NATALIA AFANASEVA
SHINIE'S RITUAL

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«Издательские решения»

Afanaseva N.

Shinie's Ritual / N. Afanaseva — «Издательские решения»,

We live in a dynamic era and in a world changing so fast that there seems to be but one little step that separates the past from the future. A whole load of useful inventions previously known from science fiction books are now being called into service… However, the problem is that you are not alone here, and our future is a fabric woven from the efforts exerted by the many around us. No technology would stand a HUMAN. Welcome to the world of absurd fiction, where everything goes wrong.

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Shinie's Ritual
Natalia Afanaseva

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It's a well-known fact that our Future is mighty world rescuers wearing exoskeletons, and heroic spacevessel captains prowling the Universe. The smart things capable of doing all yourdaily routine work. Super-geniuses and explorers creating the new reality.

Maybe itwill be this way, but to err is human. Stumbling and ending up with eggall over the face will be as human-like in the future as it is today. However… not unlikely, with the advent of anti-gravity, the egg will be able to hop and smearitself over your face, and, with the appearance of artificial intelligence, itwill try to catch up with you and rub itself in your face once again. I'm here to invite you to take a fresh look atthe Future uncrowned, with a large dose of irony.

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Human Factor

– 1 —

Wahl crinkled. His right foot was encapsulated in a glass cube and was a sorry sight. The swollen bluish-black flesh was oozing drops of some nebulous liquid. Although the cube kept the smell inside, Wahl felt like he could smell it *internally*. The smell was a kind of saturating his entire body and oozing treacherously from every pore. The worst thing was that the leg itched terribly.

Doctor Tim, a merry fat little man, as ill luck would have it, commenced his round with Wahl's chamber mate. One minute, two… Wahl could not bear his boisterous cackling any more. Finally, the doctor turned to him and took an indulgent look at the guy's dying limb.

"Won-der-ful!" he clicked his tongue with enjoyment and shook what was left of his red locks. The thin hair was drawn back in a puny neither-here-nor-there bobtail. Indeed, the doctor's appearance was that of an aging punk-rock fan rather than of a world-class head of science. Wahl hated him.

While the "Wonderful!" followed by either one or two exclamation marks, had lasted for a month, what was left of his patience could last him for but a few moments. And, right away, the doctor said what the whole thing was all about.

"Ti-da-da, ti-da-doo, surgery tomorrow…", he chanted in the manner of his favorite song by the Clash, and Wahl all but joined him, although under any other circumstances the Clash's "Should I stay…?" would have made him want to curse and swear.

He did not say a word to the doctor about the alarming itching, since now his biggest dream was to lapse into sleep and wake up five minutes before the surgery. Yet, he was in for a rather complex preoperative assessment. Everything had been discussed beforehand, and Wahl was aware that there would be no food and, most important, no pain-killers, during the following twenty four hours, plus he would have to go through a whole batch of unpleasant procedures.

But still that was going to be just one day! And he was nearly "off his rocker", already cherishing a to-hell-with-that-leg-an-artificial-one-will-be-ok thought. All the more so, today's prosthetics had grown dexterous enough to craft a limb barely distinguishable from the real one, so to speak. If it were not for surfing…

That was how the whole thing began. Surely, the higher the waves, the bigger the sharks. However, in 99,9999% of cases a shark will not attack you unless you are bleeding. What is left is a one-in-a-million chance of an unprovoked attack. Wahl remembered himself being carried away from the beach, not able to even look at his shredded led, and a rescue man saying to him: "You're one in a million boy, Wahl!" He did have to say something anyway.

If it were not for the surfing, he would hardly have thought about the new method doctors had come up with – protomass limb regeneration. But for the government's financial help (Wahl was an investigator at a local police department), nothing would have come of it either. The cost was far beyond an ordinary citizen's capacity.

Now the government did help him, and at first Wahl was very happy considering himself a lucky boy. Later, he repeatedly tongue-lashed himself, since he knew that he would have rejected it, had he been aware how it would have ended.

The creepiest thing was that it was his leg rotting in the cube that actually generated the protomass. The beasts dressed in lab coats had set up a blockade to let Wahl's leg rot completely. Frankly, the shark did a great job, and, it might have been a hundred years since it had brushed its teeth last time… It took only a month and a half. *Only* a month and a half! Wahl was a crazy surfer…

Alright, tomorrow he'd receive his batch of injections, the "protomass" would be loaded with nano-particles featuring DNA elements, and here we are! Wahl's right leg's second birthday – Happy Birthday, maam!

– 2 —

Everything swam before Wahl's eyes. He felt a scalding pain in the leg. "Can you hear me? Good boy!" Tim the Merry Greek spoke in an unusually serious tone. But he beamed right away, not being able to hold it: "Everything was won-der-ful!"

"You stay here for a while," the doctor absently waved his hand sideways, "but we'll put you back in there (another wave) soon. We have them coming in one by one, applicants, one by one…" And off he ran, jumping up and singing something of his most favorite stock again.

Soon Wahl was transported back to the chamber indeed. The well-recognizable cube was there too. Wahl would superstitiously turn his eye away from his leg until he really knew it was ok. Two weeks later, he was liberated from that glass contraption, which had embittered the last two months of his life, and discharged from hospital. Although there still would be a lot of screening procedures, examinations and treatment, he was back home!

The leg ached, itched and tingled, but it *was*. Regeneration was surprisingly rapid, and shortly after that Wahl started using crutches and was able to reach the window; and after a month he was giving his leg full-scale training by walking along the coast with a stick.

There was only one thing that worried him – a strange pain in the heel. He had telephoned his doctor on that and was advised not to walk too much. Wahl obediently reduced the mileage, but the pain persisted. Not that it was severe, but all nasty sensations seemed to concentrate in the heel, and stepping on it would hurt pretty much.

Nevertheless, going to the clinic was the last thing Wahl wanted to do. He rightly feared detection of a serious problem and, consequently, having to get back to that place indefinitely. But one day in the morning he groped a small lump in the area where the pain was concentrated and realized that further postponement of his visit to the Esculapian lair was no longer possible.

– 3 —

Doctor Tim looked unusually gloomy. Known for moving around the clinic in a fashion of a well-pumped ball bouncing from one wall to the other, he suddenly fell into the habit of shrugging sharply and speaking with long breaks, during which he stared at the floor with his dull eyes.

Wahl briefly described the problem and provided a visual demonstration of his swollen heel. He told the medic about the pain, craving for, if not interest, at least a tiny bit of sympathy, but Doctor Tim continued to indifferently rock heel to toe and hardly deigned to even look at the leg. Finally, feeling outraged, Wahl requested at least an X-ray of the tumor, but the doctor brushed it off wearily.

"I know, Wahl. You don't think you are the only one who has it, do you? Every seventh does, Wahl. Every seventh patient who has undergone the surgery. Everyone of you has the same thing."

"What is it?" Wahl felt cold creeping through his chest. "What… what's happening?"

"Teeth. You all have teeth cutting. My first patients already have fully grown ones."

The world-class expert was a pitiful sight. He would not look Wahl in the eye. But Wahl… The doctor's words were blowing his mind.

"Doctor, please, tell me more details. Why… is this happening?"

"Nobody knows. We have been through three checks. They've mopped us length and breadth. Both for sabotage and negligence. *Negligence*! Do you understand me, Wahl? They found nothing. Nothing!"

"How is that possible?" Wahl began to get the message, "I'm not a medic, Doc, but I remember what you told me. We apply tissue extracted from unaffected areas, which is structurally similar to that in the damaged area, and we do not have jaws growing on our legs, do we?! And why every seventh one?

"I have no idea. This should not have happened, no, it should not!" The doctor looked suddenly alive and he began to furiously kick the first available treatment couch. "I don't understand. I don't un-der-stand. Hypothetically, tiny fragments of other tissues might have gotten in there… But you remember, don't you! The whole thing is gno-to-bi-otic. You didn't spit on the samples, did you? Did you? Neither did I. Neither did anybody!"

The doctor's energy expired rapidly, and he melancholically shook Wahl's hand.

"I'm sorry. See you when they are fully erupted. And, so far, take good care and do not expose it to heat."

…

Wahl had a case of tinnitus. He did remember how absolutely strict everything had been. All samples were selected as if Wahl was going through no less than a case of Ebola virus disease. He did remember the pink plastic strips and the doctor literally scrutinizing every single one, not letting anybody touch them. All by himself!

Wahl pulled on his sock and shoes. Now all he could do was go back home, and he'd have to forget about his job. He sniffed. Yes, indefinitely. That was the expected result. He should have chosen an artificial leg, shouldn't he?! Why, why, why?! The treatment couch caught another shot.

– 4 —

Wahl limped along the corridor. Nothing has changed here. Except a visible decrease in the number of employees. Nobody would walk out into the corridor for a chat with an associate or a patient. During Wahl's hospitalization, there had been much more amicability. Now all doctors were locked in and sitting still as mice, not wanting to stick their heads out.

Miss Granzer, the nurse manager, was the only one who kept her door open. Wahl remembered that battleaxe woman, whose voice was audible throughout the department. Her powerful janitor growl made everyone of the cleaning personnel jump up and mop whatever they had close at hand with twice the energy. Well, well, this one would not care a cuss.

Wahl looked briefly inside as he walked further. Then he stopped, still not realizing what it was that had caught his attention. Then he returned and peeped in again. Granzer was standing at the

table and sorting a pack of pink plastic strips. One, two, three, four, five, six… The plastic wouldn't stick to her hands. Then she licked her finger… Seven… Miss Granzer looked up.

"What is it, sweetie?" she yelled, "it's an stocktaking day, move on, move on!"

EVOcuation

– 1 —

There were six of them. Six young confederates ready to go on any desperate adventure to achieve their goal. Perhaps, this was the only type of behavior a nineteen-year-old could show. Fiery speeches and admiring eyes contemplating the world – they seemed to have sought rather than lived – they had sought for an idea, which was worth living for.

They disappeared in the jungle of Central Africa, leaving nothing but a small camp, which was found four hundred years later by a mere accident.

No bodies were found, but that was no great wonder. What was really curious was the order, with which their gear was arranged and packed – as if to wait for their owners who had gone on a long trip and were to come back one day. There was a stock of food that would not spoil for years, if not decades. Clothes were all new and never worn. ID cards.

Nature did eventually interfere in the order, but it was clearly observable that they had not meant to leave for good. But where did they go and why? They might have known the answer, but they were never found, not even the bones – neither then, nor after a century, nor later.

– 2 —

Three months before the group of six stepped upon the wild lands of Central Africa, a heated debate took place in a classroom of the Institute of Biology in one of the cities of Siberia.

Professor Popov was watching with delight the young men trying to stand their ground. There were a good deal of sophomore bravado, highly flown arguments and scientifically weird statements. Every time he heard yet another absurdity, he lowered his eyes, trying to conceal a smile, and would wipe his spectacles with a rag.

He did not mean to offend anyone. Neither those who were heartily fighting for their moot point, nor those parrying with hackneyed textbook clichés. Such arguments were useful even if no truth sprouted from them.

To be brutally honest, it was the group with the moot point who appealed to Popov. However, it was time to break in, because the lecture was going to be over in seven minutes, and Professor was a man of completeness.

"Dear guys, I can say you are not fully right," he finally said after two frantic waves of his hand, calling upon the disputers to calm down and keep silent, "you are trying to prove that a man is capable of evolving…"

"He should be!" a collective response thundered. Professor drew a horizontal line with his hand in the air to signal that, first, he had understood everything and, second, he wanted the guys to let him speak.

"Yes, man can continue to evolve, because now we have an opportunity to distract a little from gaining our daily bread, so to say, and concentrate on the vector of evolution, as you have put it… the term sounds quite moot, but I've seized the point and I'd like to make a correction… In other words, you mean that it is possible to focus on a particular ability and develop it, say, using methods of artificial evolution."

Popov wiped his spectacles again, fumbling for correct words that would neither offend the guys nor discourage them from directing their quest in their chosen vector.

"You have left out the fact that any evolution is a reaction to external challenges, and the key factor, which has contributed to our breaking from the evolutionary loop, is the absence of this challenge. You see that as a species, we are currently above the evolution, do you understand? We don't need to adjust our lives to nature, and we adjust nature to our needs, which is a reverse process."

"But we are talking about…"

Professor drew another rigorous line.

"What you are talking about is *selection*. It is an imitative and therefore more predictable and less stable process. Your idea sounds very interesting, but it must be applied otherwise, do you get me? Do you?"

Nobody looked up once. It's ok, these boys are strong enough to face it, and they'll be grateful in the end.

"So, during the recess, I advise you to," Professor gave a sly blink, "have a good rest! That's one! (cries of approval and chuckling); not to lose the knowledge – that's two! Think once again over your absolutely respectable opinion, yet from a different standpoint, got it? That's it, see you in the fall."

Boys and girls, now buzzing and bidding good-byes, began to leave the room, some singly, others in twos. Six of them – three boys and three girls – would never get see it again.

– 3 —

They stood near the edge of a huge plateau covered with dense vegetation. As far around as the eye could see, the ground billowed into hills and cliffs laden with lush greenery. A pit yawned right next to them. Raging hundreds of yards below was the jungle of Central Africa. Mountaineering equipment, clothes and tools lay at their feet.

"So what? That's it?" they looked at each other in the eye once again. Each nodded silently. The unanimously appointed group leader walked up to the pile of ropes and tools and dealt it into the pit. After looking down to make sure that nothing had gotten caught on rock outcroppings, he turned to his mates.

"Now that's it. Let's go."

The scenery opening before their eyes was completely wild even by African wild jungle standards. There were no predators, as, notwithstanding its enormity, the plateau was isolated, and so long as they had shed their equipment, they had burned their boats.

Instead, there were tons of stuff around they really wanted – cliffs and rocks, tall trees with smooth trunks and lianas hanging unreachably high.

And down they stepped into the mirage trembling over the torrid ground…

– 4 —

A small glassy helicopter hung over the raging green mass. It looked nice and fragile, resembling a soap bubble, which was about to go down, touch the green carpet and collapse.

However, nothing like that happened. A small scientific expedition crew landed safely on the plateau, where the group of six had gone centuries ago. It was a rather routine research, and if anything could add a touch of life to it, it was zero awareness of the area.

Now that the aerial survey was finished, all they had to do was get down, take soil and water samples, examine the slabs piled at the plateau's highest point, which had caught the inspectors' attention. Actually, they were located within the landing area.

Getting there proved unexpectedly difficult. Every following step threatened to trigger a rockslide, but finally, two men reached the black holes, which, most probably, led to deep caves. They looked inside and, not daring to climb down themselves, sent down a camera-carrying drone.

That was all so routine. Nobody was ready for what happened next.

All but knocking them over, a huge pale skin-winged creature shot out of the hole and settled itself on a nearby rock outcropping. It sat there blinking myopically at the humans and shading itself from sunlight with its membranous limbs. The copper crew was all eyes…

"It's…it's… a human!" the phrase slipped out from the pilot's mouth.

"Whought?" the creature chirped, cocking its head questioningly. "Whought? Whought?"

Then, considering the inspectors too big to prey on, it bounced up heavily and flipped back down into the hole.

Superperson

– 1 —

The Superperson was going through its free phase in one of the cities of New Zealand. A significant amount of power still remained unused, so it could analyze the most recent changes in the control group's behavior. It would take 3,78% of free resources, and that was a rare opportunity.

The Superperson's separate elements performed their functions in the Philippines and in several European cities, but that was no hindrance for the already launched process. The world's smartest machine was doing was what people referred to as 'searching for an answer'.

The question was that the Superperson did not have the qualification to guide the control group's behavior during the last 6 379,15 earthly days. The types of control group members' behavior and categorization parameters had been specified by the machine's creators. However, they had programmed the Superperson to be able to launch its own categorization process with an over 55% parametrical disparity with any of the behavior patterns.

By the time, the Superperson had accumulated set of 14*10E6 incidents, and their parameters demonstrated an over 55% similarity between each other, and a more than 55% dissimilarity with her accumulated set.

In fact, it had defined and coded all categorization indicators. Now the Superperson was in for a much more complicated assignment – to evaluate destructive behavior according to the degree of hazard for the members of the control group.

The problem was that some of the indicators had estimates, which generated controversial conclusions. The revealed evaluation indicators would not let the machine categorize this type of behavior as 'hazardous', although they did not meet the criteria of 'non-hazardous' incidents either.

– 2 —

The Superperson once again aligned the non-standard indicators in the order of decreasing frequency rate. The first indicator was *absence of motivation.* None of the incidents had been motivated. The objects, which had showed behavior deviating from that defined by the standard program, had no reason to act as they actually did. That followed from the analysis of voice records.

Second, incidents were supposed to inflict consequences, which could not be regarded as the only possible ones and therefore *could not be predicted*. Man would call them "absurd".

Third, the criminals did not seem to try to hide at all. The analysis of the controlled group members' body movements, given the destructive act they had committed, had demonstrated *perfect calm*.

Had the Superperson obtained an ability to assign qualitative characteristics to its own condition, it would have referred to it as 'in confusion'. Since a group of scientists and programmers had designed it in back the twenty-second century, and since the global system of supercontrol over offenses against person – the Superperson – had been accepted worldwide, it would not have reached its current parameters.

Capable of assembling its own physical body from nanograin containers, which were located at a decent distance from each other, so that it could arrive at the scene of destructive act within 27 seconds, the Superperson, connected to a full-range detection network, chose to accumulate more data.

As soon as the decision was made, i.e. after 4,45 seconds since the launch of the process, the Superperson once again tuned all its resources to signals coming in from the detection network. There it was: one of the signals was non-standard again. The Superperson directed 4,59% of its resources to the scene.

– 3 —

There were two of them standing face to face. One was checking the time and the other one was looking around worriedly.

"Where is the THING?"

"3, 2, 1… here we are."

The Superperson materialized the nano-particles, which were contained in the nearest tank, and all but walked up to the two.

"Destructive act 3112—05—14789564 detected. Offence against person Category 2, Type 1, Code 3. Non-accomplice theft, minor loss."

"Oh, come on", the number-one objected with factitious resent, "No theft."

"You don't have anything against me, do you?" the number-two uttered with a snort.

"Nothing, Dr. Cooper."

"Well, thank you for sharing your sandwich with me."

"The analysis of your action shows signs of destructive behavior, Dr. Cooper Arc-ID-17895462879."

"No, that's wrong. Why should I steal – you mean I did it, don't you?" Doctor did realize that the Superperson would not appreciate his irony, but he could not hold it.

"Affirmative, Cap," his swashbuckling companion trumped. "Thank you for being alert, Sir… erm… Miss (there was hardly anything in the whole world that the doctor's companion liked better than sneering)".

"Charges of destructive behavior withdrawn, proceeding terminated for mutual denial", the Superperson turned around and, followed by the "criminals"' choked-back laughter, started toward the nearest container. To an onlooker, it might appear that it walked heavily and was quite low-shouldered.

– 4 —

As soon as it collected a sufficient amount of resource in one place, the proceeding was resumed. It started with the question: is the offence against *the Superperson* an offence against *a person*?

An affirmative answer was received in 10,87 seconds.

In 14,35 seconds, the Superperson decided to categorize this type of destructive behavior as 'highly hazardous'.

98,52 seconds later, the first member of the control group became the thirtieth-century's first life-termer.

Strategic Mistake

That was an act Trent could not have expected from the rival. He pulled the collar of his uniform coat. The move seemed robotic, and the body was signaling fatigue and oxygen deficiency. However, his conscience kept ordering him to stay calm. In any case, a response action would follow in minutes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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