

LIFE ON THE RED PLANET

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The old man led them toward the exit. Eko saw that Luoying seemed calmer and was following morosely.

«Would you like to know a little more about the tower?»

**Luoying gazed at the old man without answering. Eko took over.
«Yes, we'd like that very much.»**

«The tower is the heart of a set of ideals. It is the integration of generalized language.»

«Generalized language?»

«That's right.» The old man's voice was even and steady as he gazed at them. «Every form of expression is a language: perception, logic, painting, science, dreams, proverbs, political theories, passion, psychoanalysis – all are ways to articulate the world. As long as we still care about the form of the world, we must care about every type of language. Language is the mirror of the world.»

Language is the mirror of the Light.

Eko suddenly recalled the last words of Arthur Davosky. He took a deep breath. There was some mysterious link between this tower and his teacher's death.

The old man went on.

«... Every language is a mirror, and every mirror reflects a particular aspect. Every reflection is true, but every reflection is also incomplete. Do you understand the conflict between individualism and collectivism? Do you understand the debate between logos and pathos? Do you understand to what degree they each express the truth? How do they reflect different images of the same unity? This is the Proposition of Reflections. It honors every image in every mirror, but worships none of them. It attempts to shift between languages in order to reconstruct the true form of the world through reflections.»

Reflections, Eko thought to himself. Language is the mirror of the Light.

«From reflections, you deduce the source of the light?» he asked.

«Correct. But the premise is faith that the truth exists. Incomplete reflections can be pieced together into the truth.»

Don't forget the Light by focusing on the mirror. Eko nodded.

They approached the exit. Beyond the narrow alley was the ocean of white light. While the parts of the alley walls closest to them could still be seen, the walls merged into the brightness in the distance. The white light was like a thick cloud in which bright sparks flashed from time to time, giving the whole alley the appearance of a swirling galaxy.

The old man smiled and pointed to the exit. He held up three fingers.

«Every age has its own diseases. In my time, the greatest diseases were three. First, that which could not be shared prevented the sharing of that which could be shared. Second, matter, which must be fought over, constrained the freedom and free exchange of the spirit. Third, the images reflected by different mirrors were fragmented and broken, and could not be pieced together or made sense of as a whole. Humans forgot about the world. They remembered only the reflections, but neglected the subject before the mirrors. Proud and impatient, we divided into tribes that each laid claim over a fragment, isolated from each other. This was why we needed the tower.»

The old man seemed to be chanting more than speaking, and his deep voice rumbled and resonated in his broad chest.

«Go ahead.» The old man smiled and patted Luoying and Eko on the back. Through the virtual reality rig, Eko seemed to feel the moist palm of that thick, reassuring hand. **«Through this alley you'll find the tower.»**

Eko looked at the swirling white mist, and then back at the old man. «You won't be coming with us?»

Ronen shook his head. «No. I can only guide you this far, no farther.»

Eko strode forward. Luoying didn't follow. He looked back and saw that the girl was still standing by Ronen's side, as though not giving up on the hope that he would remember her.

He sighed and went back to Luoying and held her hand. Her fingers were cold and twitched in his grip, but she didn't pull away. She followed him into the alley, looking back from time to time, but not stopping.

Soon, they were enveloped by the white light, though the ground remained solid beneath their feet. The walls and statues to their sides disappeared, and the white light filled their vision. They seemed to be walking through an abstract tunnel of light.

Slowly and cautiously, they shuffled forward. Suddenly, a sentence appeared before them, clear, serene, full of conviction, like a ray projected directly onto the retina, and then into the mind and the heart. They did not seem to be parsing or comprehending so much as the sentence was imprinted straight into their understanding by a steady and certain force.

Our theories are our inventions; but they may be merely ill-reasoned guesses, bold conjectures, hypotheses. Out of these we create a world: not the real world, but our own nets in which we try to catch the real world.
— Karl Popper

Eko experienced an all-consuming sense of awe. More sentences came at them and imprinted themselves in their hearts.

I think of sense, and of thoughts built on sense, as windows, not as prison bars. ... I think it is the duty of the philosopher to make himself as undistorting a mirror as he can. — Bertrand Russell

For philosophy, the real difficulty lies in the spatial and temporal multiplicity of individuals. ... It is quite easy to express the solution in words, thus: the plurality that we perceive is only an appearance; it is not real. — Erwin Schrödinger

Eko thought he was in a tunnel in which there was no spatial or temporal order. Sentence appeared after sentence, emerging from the white light like paintings on a wall. It was impossible to look away though there was no pressure to look.

The labor of countless generations is embedded in language and custom, political constitutions and religious doctrines, literature and technology as objectified spirit from which everyone can take as much of it as they wish to or are able to, but no single individual is able to exhaust it all. — Georg Simmel

The faster they walked, the more sentences they encountered. The names were from two planets, across three thousand years, covering diverse fields. Some of the quotes were from men and women Eko had heard of, but others were new to him. He saw; he read; he remembered; he felt. All the quotes entwined with the words of Ronen, with the words of Davosky, like strands of different materials, of diverse colors, all twisted into a single stalk that rose into the sky. He immersed himself in the quotes, melded with the white light in the tunnel, lost all sense of direction, lost all judgment of distance.

Abruptly, the tunnel ended, and he found himself in the open. It was like waking from a dream, and everything he saw was as sharp as a blade's edge. He remembered the last quote before he emerged.

«Beauty is the eternal and pure light of the One expressed dimly through matter.» — Plotinus

He stood rooted to the spot, as did Luoying next to him. They were in a wasteland, and in the middle of the wasteland was the tower.

The wasteland was not particularly different from other wastelands seen on Earth. Clumps of weeds popped up here and there, and the earth itself was a dry white-gray. Roiling clouds hung over the horizon.

But the tower was something else. The cylinder was broad at the base and narrow at the top, where it disappeared into the sky. The wall of the tower was made of cloud and mist, constantly rising, falling, swirling, twisting. And so the tower appeared to change form and shape from second to second. Attached to the tower were bridges and passages in every direction, in different shapes and made from different materials: mechanical arms, numbers, musical notes, watercolor-like smears. All the passages emerged from the mist-cloud cylindrical wall and then stretched far into the distance until they disappeared, as though entering other worlds.

As Eko stared at the tower, understanding sparked to life in his heart. It was as though a clear, pure stream of water had fallen from the air to wash away all his doubts in a moment. He stared at the gigantic tower, a pillar suspended between heaven and earth; he stared at the mist-cloud wall and the multiplicity of passages, all converging into one source, like pieces of a single unity. He read the five letters among the clouds: B-A-B-E-L.

It was Babel that integrated generalized language, that accommodated science, art, politics, technology within the same spirit. Humanity was building a second Babel, a second attempt at climbing to heaven. The conversion of language and mutual understanding. Babel. The tower's name was Babel. Its first letter was B.

Eko raised his hands to the sky. He closed his eyes and shouted silently. His ears seemed to fill with a deafening rumbling.

Teacher, is this where you wanted to be laid to rest? Is this your last wish? Did you want to stay here, keeping watch over the unity of human languages, a guardian and guide like Ronen?

If so, I will exhaust all my power to help you achieve your wish.

He felt a breeze caress his face. He knew it wasn't real. In virtual reality there was no wind and no sand. But he preferred to believe that it was real.

