of a parisien hospital, I remember a doctor who willingly recounted how he saved a major French industrial boss from a digestive haemorrhage.

As a good practitioner, however, he would quickly come back down to earth and nuance his story.

"...and yes. And here I am, doing the proud during a semaine... It's supposed to be a medical secret, but this kind of thing, everyone knows it... People smile at me in the corridors, they say "bravo"... As if that's more valuable than saving our everyday patients. Anyway, the next week, while I'm still on call, we have a superstar on the screens in the ER. Again, a guy that everyone



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knows, that we've all seen on TV, in the movies... And he vomits blood. And repaints the recovery room. He died during my endoscopy. I was trying to stop the bleeding, I couldn't do anything. We did everything by the book, we did everything by the book, we were quick, transfusion, resuscitation... but it wasn't enough. So knowing that you gave the patient every chance, and that he died against all odds... in this terrible job, that's what will allow you to sleep. Never brag. And remember that you can't be bad. You have no choice in this job but to be good. »

Not a week goes by that I don't remember those words.

Tonight, it's my turn.

I'm not dealing with a star.

It's a former president of the United States, the same one who was in office when we lived there.

And within two minutes, I will know if I'm moving towards a progressive profile such as that of the captain of industry, or that of the star of the screens. And yet, I'm not afraid. I realize that I should be in panic, I even wonder if my reaction is appropriate. In fact, I'm just doing what I've been taught, and managing stress is part of that.

Anyway, it's off to a good start.

Half seated, breathing heavily under his ventilator mask, President Aaron Louis Mandala is stable and tolerates without flinching the insertion of the deslet into his radial artery at the wrist. It has to be said that I did not go to extremes with the local anesthetic: certainly in a hurry, pressurized by the situation, I would not work anyhow.

And that's just silly, but I love my work. Even though I'm not supposed to be happy and I only have Sandwill's clumsy hands to help me, just the thought of putting in a stent, treating a heart attack fills me with joy.

And I've always loved medicine in the "At work, deal with what you've got, you've got to deal with what you've got anyway.

As I mount my probe to opacify his right coronary artery network, as my patient has asked me to, I talk to him.

I describe to him, in my not so bad English, our "French health care system". Under my sterile gloves, my fingers rediscover the pleasure of automation, I take my x-ray pictures, and



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tell him what it was like to be a caregiver, and treated, before COVID 21, while trying to be extremely synthetic.

I tell him about the birth of social security after the Second World War. By adopting a Bismarkian model, universal and solidarity-based, financed by work. Named after the German Chancellor, who understood, in the midst of an industrial revolution that broke the workers at the age of 25, that the health of these young people was an "investment": otherwise, he would no longer have a young man fit to wage war on France.

Then the theoretical structuring, in two systems, private and public: on the one hand, research, care, the rare, the difficult in university and public hospitals, and a permanent care service welcoming everything and everyone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. On the other hand, fast, efficient, flexible, industrializable care in the private system. With the two entities that looked at each other like dogs in a tile dog, arguing over "activity", and which, without ever decreasing in quality, were running out of breath before the crisis. The structuring of the teaching of medicine at the national level, the good state of mind of the French health care workers, who kept the idea of quality health for all, and general medicine with solid practitioners.

Far from the mercantile health of his own country.

Pause, silence: as I thought at the views of the electro-cardiogram, after opacification, the clichés that appear on the screens confirm that the right coronary artery is normal; bring down the right probe, I will have to explore the left network. Silent and applied behind me, I can't say that Sandwill is skillful, but at least when I remove the material, he puts it safely on the sterile table, without making any asepsis mistakes.

Keep talking, check my small equipment. I then address the progressive deviation, and the defects of these two systems; a completely inertial public hospital, governed by directions disconnected from the field. A millefeuille even in care, the loss of team spirit, wanting to separate the "medical" and "non-medical", where everything is just a "job description", rigidity, and investments always late and often in spite of common sense. Poorly designed, exhausting computer systems... The inability to keep the good caregivers at the end, holding this store at arm's length, the impossibility to say anything to the bad ones, protected by



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unbendable statuses. And in the private sector, shareholders who have never seen a patient, caregivers under pressure, subject to the law of numbers, especially in care structures where they are little in control.... A primary care network carried by exhausted general practitioners, drowned under the paperwork of a social security system which, if it is benevolent at heart, is disastrous in its relationships and suspicious of everything. All of this is governed by an excess of administrative guardianships, producing contradictory indicators, and the only judges, from their offices, of what they think is "relevant".

No one talking to each other to coordinate all this around what matters: the patient.

Even though, curiously enough, the French healthcare system has never lowered the banner of its fundamental principle: that everyone be well cared for.

Once I have finished raising the aorta, all I have to do is position my left probe in front of the entrance to the left coronary, in order to opacify it, and see where it is blocked.

The presentation continues briefly, as I will finally know the work that awaits me in the arteries of the ALM. I point out the political mistake we are still paying for, made ten years ago in the face of increasingly expensive medicine that was making retirees pay by the shovel, to say that *"the fewer doctors there are, the less care there will be... and the less medicine will cost the country"*. A nonsense in a country that leads to aging. Definitely, on a national scale, health is as much an investment as it is a national right and duty.

And while injecting the contrast product, eyes glued to the radio screens, I conclude with the poisoned gift that was given to us: in the year 2000 the WHO declared France to have "the best health system in the world". A compliment that made us give lessons to the planet by making us immune to introspection.

Again I was silent for a second.

The opacification is clear and unambiguous.

I immediately see the problem.

The infarction is related to an occlusion of the anterior interventricular artery. The area of suffering, extensive, is consistent with the trace of the electrocardiogram. I take several pictures, quickly.



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Well, Guy, like that... at last a little luck.

A tiny trickle of contrast product passes through the occlusion, and finely opacifies the downstream arterial network. Not enough to make the cardiac tissue concerned come alive, but enough to define the contours of the obstacle, and to realize that I am facing a very tight, but very short stenosis. Blessed bread for the interventional cardiologist that I am. Hopefully, if the heart has only been in pain for 6 hours, ALM should recover most of its cardiac function.

No time to lose: I'm not going to dilate the structure with a balloon as most cases do, but I will attempt a stenting right away and put my prosthesis in the stenosis, directly.

I can feel it.

Let's go.

I go to the table to get the right stent. A 3.5mm diameter by 1.5 cm long will be perfect. While digging, I speak to the former president:

— Sir, if I may... you know what?

Behind his mask, ALM nods his head, begging me to continue.

— The only good news of the evening is that it should be easy. You have a short, very tight stenosis of the anterior interventricular artery and this explains your heart attack, your heart dysfunction, and your respiratory discomfort. Let's go.

I approach the patient and insert the stent mounted on the patient's guide into the deslet, which I guide up the arterial system to the heart.

Here you go.

An oddity.

Why did I say good news?

No sooner had President Aaron Louis Mandala blinked his eyes to let me know his confidence in me, than an evil sound disturbed the silence.

Slaps. Dry.

Muffled.

And Archie Sandwill, raising his eyebrows to say as if nothing had happened:

— Well... I think those are gunshots, folks.



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*At the same time, around 11:15 p.m. French time,
300 km above the earth's surface.*

So far, it was exciting
Euphorating.

To be the only one on Earth to know where Archie Sandwill, candidate for the American presidential election, was, invisible on the screens during his forced exile. Watching all this from outer space, enjoying the fantastic privilege of all these toys offered by his telecommunications empire, in the greatest secrecy.

But there comes a moment when all this game is turned into reality.

That's when we've just entered reality.

The pure product of cold, unbridled capitalism that is the billionaire, has never been sentimental when it comes to making choices in the interest of her companies. Without any consideration for the personnel that she has been able, as she has expanded, to crush under labor, or to lay off.

But she has always had respect for success and power. And to find out, powerless, that Aaron Louis Mandala is being cared for in the middle of nowhere, in a closed clinique under siege by a band of savages who are shooting with bows and arrows, moves her.

Dumbfounded by the satellite images reworked by FRANQLIN Mackto Urulala becomes fully aware of what is happening before her eyes. The videos of these humans in motion are sharp, even if the silhouettes are tiny. One man first exits the clinic before heading towards the rescue truck. Immediately, a few meters away, another silhouette, hidden behind a vehicle, was making large and precise arm movements.

The man went into a spasm and fell, touching his groin.

And now chaos is unleashed on his screens, in a surrealist silence.

— It looks like... lightning.

Everywhere in the perimeter, human forms begin to move.

— My God... it's running around...

— I don't think it's lightning, but bursts of shots fired from automatic weapons, Mrs. Urulala.



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— Of course, FRANQLIN... You can see the two lines of fire very well, and... My God, my goodness... the shots hit right into the forest, you see that?

— That's right, Mrs. Urulala. After firing from all directions, it now appears that the shooters are accurate. I already count five assailants down and as many on the run. However, some of them remain in ambush.

— Wait... this is just the beginning... But how is it possible to be so precise in the dark?

— The night is clear and it is quite possible that the shooters are equipped with night vision shooting devices. A little... like what we are doing now, but from a distance.

— If you want to... But ... wait, there is a weapon that has stopped firing.

At the front door of the clinic, ambushed, a gun stopped firing. The silhouette puts it on the shoulder and runs towards the man who has fallen to the ground, under the cover of the other shooter, who is keeping up the fire. In response, the ambushed assailants regain confidence and begin to execute the majestic gesture sequence that the billionaire now easily identifies: they fire bursts of arrows.

Mackto Urulala removes his virtual reality mask and blows.

— Is everything all right, Mrs. Urulala?

— Yes. Keep watching, I'm thinking. Do you have any way of knowing if ALM is alive in there? If we finally manage to unclog his arteries?

— No, I don't know. I can't see anything because there are no cameras.

Well, well... Maybe this is the moment when you're going to have to decide which side you're on, old Mackto...

— FRANQLIN, write this SMS from my phone line.

— Who is the recipient?

— Dennis Enrique Camacho, on his personal line I think I'm going to send him a bone. You write this in the message: "Governor Camacho, some information. ALM is the candidate for VP. I can tell you that it's a bitter pill for him and that he's probably going to die in many different ways at the same time."

— It's done. Shall I send it?



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

Hesitation. This is hardly like him.

— We're going to... give ourselves some time. Don't send it now. Wait a few minutes... But when you send, attach the picture we made of ALM's face. The moment he took off his breathing mask will certainly please the governor.

Around the same time, around 11:17 pm.
Tuffeau Clinic Parking

Margaret shoots.

With both hands.

Painfully, but with all her might.

Towing through the collar of his coat Sylvio, who is on the ground, bawling insults in Italian amidst the noise of the gusts. In the top of his left thigh, just below the groin crease, an arrow has been shot. Grinning, he grabs his weapon and tries to aim, he only sees the black.

Behind him, a voice:

— Sylvio keep your ammo for later, we're going to need it !

Only three meters left, yet the entrance of the clinic seems light years away. His comrade is a dead weight, she moves too slowly.

There are other noises, more subtle than Stefania's fire tactics.

Strident whistles, all around them.

The arrows are flying. They graze them. They hit the walls behind them, fall on the asphalt with the sound of wooden sticks thrown on the ground.

Screaming.

— Stefania! Shoot! But shoot!

That's all she does. Burst of three bullets, or shot by shot, Stefania is precise, but, after the over-catch effect, the attackers have no desire to be shot like rabbits.

Quickly, she doesn't hit the target anymore, the yellow and red silhouettes in thermal vision disappear from her night scope: the enemy has taken cover.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

Finally, Margaret passes the door.

Shrill hissing, screaming.

Sylvio takes a second arrow, above the wrist, in the left arm.

— *Ahhh! Bastarda! Porca puttana troia! Me ne frego! Vi ucciderò tutti, capito!?*

Relief, when Margaret finishes towing him inside, brushing against Stefania's silent cannon.

No respite though.

— Stéfania, you cover me, I go back to the truck, gimme your night vision gun and take care of Sylvio, I'm a big girl.

— Negative. Sylvio is tall too, go cover another corner of the building instead!

— Stefania! Fuck! We need the guns in the truck, otherwise we're dead!

— What's up?

— The stuff stolen from the frenchies soldiers, from the hospital of Tours, some guns, but mostly a Hecate II rifle with night vision, 50 caliber, I can fall the trees with this thing!

No need to say more. Stéfania drops her gun, gets her colleague's gun and prepares to cover her. And as Margaret runs outside, Sylvio watches the arrow pierce her forearm. He takes a deep breath, clenches his teeth, pushes the end of his able-bodied hand and, in a second, brings the arrow out again. Then he blows, looks at it, and says:

— *Mierda....* Margaret, Stéfania, it's the madmen! It's the men of the forest! *Sulla freccia c'è scritto "Darwin"!*

February 24th, 2021,

Around the same time, French time, 11:28 pm

U.S. Presidential Election Watch

Château de Chambord, in the large courtyard outside.

There are things that have always worked remarkably well for the Darwinians.

One of them is discipline.

As well as efficiency.



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

Bettina gave simple orders: five hundred members of the clan leave to hunt Sandwill, a hundred remain posted to guard the estate. Get out the bicycles, arm themselves, and prepare the reserve vehicles stored in the stables and on the parking lot of the former hotel relay: the cars and trucks for maintenance of the castle park, along with a few "prise de guerre" stolen from the military. Plus a few motorcycles. Beagle was not completely crazy, and everyone knows that the success of their previous raids, especially the capture of this Chambord, was not based solely on the bows.

Anyway, according to orders, under the light of a favorable moon, the great "Harnesses" that made the Darwinian raids legendary are being deployed behind the vehicles right now.

And there are now 500 people in battle order, who have put on their quivers and put their bows on their shoulders, who are marching in front of the big truck parked in the middle of the courtyard.

Sagen's first delivery was unloaded in no time at all. There's not enough for everyone. A few rifles, a few automatic weapons, but about a hundred tomahawks, combat knives, and tactical stone throwers.

The horde wants to fight.

Bettina and Cricri, after having checked that everything is moving forward, retreat to the castle's porch. They take out the tele-phone stolen from Beagle's body, and call out the hunter twins:

— Anaïs, Sylvie, where are you?

A murmur answers:

— They hold us in respect, the same for us. Status quo.

— Do they have ammunition? Do they cover their entire perimeter?

— Yes, they do. Two mobile rifles, one stationary.

— Is that all they have?

— We sent a hunter on a reconnaissance mission. Barely in the open, they cut it in half, we think with a very large caliber.

Bettina and Cricri are staring at each other.

— Well, we're coming, we need... an hour. The first reinforcements will go faster, count at least 40 minutes. We'll have a few guns. Any sign of Sandwill?



Darwin 21 by Henri DUBOC

— No. We shot a bald guy. He's alive, screaming like a skunk, and keeps insulting us in Italian... but it's not Sandwill. Is it really him? The presidential candidate we've been tracking?

Cricket, cold and determined, answers by tightening his tourniquet on his arm.

— Yes. That's him. I saw him. And that everyone is doing the counter-order to what Beagle said. We take him alive.

— Beagle, Sylvie and I don't care. All we want is freedom.

— That's fine. Hold the position. Don't give away your face.

The two new leaders of the colony hang up the phone and turn to Sagen:

— And you say you have more guns?

— Yes, we do. Not for lack of offering them to Beagle. My stock is not far away, if you tell me where we're going, I can...

There, Cricri giggles and Bettina grabs it by the collar: Sagen, breathless with the slightest effort, doesn't do the proud.

— Listen to this. You're coming with us. We'll take your truck, and if it's not too far from the objective... we'll make a little detour to your stock. But we're not going to waste a second and you're going to explain something to us. If we catch Sandwill, who pays?

