

One Step Away

A novelette by Lance Robinson

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One Step Away

At the close of the first day of the summit, Hugo stepped outside to walk in the rain that was not quite rain. The weather was the same as it had been in the morning; the same as when he had arrived in Atlanta the night before; according to the desk clerk at the hotel, the same as the previous three weeks. South of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a formless grey had interposed itself between the ground and sky and rained without pause, but not as downpours, showers, or even drizzle; instead, it was mouse pee, barely surpassing the threshold of *mist*. This was alien weather, Amsterdam-in-September weather. It did not belong here, yet apparently it was here to stay. But for all its persistent strangeness, it was too bland and feeble to confine Hugo to the Congress Center and its interconnected hotels and restaurants, and he slipped out into the streets.

The Atlanta summit was conceived years in advance as a feel-good event, one of many around the world that year to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the United Nations. But as annual death toll from cyclones, heat waves, droughts, and floods escalated, the summit was repurposed as a conference meant to achieve what Kyoto, Paris, and Dakar had been unable to. The one hundred and ninety-five delegations were nearly unanimous, both in their desire for a new climate regime, and in their recognition that fundamental changes to the international order would be needed if the new regime was going to have any teeth. However, they also seemed unanimous in saying, "Don't do anything that might harm our country's standing in the international pecking order." And the way that global governance and international treaty-making worked, a *yes* vote from a simple majority meant nothing: they needed agreement from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, other key countries like Brazil and India, and a sizeable majority of all the rest.

Hugo wanted to believe it was possible, but he knew it would not be easy. The global South wanted damage-and-loss funding quintupled. Canada, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and Norway wanted compensation for leaving their remaining oil and gas in the ground. China wanted a population-based cap-and-trade formula with 1990 used as the baseline year. India wanted a permanent seat on the Security Council. The United States wanted the climate deal to be aggressive and enforceable with powerful penalties for non-compliance; more importantly, it wanted the status quo on everything else. The only thing the first day of the summit accomplished was to unveil the gridlock.

Instead of passing through the vestibule that connected the Georgia World Congress Center to the poshest of the adjacent hotels, Hugo went outside and walked through the Vine City neighborhood before looping back to Northside Drive. Half an hour later, wet but not soaked, exercised but not refreshed, he passed through a layer of hotel security, and then a layer of the State Department's DSS security, before being shown into the Secretary of State's suite. Secretary Myers, pacing as he spoke on the phone, motioned for Hugo to sit. Normally the epitome of poise, right now he seemed like a cornered rabbit. The person on the other end of the call was doing all the talking, except for an occasional "Mmm hmm, mmm hmm" from Myers. Then he said, "Yes, Mr. President," and finally seemed to relax a little. He removed his ear-hanging headset and settled into the armchair facing Hugo.

"Bon jewer, Hoogo," he said.

It was a little joke they shared. The Secretary's French was quite good and was actually less accented than Hugo's English. Hugo sensed, though, that he was just putting on a brave face. Still, he obliged and gave the expected reply, emphasizing all the wrong syllables to exaggerate his Parisian accent: "'Owdy, partner."

The Secretary smiled feebly. "It wasn't all bad today. I spent an hour over at

the NGO side event: it's got a different feel to it than other UN conferences I've been at. And in the summit itself, we got you on the drafting committee."

"The zero draft needs a lot of work. It's as anemic as the Paris Agreement."

"And that needs to change. Too many people are starving and suffering and dying each year, and too much of the suffering is morphing into unrest and radicalization and outright war." He pointed off in the direction of the Congress Centre. "But as intractable as the situation in there seems, Mother Earth has been sending us warnings, and the recognition that we finally need do something serious is more widespread than it's ever been." Myers sucked in a deep breath then slowly exhaled. "On the other hand, this summit could be the *last* chance we'll ever get."

"The last chance?"

"We've got credible intelligence and projections from our AI systems saying that several international actors are at the end of their patience, and if this conference doesn't come up with serious measures—not voluntary pledges, but real regulations and incentives and strong penalties for laggards—if that doesn't happen, the patience will snap and the diplomatic shit will hit the global security fan."

"Isn't that happening already?"

"You have no idea. Okay, here's one. Bangladesh blames India and the Brahmaputra dam for the last three years of flooding. By reducing the flow of freshwater into Bangladesh, the dam allowed the incursion of saltwater to be worse than it would have been otherwise. Geopolithink 7 is predicting with 86% confidence that if this summit fails, they'll go to war.

"That would be suicide for Bangladesh!"

"With seventy million people displaced, Bangladeshis are feeling like their country is dying anyway." The Secretary waved a hand as if to sweep away the

topic and make room for the next. From the small table beside him, he picked up a black, horseshoe-shaped ring and slipped it over his forehead. “Do you mind?”

“No, no,” Hugo replied. “Go ahead.”

Secretary Myers adjusted the headband until it was snug just above his eyebrows, with the curved ends hooked over his ears, then leaned his phone against a vase on the coffee table to watch the headband’s output. “Have you tried one of these?”

Hugo shook his head. “I use a mental health app, but not neurofeedback.”

“Which app? Reflect?”

“No. When I try to introspect and talk about feelings, my brain switches back to French, and Reflect’s French version hasn’t been vetted by Homeland Security yet. The one I use is from a European manufacturer. It’s called Roseau Creux—Hollow Reed.”

“Oh, that’s one of the Insightful Springtime family of AIs. They do weather and climate modelling, cultural simulations, mental health—maybe one other area—I can’t remember them all. We and the French government tried to entice the company to expand into geopolitical simulations, but they weren’t interested—didn’t want to spread themselves too thin.”

Hugo just nodded, and Secretary Myers turned his attention to his phone screen. Hugo waited, watching the Secretary’s breathing slow and eventually his shoulders begin to relax. At one point he shuddered, then closed his eyes and shook his head as if trying to dislodge frightening thoughts. Then he focused on his phone again and continued meditating.

Eventually he spoke again, but without taking his eyes off the neurofeedback display. “If the summit fails, India-Bangladesh would not be the only conflict. DRC and Indonesia would become battlegrounds over critical minerals. And there’s

intelligence suggesting some NATO allies are almost ready to do anything to get GHG emissions down. *Anything*. Including sabotaging Canada's oil and gas pipelines and Norway's offshore platforms." He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head again.

Hugo could see the Secretary was scared. And that scared *him*. An image flooded down from his memory, from a time before he came to work for the State Department when he was sent to Gabon to mediate between factions in the multilayered mess that was part inter-ethnic civil war, part conventional conflict with neighboring Congo-Brazzaville, and part international proxy war over who would control Gabon's oil and whether it would produce oil at all, all of it sparked by a record-setting drought. He had been sent there to mediate, but as he arrived, a heat wave did part of his job for him: it imposed a de facto ceasefire, and it did it by killing nearly thirty thousand people. The bodies he had seen in the streets left a scar in his memory. But the Secretary was now suggesting that if this summit failed, the aftermath would eclipse that and all previous horrors.

"I did my part here, Hugo. I showed my face, and I did my best to convince the Chinese and the Indians and all the rest that the United States is serious. But I'm more use to you in Washington—it's your skill set that's needed here now. And you've got the best team you could hope to have: the AI jockeys will update you, Senator Garcia is the best schmoozer in the world, and Daphne is probably the most resourceful person in the whole State Department. If you can channel this team, channel them through your skills, and figure out which other countries are ready to work together—maybe Mendoza from Philippines, I'm not sure—if you can do that, then you can make this happen." The words were intended to boost his confidence; Hugo felt them as a weight that he doubted he could carry.

#

... And that means this is the longest lasting Omega Block ever recorded. Normally, we expect the jet stream to take the shape of a gentle wave somewhere above Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, and as that wave moves from west to east, it drags weather patterns further south along with it. But as you can see, now the jet stream looks like an old river, with giant meanders reaching down to the southern states. But what's just as important as the shape is the fact that it hasn't moved in three weeks.

What has changed, day by day, is the temperature. These shades in the Midwest have been going from yellow to orange to red. These dark red blobs—one in Canada and one in Arizona—that's where the records are being shattered. Yesterday, Albuquerque hit 112 degrees—that's 44 Celsius for those of you who've made the mental switch. But over here in the east, on the other side of the meandering jet stream, the map is various shades of blue fading to white. It's as if the jet stream lassoed the eastern third of North America and claimed it as part of the Arctic.

And to top it all off, this bit you see here off the coast of Florida: that's Hurricane Chéckina. It's strong and it's getting stronger, and the weather modeling AI systems say it's heading this way.

On the morning of the second day of the summit, Hugo arrived at the syndicate room that served as the American delegation's onsite war room. "The drafting committee meets in one hour," he announced to his team. "If we want to have any hope of reaching a deal by tomorrow evening, we need to start making progress."

"There's no point trying to haggle the wording of all the square brackets with India and China," Daphne said. "I spoke to my counterparts from both countries: we shouldn't expect last-minute flexibility from either of them."

Daphne's career in the State Department went back nearly three decades, and her network and experience were both vast. Hugo, on the other hand, had parachuted into State from the UN system only three years ago. He saw no sign that she resented being passed over for leadership of the U.S. delegation at the summit. However, she did seem to think he was in over his head.

"But," she continued, "China and India both want a GHG regime with teeth as badly as we do."

"Seventy-nine thousand people," said one of Daphne's assistants, quoting the number of people who died in the cyclone that hit India the year before.

"And Shanghai will never recover from that storm surge in '43," Daphne added. "So, they both want a deal. But they want a deal that reorders the international system, so if *we* really want a deal, I think we need to offer India a permanent seat on the Security Council with same veto as the P5, and for China some version of the Diouf proposal for an international currency tied to damage-and-loss financing."

Hugo had to remind himself that as much as Daphne drew on a huge reservoir of experience, so did he. Having seen the operation of the Security Council up close, he knew that with five vetoes it was already dysfunctional; a sixth would paralyze it completely at a time when the world needed the opposite. He also knew that if the Silk Road family of AIs was telling the Chinese leadership to push for a transformation of global finance, it was because the United States had signaled that it might knuckle under. In the past decade, America had lost billions of dollars and more than twenty thousand people to heat waves, storms, and flooding, and to the category EF6 tornado of '42. It was no secret that domestic American politics was desperate for global climate action. Even the radical right was now calling its past denialism "fake history". China was more than capable of taking advantage of such divisions, desperation, and confusion on the American side.

Although Hugo had the confidence of the Secretary of State, he suspected that key movers and shakers in Congress saw him as a mere *mediator*, someone whose main experience was settling disputes between Indigenous tribes and second-rate mining companies. It did not help that he was a Frenchman representing America in the most important negotiations since FDR sat down with Churchill and Stalin. No matter that he'd been a citizen for twenty years—when Hugo met face to face with some people in DC, he saw the word *impostor* written in their eyes. *Yet, for whatever reason, the responsibility for this mission has been given to me.*

“I know we talked about taking a hard stance,” Daphne continued, “but I wonder if we should offer some carrots at the same time as waving the stick.”

I need to stop this in its tracks. If a deal with my name attached to it is going to fly in Washington, I need to show them I've been a pit bull. “No carrots,” he said. “Not even *hints* of carrots. We keep the official discussions focused on climate governance, and meanwhile through the backchannels we make a show of our big sticks.”

He walked them through the details, and few minutes later when the Congressional reps and Senator arrived, they too fell in line, ready to accept his lead on matters of strategy.

By midday, in the room where the drafting committee met, he was seeing signs that the strategy was having an effect. But not in the direction he intended. The Namibian ambassador described the refusal of the United States to discuss new, UN-controlled monetary instruments to support adaptation funding as “recalcitrance”. Later in the afternoon, Canada and Norway joined the voices for reform to the UN Security Council when they saw that they might be able to trade their support for a slower timetable for fossil fuel phase out. The developing countries' bloc seemed to be fracturing, with half of them balking at reducing GHG emissions unless they received massive subsidies for clean energy development, and the other half demanding drastic GHG cuts but also a five-fold increase in

damage-and-loss funding. By the end of the day, even the consensus on the few measures agreed to on the first day was unravelling.

At eleven p.m., Hugo returned to the American team's syndicate room. He sat with Daphne and, needing a break before trying to deliberate strategy again, he suggested that they first check what updates they had from DC. Along with a brief note from Secretary of State Myers—"no progress on my side"—there was also the latest short video of news bite gleanings their support team in DC harvested and packaged up for them twice a day. As well as political news and coverage of the summit, Hugo had asked the team to include news on any noteworthy extreme weather events, thinking he might want to draw attention to such happenings in the formal discussions. The first item in the video package was an update on Hurricane Chéckina. It had defied the short-term projections of the weather models, most of which had foreseen it achieving Category Seven wind speeds and making landfall somewhere near Orlando. Instead, it had stayed over the Atlantic on a path parallel to the coastline and it was still a Category Five.

That was followed by a short clip from the English language broadcast of *Mainland Report* on Taiwan Plus talking about the heat wave in Guangdong Province. "All three of the so-called 'Three Witches' AI weather models got it wrong," said the presenter. "The wet bulb temperature never passed 30 degrees—still horrendously hot, but not the 34 degrees they predicted. The Three Witches also missed the mark on Hurricane Chéckina and on the North American Omega Block. Meanwhile, five days ago, a lesser-known AI called Insightful Springtime issued near perfect forecasts for all three of these weather events." The presenter went on to say that the death toll in Guangdong was no more than twenty people—far less than the hundreds or even thousands that had been expected. Apparently, local governments had been well prepared with cooling centers, electricity generating capacity, and volunteers checking on vulnerable people.

Hugo felt his hope deflate. Confusion poured in to fill the void as he tried to make sense of what he was feeling. Two years of using the Hollow Reed mental

health app had sharpened his self-awareness, and as he brought his emotions into focus, he realized in horror that what he was feeling was disappointment—disappointment at learning that nothing particularly catastrophic had happened with the weather over the past few days. Seventy million displaced by the flooding in Bangladesh; twenty thousand deaths in the United States over the past decade, seventy-nine thousand last year in India, thirty thousand twelve years ago in Gabon—it was not enough, and he recognized now that in the part of his being where hope had entangled itself with despair, he had been counting on a bigger catastrophe to shock the delegates into action.

He brought his attention back to the screen: Daphne had paused the playback. As if she knew what he was thinking, or as if she was thinking the same thing, said, “Looks like we’re not going to get a climatological Pearl Harbor moment to bring us together.”

He wanted to scream. *But we need one!*

Instead, what he said was, “Even if we got one, would it *actually* bring people together? We’re frogs in a pot, boiling too gradually to get serious about it.”

Daphne sighed. “Our Pearl Harbor moment got stretched out over fifty years.”

They sat together in silence. Eventually, she reached to resume the video playback, but Hugo stopped her. “Leave it. Time to get some sleep.”

They left the conference center, passing through the vestibule that connected it to the hotel. When Hugo reached his room, he could hear the machine-gun metallic ping of sleet hitting the window. He ignored it as he removed the headphones and tablet from his bag, woke the tablet, then told it to open the Hollow Reed app. The screen turned a salmony shade of pale orange and two eyes faded into view, closed at first, but then laugh lines appeared at the corners and they opened. Nothing else occupied the screen—only those expressive, penetrating eyes.

“Salut, Hugo,” a women’s voice said through the headphones. “Ça va?”

He began to answer then paused as he made the mental switch in languages. “I think I messed up today,” he said in French.

“Tell me about it,” the app said.

Hugo described how the day had gone, focusing not on the details of the negotiations but on his own thoughts and feelings, his fears and doubts. “I used to worry a lot about impostor syndrome,” he said. “I would talk myself out of believing I have the expertise I say that I have. But this—here, now—it feels different. I mean, we’re trying to create a new global convention to save what’s left of our future, when very smart people, very expert people have been failing at it for fifty years. How can I be the one representing 425 million Americans in this? In fact, me and the other delegates, we’re meant to represent the whole human race. How the hell I am qualified for that?”

“I don’t understand,” the app replied. “You say you have impostor syndrome, then you say it’s not a syndrome—that you’re actually an impostor.”

“For this negotiation, it’s not a syndrome at all—it’s true. Today, I made things worse. I triggered a backlash instead of inviting the others to find common ground with us. *I* did that. This needs the wisest and calmest and most insightful people in the world; not me.”

The eyes shifted on the screen, as if the app was tilting its head as it had an insight. “I see,” she said.

“See what?”

“Hugo, you are so close, but your *self* is still getting in the way. Just take the next step.”

This surprised Hugo. Normally the app simply asked questions—often

insightful, thought-provoking questions—but he could not remember her ever giving direct advice. She always let him figure it out himself. And if this was the app's first foray into giving direct advice, it was a particularly unhelpful attempt. "My *self*?" he repeated. "Have you heard anything I've said? I told you, *I ruined things today, I don't have the insight to do this. I devised our strategy, and it failed. I failed. Do you hear something conceited in that? Something egotistical?"*

"No. You're not a prideful, selfish, or egotistical person. But even in your feeling of inadequacy, your *self* is taking up all the oxygen in the room. '*I messed up. I ruined things. I'm not wise enough. I'm not qualified.*' Let go of the ego, Hugo. From what you've told me of the project you're working on now and the problem you're trying to solve, it's not something you can just force to happen all by yourself using your technical expertise and a screwdriver. Let go of the '*I*'. Instead, let your wisdom and your intuition and the many-colored gifts of your fellows come together and do the work without your *self* getting in the way."

Putain de connerie! I liked her better when she only asked questions. This is a bloody waste of time.

He closed the app, crawled into the bed, and slept a restless few hours as the wind blew sleet and freezing rain against the window.

#

Hurricane Chéckina still hasn't made landfall, and the Georgia and Carolina coasts have escaped the most destructive winds. But this hurricane is a big one and a wet one, and as that warm air mass on the hurricane's western edges pushes inland and northward, the Blue Ridge Mountains have anchored the cold air mass that was already here. So now the wet, tropical air moving into Georgia has formed a wedge that's riding up and over the cold air. And when wet air is

forced upward, you know we're going to get precipitation. But here's the thing: on its way down, that falling rain passes through the cold air layer. When it freezes on the way down, we get sleet. But when it passes through the cold air long enough to get supercooled but not long enough actually freeze, then when it hits the ground—or when it hits trees, or power lines, or airplane wings—it instantly freezes.

This is a “Be careful what you wish for” situation: after three weeks, the Omega Block in the jet stream is finally breaking up, but in Atlanta it's breaking up with a nasty ice storm, not quite rivaling what happened in 2035, but on par with the storms of 1993 and 1940.

Although the ice storm crippled the grid in much of Georgia, the conference center's emergency systems kept the lights shining and the warm air blowing in most parts of Pavilion C where the meetings of government representatives convened. In the American delegation's war room, two analysts—one from State and one from the Agency—finished their briefing on the latest scenarios and strategy recommendations from Geopolithink 7 and Kissinger 4.2. As they put their wet boots and coats back on, Hugo checked the time. The meeting with his Chinese counterpart was in ten minutes, and the drafting committee was to reconvene for the final time one hour after that: time was up to salvage something from the summit. He asked Daphne for her thoughts on the strategy the two AI jockeys had just laid out for them.

She sighed. “The AIs have been getting better at this every year. And of all of them, it's the Kissinger series that gives us the best results for India and China.”

Hugo heard something in her tone that did not match her words. “Please don't hold back—you know I value your input.”

“That's good to hear,” she said. She closed her eyes, gently shaking her head,

and then opened them and looked at Hugo for a moment. “And you should also value the AIs’ input. It’s just... I mean... This situation is unlike anything they’ve been trained on. Hell, it’s unlike anything *I’ve* been trained on. I just think we’re all out of our depth here, the AIs included. We’re trying to solve a twenty-first century crisis with an international system that was designed for 1946.”

“It was designed *in* 1946, but it even then it was out of date. Basically, we’re being asked to defuse a nuclear bomb with stone axes. Any advice on how I do that?”

She shrugged. “Trust your instincts?”

A few minutes later Hugo was sitting with Leung Jin Hie in a calm corner of one of the common concourse areas, close to the security checkpoint that separated Pavilion C of the sprawling Congress Center, where the summit of national representatives was taking place, from the side event for civil society organizations in the other pavilions. Jin Hie listened to the sound of drums leaking through from the other side and grinned. Then he turned to Hugo and began talking. Although the Minister of Foreign Affairs was the public face of the Chinese delegation, it was Jin Hie who, with the help of the Silk Road AIs, was its actual leader. He reiterated China’s position, and although he proposed a couple of new ideas, the overall thrust of what China wanted still tied action on greenhouse gases to broad reforms of the UN and Breton Woods systems. Hugo responded by saying the U.S. was ready to put something different on the table, but he did not get very far before Jin Hie interrupted.

“The global carbon tax? Even if you have a new idea for it that can somehow get key countries onside, it’s not enough.”

How did he know that’s where I was going?

“For the carbon tax to actually help,” Jin Hie continued, “it needs enforcement mechanisms that would require General Assembly and Security

Council approval. And I've already spoken to Russia—they'll veto it. Besides, unless the revenue is reserved for damage-and-loss funding, most of the developing countries will also oppose it."

Hugo had thought that some kind of deal could be struck with Russia on the carbon tax, but Jin Hie sounded as if he had already confirmed that Russia would not accept it. That meant it was time to steer the negotiations back to the main tactic the Kissinger AI had proposed. "The alternative you're asking for goes way beyond climate change. The United States is here to negotiate about what we agreed to negotiate about. The General Assembly resolution set the mandate for the Centennial Summit as—"

"Yes, I know: the mandate of the Centennial Summit is a binding accord on climate change adaptation and mitigation."

There—he did it again! Their AIs are one step ahead of us. He knew what I was going to say, almost the exact words I was going to use.

But Hugo decided there was nothing to do but press ahead. "We can barely..." He stopped himself and drew a big circle with his finger. "I mean we, the international community—we can barely get agreement on climate change by itself. Tying it to Security Council reform, and global finance reform, and a standing UN peacekeeping force will make agreement impossible."

"Hugo," Jin Hie said, for the first time using his first name—and with the correct French pronunciation, he noted, Oo-go rather than the English Hyoo-go. Jin Hie removed the bud from his left ear. "Hugo, can we set aside the pre-planned messages we are each supposed to deliver? Can we step away from the diplomatic combat, and the negotiating positions, and..." He gestured with the earbud that he now held in his fingers. "...and from the people and the computer programs whispering in our ears—step away from all that and talk to each other as human beings?"

This, Hugo thought, is not what I expected. Then again, even his suggestion that we set aside the calculations and contrived strategies could be part of his strategy. But he decided to play along. "This conversation is already unofficial, off the record. So, yes, of course."

Jin Hie nodded, but then waited a long time before he spoke. "I'm afraid we won't find any middle ground in this negotiation battle. Very afraid. I think our only hope is to bring our minds together and create a *new* solution; one that our artificial intelligences and political bosses aren't able to imagine; one that isn't a *middle* ground, but a *new* ground."

Hugo wanted to say yes, and he knew that on one level, what Jin Hie had just said was true. Even if he was playing a cynical psychological game, it was a game that matched what Hugo knew to be true. But it made no difference: he was trapped.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Our position on this is firm. We're still flexible on the details of a new climate regime, as long as it has teeth. But if this summit does not take a decisive step forward, the sanctions that we postponed after the April cyber-attacks and your incursion into DRC will be activated: complete cessation of trade, seizure of assets, everything."

Hugo was not prepared for the look that came over Jin Hie's face. It was not anger, fear or shock; definitely not surprise. Instead, Jin Hie seemed disappointed, as if he had been expecting this would happen but holding out hope that it would not.

"In that case," Jin Hie said, "there's a message that will make its way through back channels to Washington tonight, but I suppose I can give you a preview. I predict that a powerful but worried country—I won't say which country—but I predict that this country will arm Iran and Iraq against your ally Saudi Arabia, and this country will be prepared to support Iran and Iraq indefinitely. This country

doesn't care about Iran or Iraq, but it will provide them and their non-state allies with sufficient weapons to bring enough chaos that Middle East oil production will grind to a halt." As Jin Hie stood and left, he looked like he was on the verge of tears.

Hugo sat there alone hoping another strategy would present itself, but not believing that it would. He was out of ideas. Images he had seen of some of the recent storms and unprecedented heat waves, and what he had seen with his own eyes twelve years earlier in Gabon, all replayed through his mind, and he knew these catastrophes would only be worsening, but doing so too gradually and too late to shock the world into action.

Then he and Daphne saw each other from across the concourse. She glanced at Jin Hie walking away, then headed toward Hugo.

"So, it looks like that didn't—"

"Not now," Hugo snapped.

She looked as if she was considering saying something anyway, but then she said "okay", and walked away.

Hugo did not want to talk—there was nothing to say. Everyone at the summit was talking with other people's words. They all knew what to do, but were tied with strings that would not let them do it. He wanted to listen with his own ears, but the incessant whispers kept saying, "That's impossible. It's unimaginable. It's not in your job description."

#

The Omega Block is unblocked. And we're now looking at the back of Hurricane Chéckina. But although the temperature is above freezing again,

we're still dealing with the aftermath of the ice storm. Most of the northern half of the state is still without power, and it will be tomorrow morning at the earliest before flights are moving again.

And this over here to the west is a warm front moving our way. I can't remember the last time I was able to say that.

At 3:45 p.m., the Uruguayan Minister of Environment, with Hugo sitting beside him, announced to the Assembly that the drafting committee had failed to come to agreement on a text. The silence that followed was unlike anything Hugo had ever experienced at any UN event. The Prime Minister of Samoa—one of the two co-chairs of the Centennial Summit—let it linger. Hugo thought about the hundreds of thousands who had died from cyclones and extreme heat waves and other natural disasters in the past three years, and about the bodies he had seen in the streets of Libreville from his air-conditioned car twelve years earlier. He knew this was a shared failure, not something for which he personally shouldered the blame; still, he hung his head, feeling the weight of the collective shame.

“As you all know,” the Samoan Prime Minister eventually said, “because of the ice storm, none of us are flying home just yet, so it seems the weather has given us a reprieve.”

The delegates were nearly unanimous in approving his motion to extend the summit until noon the next day, with only Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Angola abstaining, yet in the room Hugo sensed no enthusiasm for the extension; more like dread that their failure was simply being prolonged. For the next two hours until the assembly adjourned for the day, speaker after speaker took the floor, pleading eloquently for united action and finding some other country or bloc of countries to blame. Or blaming the fifteen countries represented in the drafting committee. None of them offered any new ideas.

As the assembly adjourned for the day, the Uruguayan Minister told Hugo that the committee would meet at 7:30 p.m. and then messaged the rest of the committee members the same thing. A few minutes later, when Hugo found Daphne, she suggested that the American team each go spend a few minutes with their mental health apps, or get a bite to eat, or just rest. That was fine with Hugo—he had no idea what the team would discuss if they met, anyway.

He went to their syndicate room and found he had it to himself. He got his headphones and his tablet from his bag. The eyes appeared on the screen, and a few seconds later slowly opened. “Salut, Hugo.”

“C’est fini,” Hugo said. “It’s over. It’s a dialogue of the deaf. The desire is there, but not the wisdom, not the empathy.”

“Sorry to hear that. And how did your part in all that go?”

“What? Oh, since we last talked, maybe I’ve done better at letting my team be a team and building on all of their contributions. But what difference—”

“Good. Time to widen the circle now. You’re one step away.”

“One step away? What are you talking about? I have no idea what to do. We’ve been at it for three days. We’ve been at it for fifty years!”

She said it again: “You’re one step away.” But this time the “you” was plural, “vous” instead of “tu”.

“Seriously? Suddenly you’re getting all formal on me?”

“Non, Hugo. *Vous!*” A hand appeared on the screen below the eyes, palm upward, and swept back and forth as she said “vous”, as if gesturing to a large group of people she imagined to be in the room with him. “*You* are one step away.”

He stared at the screen without saying anything. The Hollow Reed app was

supposed to be for emotional advice, mental health, and coaching—at a personal, individual level. Rules against it offering advice on any kind of *social* decision were supposed to be hard-coded into it. *Not that the advice makes any sense anyway. She's been getting all vague and mystical this past week. "I'm one step away." "We're one step away." Which "we" is she talking about? And one step away from what?*

Just then the lights went out, and the dimmer, battery-powered emergency lights came on. Then a small red exclamation mark appeared over the Wi-Fi icon at the bottom right of his screen.

"Oh, sorry Hugo. It seems I have to go." The eyes faded, replaced by text: "Internet connection lost."

That's probably for the best—I should just figure this out myself. Especially since the app seems to have gone off the rails. He removed his headphones and went out to pace in the concourse. With the lighting now dim, coming only from the scattered emergency lights, the whole place seemed to have a different mood, like relatives gathered in the family home to console each other after a funeral. Delegates were scattered in groups of two or three, having quiet conversations.

Hugo walked. Soon he found himself again near the passageway that led to Pavilions A and B and the side event for civil society organizations, and he decided to pass through. Here, too, it was dim, lit with battery-powered emergency lights, but there were also candles—dozens of them spread throughout the hall—and he wondered how they had found that many candles so quickly. And as he crossed the open floor of the main hall, he saw that the mood here was not at all dim. To his left, a group of about ten people, some in traditional costumes from their respective countries, were laughing and shouting playfully at each other. Further on, two people were vigorously arguing. Ahead, he heard the drumming he had heard earlier when talking to Jin Hie. *Some African cultural presentation*, he guessed. He had no plans to stop and take it in, but as he kept walking, he got closer and realized that it wasn't coming from a stage or off in one of the auditoriums; it was just a

group of people gathered in the common concourse area.

A dozen contradictory thoughts spilled into his mind:

What the hell are they celebrating? The summit is failing.

How can I just throw up my hands and say we failed?

Are these the people who should be deciding things instead of us diplomats, bureaucrats, and politicians?

He walked faster, almost ran, until he was through the doors and outside. A cold wind shot frigid rain into his face and drove him back inside.

He went back the way he had come, and as he again passed by the drummers and the crowd gathered around them, he realized there were other instruments, too. And he saw that although two of the drummers were African, one was Asian.

And playing the flute with them! Is that the Japanese UN ambassador?

On the outer edge of the crowd, he saw the Secretary General, standing by himself, taking in the music. Hugo walked over to him. "I'm surprised you're not being hounded here," he said, raising his voice to be heard.

"Oh, I was for the first two days, but by now everyone who wanted to bend my ear has had the chance. Besides, the conversations and the arguments and the music that are going on here are more fun and more interesting than anything I have to say."

"I don't understand that. I don't understand the mood in here. This summit was touted as humanity's last chance to avoid descending into climate wars, the last chance to prevent every glacier in the world from melting, and to prevent every country near the equator from becoming uninhabitable. These are the same people who've been condemning us for our inaction. But this feels like a celebration."

“It is a celebration: it’s the hundredth anniversary of the United Nations.”

Hugo grimaced incredulously.

“They’re not naïve, Hugo. They’re every bit as scared as we are. And of the hundreds of different NGOs and industry organizations and Indigenous communities and social movements who are here, they disagree amongst each other every bit as much as you delegates on the other side of those doors. But sometimes you just need to take a step. And it feels to me like there was a collective, unconscious decision here to take that step.”

“A step toward what?” Hugo asked.

The Secretary General shrugged. “Hope? Embracing their diversity? I really don’t know. That’s why I came back here when the Assembly adjourned: I’m trying to figure that out.”

They stood listening to the music. The musicians weren’t all quite in sync and it was a bit of a cacophony—drumming, singing, the Japanese ambassador’s flute barely audible, even someone with a kazoo—but, Hugo decided, it was a joyful cacophony. And it called to him, like a planet pulling on its satellites, and the words of Hollow Reed echoed in his mind: “You’re one step away.”

“The drafting committee is meeting again soon,” he said.

“Do you have something new to propose?”

“No. We’re finished with proposals and counterproposals. But we need to try. And I guess that means trying something different, something new. Maybe we just need to sit down and figure it out together.”

“To create a new direction,” the Secretary General said.

This is crazy! Hugo thought. *It’s impossible.* He forced the thoughts aside.

“Could we get the Philippine Environment Minister there too?”

“Mendoza? She’s not part of the drafting committee.”

“I don’t care, she’s like superhero of charisma and laughter. Everybody here loves her.”

The Secretary General nodded. “She does sway a lot of representatives from the global South.”

“Exactly,” Hugo said. “Do you think we can find her quickly?”

The Secretary General pointed in the direction of the musicians. “What do you mean? That’s Mendoza over there playing guitar.” Then he left Hugo and weaved toward the epicenter of the crowd. Several people were in the way and Hugo could not see what happened, but the music stopped and then half a minute later the Secretary General was back.

“Is she coming?” Hugo asked.

“Unfortunately, that’s not her guitar—it belongs to a scientist from Greenpeace. So, I had to invite him as well, and once I invited him, I had to invite the drummers.”

Hugo was confused. The point was to get some of the key delegates together in a room—the official representatives. It was not Mendoza’s guitar playing prowess that was relevant here, or the drummers she had been playing along with. Then he saw the Secretary General’s sly grin and knew that of course the man knew this. And yet he was not joking.

“Actually?”

The Secretary General nodded. “Minister Mendoza, Ambassador Nishimura with her flute, the three drummers, and the Greenpeace scientist with his guitar.”

“Won’t the drummers and the Greenpeace guy need red badges to get into the other pavilion? And need all the security vetting for them to get the red badges?”

“I’m the Secretary General. I’m powerless in all the ways that usually matter. But one thing I do have the power to do is invite people to meetings. Don’t worry, they’ll be let in.”

As he walked back toward Pavilion C, Hugo called Daphne. “India,” he said.

“India?”

“India. Do you have any ideas on how to give them what they need *without* adding additional vetoes to the Security Council?”

“Well, me and some of the other delegates here—people from a few different countries—we’ve been talking about that for years. Unofficially. We’ve got some ideas. But these aren’t ideas that are part of any country’s approved playbook. In a way, they’re more radical than anything—”

“Good. Get those people you mentioned—those counterparts of yours—get them together somewhere near the drafting committee’s room. I’ll talk to Senator Garcia—if there’s anyone who can overcome the resistance we’re likely to face, it’s him. I’ll explain in a few minutes.”

Twenty minutes later, Hugo was in the conference room where the drafting committee met, sitting where he could see the door. The room was packed, the drafting committee’s number having nearly doubled. The three NGO delegates played drums as members of the committee trickled in, with the Philippine Environment Minister making people laugh between each musical number. Within a few more minutes, most of the members of the drafting committee had arrived.

“We should start,” the Uruguayan Minister, chair of the committee, whispered.

“Not yet,” Hugo answered. “We need to have—” At that moment, Leung Jin Hie from the Chinese delegation entered the room. “Okay. Now we can start.”

Minister Martinez started the meeting, then turned to Hugo. He stood up.

“Some of us here have stood in the way of every possible version of a global carbon tax. Some others have stood in the way of any solution that doesn’t include reform to the UN Security Council. And *we...*” He gestured to Daphne and then himself. “... we have stood in the way of any reforms that undermine the global position of the United States. But what our delegation is *more* opposed to is the possibility of failing to finally turn a corner on this crisis. And I believe we all agree on that. I’m here to tell you that if the reforms some of you are seeking can combine changes that stop us all from destroying our planet with changes that work for justice, then we’re ready to talk.” He paused and looked slowly around the room. “I’m sure most of you have noticed, our Internet is working again. Once again, we can consult our advisors and our systems and our oracles.” He turned and looked squarely at Jin Hie, and then removed the bud from his right ear. “But let me suggest that before we try to do that, we set aside the voices whispering in our ears and talk to each other as human beings.”

Hugo sat down, and over the next two hours together with the others in the room, he set himself to the task of shaping the human race’s next collective step.



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