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## THE OLD MAN

Mzzzp. The door to our carriage in the Metro-Glider swished open. 'Hello, my name is Lukas. Sorry to trouble you. I've been living in the C-Zone for five months now. And I'm afraid I need your help. If you have a bit of money to spare...' He pointed at the mobile payment receiver hanging from his belt. '...Or even a few aroma tablets, a couple of hours for my Mospecs account...'

He tapped at the Mospecs frames on his head. They only had glass on one side and they reacted to his knock with a mzzzp. His other eye looked at us unglazed, directly. 'I'm grateful for anything. And I'm sorry to bother you again.' I hated the C-Zoners. They reminded me of the constant threat of decline from the A-Zone to the Chaos-Zone, as we A-Zoners called the C-Zone. And they reminded me of Nomos. My boss. 'Meet your targets or it's off to the C-Zone!' he used to say. I hated Nomos like I hated that C-Zoner. And I hated the Metro-Glider.

It shot across the city at breakneck speed along a magnetic rail. The glider accelerated and braked once a minute. From station to station. All the curves made me feel dizzy.

There were three of us sitting in a twenty-person carriage. I pressed my hands against the armrests. Opposite me was Jojo, my best friend. Next to me an old man, and that was how the whole thing started.

It was one of my last times on the Metro-Glider. I don't mean that week or anything. I mean in my whole life. In a few days all this would be ancient knowledge for me. But I had no idea of that at that moment, while I was sitting in the carriage with Jojo and the old man.

The old man next to me nodded at the C-Zoner. He smiled and deactivated his mobile payment receiver. Mzzzp. We were alone in our carriage again. Without the C-Zoner. The old man was still there. He had long, grey hair. A yellow collar peeked out of his black hoodie.

I was amazed. I'd never seen anyone with so much hair in real life. I was bald and so was Jojo. Presumably everyone else on the glider was too. No matter how old they were. No matter if they were men or women. It was a pure and shaven world. It was bald. Bald was good.

I stared at the old man. He looked up for a moment and smiled. Caught staring, I looked out of the window. Black strips of concrete whizzed past. Every strip was an apartment block. Every apartment block held two hundred families. Every family had one child. Provided the zone government approved the parents' application.

Not everyone was allowed to have a child. Like my neighbours, for example. They'd passed the finance check (both A+). But they'd failed the genetic suitability test (over 1.3 % deviation from the norm!). Raindrops splashed against the window of our carriage, tracing thin lines.

'We'll have to look in the park hall tomorrow,' said Jojo.

'That'll take forever. How's our target going?' I asked.

'We're behind. Only two this week.'

I pursed my lips and shook my head slowly. Two was really bad. It wasn't nearly enough to pay all my bills. Jojo and I were finding fewer and fewer from one week to the next.

'Remember at the beginning?' I asked.

'We didn't have time to breathe, we were scanning so much,' he said. Jojo and I worked for Scan AG – a subsidiary of the global player Ultranet. Our employers wanted to make the bald world paper-free. All knowledge for all! At any time! Free of charge! – that was their motto. We helped Scan AG to put that dream into practice.

Jojo had brought me in. And I dreamed the dream too. 'The book agent era is over,' said Jojo. I wasn't counting the grey apartment blocks any more; I'd stopped at 132.

'Maybe we're doing something wrong?'

'We've just found all the readers already,' said Jojo. 'Bought all the books. Scanned all the crap.' Jojo was the pessimist of the day.

'What if we changed departments?' I suggested.

'I don't want to go hunting down dusty old maps.'

'Notebooks?'

'No!'

'Printed letters?'

'Forget it. And before you ask: no mouldy old files full of paper either.'

'Maybe the other team leaders are a bit...'

'...nicer than Nomos? You wish!' Nomos chased us from seminar to seminar at headquarters, from meeting to meeting. It was him who gave us the cash we used to persuade readers. And it was him who gave us our share. The money wasn't that great but it was better than nothing. Before I started at Scan AG I'd been desperate for a job. I had to drop out of my Ancient Knowledge degree after a few months. The fees were too high. I couldn't afford any more Mospecs lectures, let alone real-life lectures at uni. Even seats in the back row were out of my price range. At first, I didn't want to admit I was out of my depth. I looked for part-time jobs. But even the old teaching mistress couldn't help me. That was what I called my favourite professor. She used to send me job ads via Mospecs. Every day. *Express course: all-subjects teacher in four weeks (B-Zone licence). OAP camp in C-Zone seeking hard-working care staff – no previous experience necessary.* After I dropped out, at least I found the book agent thing with Jojo's help. I was still getting her ads even long after I started working for Ultranet. One day the zone administration simply deleted the subject area. Ancient Knowledge had got a lousy rating from a private testing agency (Master & Partner). Too little sponsor funding, the zone administration announced in a press release, called for this important step. And: It's a step towards the future! Even I soon came round to the idea. All the ancient knowledge had long since been digitalised. Anyone could call it up on Lexi-Ultranet. At any time! Free of charge! My boss Nomos had laughed out loud at my interview when he heard about my degree. 'Ancient Knowledge? What on earth were you planning to do with that?'

'I'm interested in politics. I mean, learning new things... And I thought maybe...'

He shouted at me, interrupting. 'Study the future! Learn about really new things, not old things. Do you get me?' I got him and I got the job too. The zone administration announced the end of Ancient Knowledge at the uni and my old teaching mistress vanished. Without a trace. Without a Mospecs message. I stopped getting ads from her. No more advice. Nothing. I started worrying. For a while I looked for relatives on

her Ultranet profile. She only had 500 friends (I had 8500) and no premium-status best friends (I had 650). I sent a message to all her friends. The only answer came from B-Zone Joni. She hadn't come home after her farewell speech at uni, she said. No idea how B-Zone Joni knew that. She surely didn't live in the B-Zone.

The job at Ultranet with Jojo distracted me. I'd known him since our schooldays. And were made a good team in our final exams. I took his ancient knowledge test (focus subject: 2015 – from the financial meltdown to the war) and Jojo sat my maths test (I have no idea what that was about). All we had to do was swap our Mospecs. No one cared if we cheated anyway. There were 400 pupils packed into the hall in tight rows. The only teachers I saw in my last years at school were on my Mospecs. If at all. Jojo studied at a private Ultranet uni after school. He must have messed around there too much and ended up with the book agents.

Jojo and I had been sitting silently on the Metro-Glider for a while now. I was counting apartment blocks again. I'd get Jojo to work out how many people lived in this quarter later on. But it didn't come to that. The old man next to me took out a book. I guess he must have listened in on our conversation and wanted the money. 'How much do you want for that bunch of paper?' Jojo asked him, not even two seconds later. We never said 'books'. We used oldspeak: tomes, treatises, titles, hardbacks, paperbacks.

We learned that at headquarters from Nomos. He'd repeat the same words at every single seminar: 'Think of our dream! All knowledge for all! At any time! Free of charge!'

The old man didn't answer Jojo's question. He opened up his book, leaned back – and started reading. Jojo didn't give up that easily. 'I'd say I'll give you ten.'

That was a ridiculous amount, but that was how Jojo and I did most deals. We'd always start by saying a tiny sum of money. And then the readers would defend their bundles of paper.

'The book's not for sale.'

'The printed word can't be weighed up in cash.'

'This work will never change hands.'

Time for level two. Jojo would reach into his pocket and pull out a wad of hundreds. Twenty of them. That was more than anyone could cope with. You never saw that much cash anywhere now. Why bother? We had our mobile payment receivers and

fingerprints. The only place you ever got two thousand in cash was from us. And then we'd tighten the screw a little more. 'That's for that bit of paper. We'll give you two thousand five hundred for every other printed bundle you've got. And a thousand if you tell us the name of any reader you know.' As if that wasn't enough, we'd add a dramatic flourish: 'That's our final offer. And it's valid for exactly the next two minutes.' At that very moment, we'd take out a stopwatch. It was fastened to a thin plastic strip and projected flashing red numbers. Mzzzp, and time was counting down backwards. Two minutes, one minute fifty-nine seconds, one minute fifty-eight seconds, one minute... Almost all readers were ready to sell in the first fifteen seconds. The stubborn ones took over a minute. One guy burst into tears. That was maybe a year ago. The offer made him go crazy. Some readers said they'd never ever sell a book. Until we wiped away all their principles with twenty banknotes. We got all of them. Almost all of them.

There was one in ten who we couldn't tempt with money. They either had enough money already or they were fanatics. Book freaks. In the worst case, bibliophiles. They were the ones Scan AG really wanted to crack. They taught us catchy formulas in the Ultranet training sessions: bookworms equal fanatics, fanatics equal collectors, collectors equal lots of books, lots of books equals lots of money for book agents. And that was just what book agents like Jojo and I wanted to hear. Never mind the seminars, there was no changing it: there was one in ten we didn't get. So Ultranet came up with a different procedure. When we came across stubborn readers, we were supposed to find out as many personal details as possible. Where they were coming from. Where they were going. Best of all of course what their names were and where they lived.

We passed the data straight on to Nomos. He'd react by calling us incapable HUCAMISINs (human capital misinvestments) because we hadn't talked the reader into selling. Once he'd calmed down he'd assign us a little bonus. Depending on whether the data was useful. That's how it always went for us HUCAMISINs. No idea what happened with the reader data after that. We didn't care. Jojo's and my mood wasn't exactly the best. Especially over the past few months. We'd simply stopped finding readers.

We dashed from one end of town to the other on the glider. For hours and hours. I spent half the time in the toilet. We strolled through the park facilities in the A-Zone.

Looked around in the aroma cafés. Knocked on doors. Searched doctors' waiting rooms. Went round to the addresses other readers had given us. And nothing. Days passed with not a single reader.

So the old man next to me on the Metro-Glider was more than just important to us. And for our target. I couldn't think of a word to say. Something about this reader was different. And I don't mean just the hair on his head. He didn't even move a muscle after Jojo's offer of a lousy ten. He went on reading. He took no notice of us. Jojo continued his spiel as usual.

He spread the cash out on the table between him and the old man. No reaction. Now that really did surprise me. No matter how stubborn readers were, they all stared open-mouthed at all that money. Jojo wanted to reel off the usual phrases he'd learned off by heart. But he had to improvise because the old man didn't look at the table for a millisecond.

'There's TWO THOUSAND in cash on the table BETWEEN US.' Then back to the standard lines. 'That's for that bit of paper. We'll give you two thousand five hundred...'

'...for every other printed bundle I've got. And a thousand if I tell you the name of any reader I know,' the old man rattled off, sounding bored.

Jojo looked at me. I shrugged. The grey-haired man closed his book and put it down on top of the money. He looked me in the eye and spoke to me. As if Jojo wasn't even there. 'I'll give it to you. But before you scan it and destroy it forever, you have to read it. Can you promise me that?'

I was still speechless. No reader had ever just given us a book for nothing. And none of them had ever asked me to read either. Who was this man? Why did he want me to read the thing, of all people? Only one thing was clear to me. We weren't going to make any money out of this reader.

Jojo leaned over the table, whispering with his hand shielding his mouth. 'The guy's crazy. Let's look for another carriage. We can report the incident – all we need is a bit of data.'

I didn't reply. I couldn't shake my head or nod it either. The whole thing was totally bizarre. Jojo stayed calm. He sat up straight, pushed the book carefully aside, picked up the money – and went on doing his job. 'Some people think a tome like that's worth this much. Of course, we respect your opinion. I'm Alex, by the way. This is

Paul.’ Jojo pointed at me. ‘We work for Scan AG. As I’m sure you’re aware, we want to make knowledge available for all at any time and free of charge. Could we contact you again at a later date, Mr...’

I was ashamed of Jojo’s pathetic attempt to find out the book man’s name.

‘Bergmann, Arne Bergmann,’ the old man said, to my surprise. Before Jojo could make any more enquiries, he went on. ‘That will be enough for Nomos. I’m quite sure of that, Jojo. And what does your colleague Rob have to say?’

Jojo’s mind worked like a pair of Mospecs. He saved what we learned at the Ultranet seminars somewhere inside his skull. He could access all of it at any time. We practiced the right response to every possible comment. Once, a reader wanted to argue with us. ‘I don’t know why Ultranet needs every single book! You must have bought this book title and scanned it a thousand times over.’

Our answer came a second later. ‘But maybe we haven’t got exactly this edition and exactly this print run. You might have made valuable notes in the margins, as a reader. Underlined things. All that can be very useful to other people. Your comments will be saved for future generations. Every printed product has its own character.’

That was incredibly flattering for the reader. No one could take us by surprise. We were prepared for everything and everyone. Except for this guy Arne Bergmann, who knew Nomos’s name. And knew our real names too!

Jojo searched for an appropriate reaction. It took a while. All three of us were silent. Jojo’s brain took longer than usual but it was still working just fine. He remembered the last line of the ten-point manual for book agents. In case of unusual behavioural patterns, contact team leader! Report all data collected!

Jojo stood up, too suddenly for my taste. ‘Thank you very much for the conversation, Mr Bergmann.’ Jojo pulled at my sleeve, trying to drag me away with him. I stayed where I was, as if glued to my seat. I was still puzzling over why the old man had spoken directly to me and why he was still staring at me. Jojo disappeared into the next carriage.

‘I’m sorry, we’ll have to continue our conversation elsewhere. I’ve got to go now,’ Bergmann said to me.

A thousand questions shot through my mind. ‘The next stop is in the C-Zone. I wouldn’t get out there if I was you,’ was all I said in the end.

The old man smiled and tucked the book underneath his sweater. Outside the door,

he turned around again. 'See you soon!'

He was speaking in riddles. Before I could ask him anything he carried on. 'You look pale. All this metro-gliding's no good for you.' He stroked a hand across my bald head, pulled up the hood of his sweater and vanished into the narrow corridor.

'Next stop: C-Zone, 3rd quarter, one minute's stopover,' said a gentle male voice.

The Metro-Glider hurtled into a sharp curve. It braked not a moment later, from far too fast down to zero.

I rushed along the corridor to the toilet, catching sight of Jojo in the next carriage. He had his Mospecks on and was presumably contacting Nomos. Jojo looked over his lenses at me, gave me a thumbs-up and grinned. I pointed at my stomach and carried on.

The glider was already in the B-Zone by the time I flushed the toilet. I was trembling all over as I turned to the sink. The cold water flowed over my hands. Over my face. My forehead. My bald skull. Down the back of my neck. I stood upright, bumped my forehead on the shelf and opened my eyes. In the mirror, I saw a pale, tired, but at least bald book agent and a few handwritten words in green.

Tomorrow, 8 a.m., Sunshine Café, C-Zone, 20th quarter. See you soon! Arne