

7. *Peering on another planet*

"What's this?" Christian asked.

In an instant, the surroundings had changed. Through all the windows of the flying saucer, the view was the same: frantically shining white light and yellow chaos, as if inside the hottest firestorm. Christian felt no warmth, but he was sure that it must be awfully hot out there. The light was so strong that it was painful to his eyes.

"We're now inside the star I pointed at," Rudefort explained.

"Inside?"

"Why yes. Even you can see that, can't you?"

"But it must be horribly hot!"

"One might say that."

"How can we survive?"

The supernova sighed and shook its head.

"How many times do I have to explain? Have you forgotten that I'm a supernova? I could absorb this puny sun instantly, without being the least affected."

"What about me?"

"You're protected by my repelling power."

Christian gradually calmed down, and had a closer look. It was fantastic to be right in the middle of a storming sea of fire. A primordial force was breathing, panting and puffing, as brilliantly white as newly fallen snow. Christian gasped, enraptured by the force of it. Then it hit him:

"Hey, how can I breathe? If my spaceship is just an illusion, then there's no air here!"

"Once again an example of your self-delusions. Here's nothing but you and me and the star around us. Are you suffocating?"

"I don't think so."

"So relax! Grow up from your childish anxieties."

It worried Christian some, but as long as he had his imaginary spaceship and could breathe imaginary air, he was not too upset about it.

"We sure got here fast, didn't we?" he said, mainly to calm down. "How did you do it?"

"We traveled at the speed of energy pulsation. Then the time is always nil, no matter how far you go."

"The speed of light?"

"For example," Rudefort replied indifferently. "It's just you and your species who have such impractical means of transportation. In fact, there's nothing more natural for beings of energy, as we all are, than to travel at this speed. Most of us do it all the time."

Christian was proud of being the first man to witness nuclear processes in action, inside a star. He avoided mentioning it to Rudefort, though, being certain that the supernova would take the fun out of it by a few arrogant comments. His visual impression of the star was probably just an illusion, and so on and so forth. He did not want to know.

"What does it look like on the surface? Can we get out of it?"

"Of course."

And they were out in space, on such distance from the star, that it just filled up one of the spaceship windows. Outside all the other windows was black space, dotted by millions upon millions of white stars. This night sky was so filled with them that no constellation could be singled out. Some stars shone more brightly than others, and some were stuck together in clusters. In this conglomeration one could easily lose one's sense of direction, even of what was up or down. Christian was in awe.

"There's your sun," Rudefort said, pointing to a cloud of stars, all of them looking the same to Christian's eyes, impossible to tell apart. Realizing Christian's problem, Rudefort explained: "Well, I told you it isn't very much of a heavenly body, that sun of yours. You find it a little to the left, right under that white dwarf, there."

Christian quickly lost interest in the impossible task of locating his own sun, and turned to look at the view through the other windows. What he saw through one of them made him scream:

“Rudefort! Look! Watch out! Help!”

“What is it?”

“There!” Christian shouted, pointing with a shaky finger.

A dark globe came rushing right at them through space. It was a real giant, and grew by each second.

“That’s a planet,” Rudefort explained calmly. “Nothing to be so excited about.”

“It’s going to crash into us!”

“That’s because we’re standing still in space, while that thing is moving through its orb around the little sun over there. We’re in its way.”

“Had we not better move away?”

“Why? It might be fun to see what it looks like, wouldn’t you say? I mean, you being planetoid. It’ll soon be here.”

“I can see that!”

Christian was too terrified to do anything. He had to trust that Rudefort knew what it was doing — or not doing, in this case. After all, they had just been inside a star.

The planet got closer, filling up the whole view of one side of the ship. There was a swooshing sound when its atmosphere reached them, with sparks and loud bangs outside the windows. The starry night sky disappeared.

Then there was silence.

The surface of the planet uncovered beneath them. Verdant land and deep blue seas appeared between the clouds. Christian would have guessed it was his own little Earth, if the colors weren’t so immensely clear and thick. These were pastures of a dreamland, he thought.

They landed softly in the middle of a field, heavily scented by thousands of flowers that burst of colors. As soon as they were on the ground, the imaginary spaceship disappeared. Christian took a deep breath and sighed. The

ground was as soft as eiderdown, and the air was truly fresh to breathe.

"Welcome!" a voice said out of nowhere. It was as soft and friendly as the whole planet seemed to be.

"That's very kind of you," Rudefort replied.

"Who is it?" Christian wondered and looked around, not seeing anybody at all.

"It's I, of course," the voice said. "You're standing on me, you know."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

Christian jumped aside and looked down on the spot he had been standing on. There was nothing but grass and pretty flowers.

"You're still standing on me, silly," the voice said with a charming little giggle. "I don't mind at all. I said you're welcome, and I mean it. Make yourselves comfortable. Your feet can't hurt me in the least. I'm glad, though, that you're so considerate."

"Who are you?" Christian asked, carefully exploring the grass with the tip of his foot.

"Ah, come on! You must understand, since you're standing right on top of me."

"No. Honestly. I can't see a thing."

"Is that so? Can't you see me? I don't believe you."

"I assure you." Christian was beginning to feel ridiculous.

"You're blind, then," the voice said with sincere pity.

Rudefort leaned over to Christian and discreetly whispered in his ear: "Please stop this nonsense, my friend. It's the planet itself that you're talking to." The supernova turned away from Christian and spoke out loud: "You have to forgive him. This little creature who is my companion has quite a limited world of concepts."

"Aha," said the planet and seemed to be satisfied with this explanation. "We all have our weaknesses, don't we?"

"I wouldn't be too sure," Rudefort protested. "Isn't weakness trying for what cannot be accomplished? I just can't see what that could be, in my case."

The planet replied, with that charming giggle: "What about failure, then?"

"What about it?"

"If what you say is true about your power, glorious as you are, what then if you try to fail? Wouldn't that be impossible to accomplish for you, in all your splendor?"

"Why would I ever want to fail?" Rudefort protested.

"But if?"

"If I wanted to fail with something, I most certainly could. It isn't hard, you know."

"Don't I know it!" the planet exclaimed from the bottom of wherever its heart was. "But if you succeed in failing, it's not a failure at all, is it?"

"In that case, tiny planet, failing to fail is failure, and thus I'm apt to it."

Christian listened to their dispute with a startled expression on his face.

"This I don't understand," he said to himself. "A planet that is alive."

"What's so hard to understand?" the planet inquired. "I'm certainly not the only planet with an 'I'."

"How did that happen?"

"Like it always does. I accidentally passed through a psychoplasma cloud. Ask your splendid friend, the supernova. Wasn't it the same thing with you?"

"Of course," said Rudefort.

Christian was still shaking his head in confusion.

"I think," the planet said softly to Christian, "that you need some basic information, my dear. Please be seated and make yourself comfortable. I like to think that it shouldn't be too hard here. I'll tell you all about it."

Christian obeyed and sat down among the pretty flowers, each one smelling like French perfume.

"By the way, what do you think about my decorations?"

"Absolutely charming."

"Just quanta," Rudefort butted in. "It's all the same to me."

Once again, the atmosphere hummed from the planet's

giggling. "Don't pay too much attention to the supernova. Stars have so little understanding of planetary innovations. They only recognize the very rudimentary. With us it's different."

"Us?" Christian inquired.

"Yes. You being a planetary product, and me being a planet. We understand each other, don't we?"

"Product?"

Christian was glad that he was sitting down. This was getting more and more absurd. He tried not to take the implications of what was happening around him too seriously. Who would keep a sound mind when facing all this? He preferred to think of it as sort of a dream — a very weird dream.

"I should explain," the planet said. "Are you comfortable?"

Christian nodded. That was true, and right now the only thing he knew for sure.

"It might take some time."

"I don't mind."

The planet cleared its throat, and the whole ground rumbled and quaked.

"Now, this is the way it is. All around the universal space there are lots and lots of planets and stars."

"Quanta," Rudefort interrupted.

"Yes, yes, quanta, if you prefer. Now and then such quanta," the planet went on, pronouncing the last word in an exaggerated way, "pass through clouds of psychoplasma. The process that follows is infallible. They get a personality. Right?"

"Right," Christian replied, more out of politeness than anything else.

"This happened to me and this happened to your planet."

"How do you know?"

"My dear, I'm not stupid. I know very well where you come from. As a matter of fact, Earth, as you call it, and I are quite often in telepathic contact. We are, after all, relatively close neighbors. Also, it was your Earth who gave me the

idea to get some variation into my life. Brush myself up a little, you know."

Christian nodded and Rudefort frowned.

"Earth has handled it all so well. It's just like a beautiful fairytale. First she separated her chemical structure into a number of fundamental elements and molecular substances — like stone, water, air, and whatnot. Then she had to figure out a chemical code that is reproductive. This sure wasn't easy. It must have taken her some hundred million solar rotations."

"A reproductive chemical code?" Christian was not really that fascinated by this lengthy explanation, the way the planet seemed to expect, but he did want to understand it.

"From the given premises, Earth had to find her way to a basic chemical process that would work continuously, automatically, and eternally. Perpetual motion, you know. Something that would change and get increasingly complex by time, so that it would have an ability of metamorphosis and self-adjustment. It took some time, naturally, but we have all the time. And then it came to her."

"What?"

"Proteins. They regenerate all by themselves. The sea was good territory for this, so that's where Earth had her laboratory. It took quite some time before anything happened, but slowly the basic molecules were developed into more complex structures. Those and the psychoplasma, which is within the water, fell on dry land with the rains, so the process was soon well on its way, all over Earth's surface. Oh, Earth has told me many times about her excitement, describing it much more vividly than I can. So I just had to try it, myself. You can see that I have gotten quite far already. Naturally, I have no life forms as complex as those of your planet. Not yet. But given time, I sure will."

"It's like magic!" Christian said, admiring the beautiful landscape, and even more so the pleasant smell of all the flowers.

"Not at all," Rudefort interrupted, definitely irritated.

"It's just what I've said — multiplying by division. Nothing more."

"Of course!" the planet replied patiently. "Division, what else? Still, you have to admit that the result is attractive!"

"Yes, really!" was Christian's spontaneous reaction. He did enjoy feeling the soft grass, viewing the many magnificent colors, and smelling the strange flowers.

The supernova said nothing.

"And I gather you're quite pleased with yourself as a consequence of protein reproduction and refinement?"

"Absolutely!"

Coming to think of it, Christian could mention a couple of improvements on himself that he would enjoy, but said nothing about it.

"Stars have no understanding of the artistic qualities of life. They are so," the planet was searching for the right word, while Rudefort grew darker, "so primitive."

"Watch it, micro-satellite," Rudefort grunted. "I'm not just any star. If you don't show more respect, I might decide to absorb you, and then we'll see what good all your experiments did you."

"Now, now," the planet said softly, starting to giggle again.

"I won't stay here and listen to this nonsense for another instant!" Rudefort exclaimed. "Are you coming, Christian?"

"I guess I have no choice," Christian mumbled.

"What a pity," the planet complained. "You won't have time to see some of my own specialties."

"Like what?" Christian inquired, not that eager to leave just yet.

"Oh, I took myself the liberty of adding some alternative solutions of my own invention to the ecology. Nothing very particular, but I kind of like them, myself. Such experiments give me a feeling of individuality — quite a relief in this conform universe."

"Individuality!" Rudefort moaned.

The planet continued with growing excitement, not the least bit bothered by the supernova's animosity: "For example, my nights are intriguing. They have sort of reversed daytime ecology. Doesn't that sound thrilling? And the different reproduction mechanisms of my plants are intriguing. Great fun! I'm still at my best in the water, though. Some completely revolutionary species, I tell you."

Rudefort stood up and took Christian's hand.

"One thing, please!" the planet insisted.

"What?" Christian asked, while Rudefort was impatiently pulling him.

"For sentimental reasons, if you please. Your Earth and I are such good old friends. I'd love it if you would leave a memory, a souvenir from your world."

"Gladly, but what?"

"Energy and psychoplasma, of course. That's all there is, as your friend will be happy to explain. Drop some of your water on my soil. Wouldn't that be beautiful? The symbol, you know. Joining two worlds. It's not asking too much, is it? It would mean a lot to us. You wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all. But how?"

"Just pour some of your home planet's water on my soil. That's all I ask of you."

"How?" Christian repeated, trying to figure out where to find Earth water.

"How! What do you mean how? You should know it best. Are you so reluctant to help with such a small thing?"

"I haven't brought any."

"Please! You consist of it! So, how do you normally discharge water from your body?"

Finally, Christian understood. He blushed.

"I don't feel like I can, right now," he mumbled.

"Why are you being so difficult? It's all I ask for."

Christian opened his fly. It embarrassed him so much that he had to turn his back to Rudefort.

"Don't look now."

"I've got no eyes," the planet said.

It took a while before something came out, and it was

little more than a few drops, but the planet was delighted. Its joy made a soft wind play over the fields, so that all the grass and the flowers bowed repeatedly.

“Can you please bring one of my flowers home with you, and plant it on Earth when you return? We will be most grateful, both of us.”

Christian obeyed, and carefully dug up one of the pretty flowers with its root. He thought it best to keep good relations with his own planet and its close celestial friend.

Rudefort was so aggravated that they took off right after this was done. The prosperous, blooming planet saluted them.

“Remember me!” it called out when they levitated from its surface.