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Stories From The First Transnational Traders

The Manager

The glass was ice cool on his forehead. He gazed down past his feet. Outside on a lower deck he could see a group of the crew busying themselves with the operation of some machine he could never understand. Did the crew even speak English? Weekly meetings about ship matters began in English but his lack of input quickly began its shift into Russian, Polish and Hungarian while he faded away.

He knew the mockery that he elicited from the crew, the sniggers and glares. He was the troll under the bridge between two worlds in a very small space, friend of no-one and thoroughly misunderstood. He would greet the traders when they landed, brief them for fifteen minutes, give them the basic tour - taking in the bridge, sleeping quarters and trading floor and then they were in the hands of the medics and scientists downstairs for prepping before trading began. At the end of their tenure, after a few days in the sick bay, he debriefed them for another fifteen minutes and saw them off from the tiltrotor deck before returning to his office seclusion.

In an hour or so, a group of directors and inspectors would be landing on board. He'd show them the reviews and statistics that the computer basically prepared for him and they would nod, prod and shake their heads as they marveled at their creation. In the year of its operation, the ship had never failed. The Russians kept the reactor humming and the traders kept the activity flowing - the colossal and rapid bubbles and bursts that paid his salary.

The directors would shake his hand, pat him on the shoulder and board the tiltrotor back to Arkhangelsk. From there they would head to London, Amsterdam and New York. That evening they would be in their homes. They'd watch some videos, have a drink and climb into bed comforted by the steely beast tearing around the arctic circle miles above their heads.

A misty circle of condensation was forming around his head. The crew below were probably sharing jokes about him. He breathed in to his chest and let it go with a sigh. Turning on one heel he looked up and around at the traders plugged into their systems. They weren't really here anyway, they were off somewhere in the fractional world, operating at light speed around the markets. Each would have to spend at least forty-eight hours after their tenure in the medical center to recover, receiving the surgery and neurological refitting that would bring them back to normalcy.

He used to eat with the people from the medical center when they first started. Some of the discoveries they were making and experiments they were performing were fascinating to hear about. Gradually he became irked by the way they began to refer to the traders. Their talk of stock, lineage, redundancy and modification made him retreat to the humane sanctuary of his office for his meals and recreation time. Now he saw them less than the crew with whom he shared no language.

A vibration in his pocket marked the imminent arrival of the tiltrotor. One last glance around the silently tense trading floor confirmed the paragon of glory and success he was supposed to be conveying. He headed downstairs to the visitor's reception with the signature potted palms and marble floor awkwardly veiling the hulking mass of the financial weapon under his feet.

The Trader

She realised that she'd had at least one point four seconds of creaking crescendo masquerading as a warning before the violence of the shock hit. She lost focus as lines and digits danced chaotically in her eyes. Somewhere deep, some part of her groped for information, for context.

She felt firm pressure on her right elbow as her left shoulder began to lead the charge in countering gravity's demands on her body. She could feel the strain at the back of her neck as her body executed millions of years of programming to ensure her head stayed up top. She briefly marveled at the thoroughness of this bio-structural mitigation. If only she could so effortlessly deflect the universe's brutal reprimands as her body did.

She quickly reckoned on the disturbance lasting one and a half, perhaps two seconds longer before she could regain her visuals and get back on target.

Fuck, anything could happen in two seconds. The measures she was slowly winding up on the cusp of Amsterdam's trading times could have been spun out and hours of careful calculation would be rendered worthless. ***The loss would be worsened because those hours were more than just careful calculation, they were hours of nurturing. They were hours of love and perverse lust, creating something that was at once a child and a lover to her. She had felt it grow in her blood and her bones, had felt the drip-drip of warmth as it trickled from the perfect nothingness of the digits and lines, down her spine and into the centre of her.*** That trickle had carved away at that nothingness, digging deeper, emptying it and hollowing it, becoming a roaring, pounding goliath and she had felt her body seize itself as she watched it. She had distantly sensed the prickle of the hairs of her arms and neck standing alert. Then she had felt her heart, the size of a beach ball, skip along the edge of the bottomless canyon the goliath had created between herself and the other side.

Eventually, her breathless desire would come up against her uncontrollable need for release as her mind desperately thrashed, begging for the end. Then came the leap. Should she make it to the other side of the bottomless canyon then her beach ball heart would explode, the vibrant chill would soothe her skin as the hairs settled, her jaw released itself and she breathed the first breath of life that would send blood coursing through her head.

The strain in her neck was fading, the digits and lines were re-assembling. Another shockwave hit her - this one made of memory, carrying in its wake a sudden vision of ice, of unmeasurable and borderless pure white from behind glass. In a brief and forgivable moment of clarity she remembered the ice, the ship on an endless expedition along the incline of the market. She remembered arriving here two weeks ago, feeling the same shudder and crash of the thick, brittle sheets off the bow as she watched the ship plow a new course from the bridge. Here there was no earth to quake, just an infinity of ice.

Perhaps everything here was vaguely magic in some way. She gathered herself and she might have frowned slightly as she realised that her newborn ravine had been filled with the slurry of careless market activity while the ice had temporarily stole her away, but she wasn't sure. She was off and away, far from her possible frown, listening hungrily for the tell-tale drip of a vast, bottomless canyon waiting to be born out of nothing.

The Engineer

The white ice burnt his retinas as he breathed in the freezing air of the arctic. It never snowed here, but often enough blizzards raged through winter that would catapult shards of shattered ice across the ship making the opportunity of trips to the outside rare and in the summer heat the reactor demanded his constant attention. The ship was getting old. To the patrons of this never ending expedition it represented no more than an ever-charging dot on a digital globe, a series steeply curving charts and some elementary formulae, but to him, it was an aging titan.

The USSR began the construction of the icebreakers knowing that it was vital to keep the seaways of Siberia clear for transport. Later they would launch tourist expeditions to the very top of the world - gleeful amateur photographers and consumer-explorers, buoyed by the comfort and ease of traveling to the world's most remote point in a few days from a heated plastic cabin. The once-holy marker they circle, always one-hundred and sixty kilometers starboard, the one so lusted after by the geographic entrepreneurs of old now stood untouched in its place at the pinnacle of the globe, tourists no longer cared for the romance of arbitrary geography.

The heat from inside announced itself as steam boiling over from the vents that pockmark the deck. These ships were only ever built for this place. Two seventy-five-thousand horse power nuclear reactors that can only be cooled by the Arctic Sea herself lashing and lapping at the hull.

With the servers clicking and humming on the other side of the ship, poured over by less personable people than he, and the reactor being quiet and uncomplaining for now, he took some time to observe the states of matter around him: The ice around, the water below and the steam above. Here the ship is, ploughing cyclically through the eyes of no-one and leaving a wake of unsettled physics. Perhaps from a distance, a traveler from the past might think of this vessel as not too alien from the steam-ships that first conquered the Arctic circle.

The quiet was no longer as foreboding as it was all those years ago when he came on board. The rhythm of the machines on the ship; the trading system and his beloved reactor all kept a time that defined the days in a world of ever-dark and ever-light. Occasionally the reactor would hiccup, or even worse, belch and he'd be roused by a shrieking alarm in his ear and he'd launch himself, ducking under bulkheads to the true heart of the ship to soothe her as she shouldered the burden that her masters put on her.

Of course, she was due for refit - a fusion reactor, a sleek and arrogant machine full of love of its own self-worth, admiring its reflection in the mirrored surface of the Arctic Sea. They'd have to dock. It had been three years since he had last set foot on land and, scanning the horizon one last time before ducking back inside, he wasn't sure how he would cope with the months in some glossy training center, waiting to be aboard again with his new obnoxious charge. Perhaps he could request to stay aboard and sit at his little station, pouring over schematics as he listened to the groans and squeals of ship-heart-surgery around him.

The Lieutenant

The crew were leaning, squatting and sitting around the large table in the main mess hall. After the boardroom table it was the largest table on the ship but there still was nowhere near enough room to fit the hundred or so crew who permanently tended to the needs of the ship.

The announcement they were waiting to hear had been a decade in the making and he knew that the crew of the Arktika felt a simmering notion that throughout that decade, their role had been crucial in its writing.

The Lieutenant coughed and glanced over the men assembled before him, catching the eye of one or two. He glanced at the notes on the glowing pad in his hand and began reciting the transcript in his deep Russian drawl: 'At midday, Greenwich Mean Time, the Equestrian Councils of Spain, Italy, France, Belgium, Greece-Turkey, Great Britain, Germany, Portugal and Switzerland formally took leadership of the European Union so beginning the European Equestrian Union and taking the final step in the road to a transnational, individualist, libertarian society.

'Joan Hustvedt, Chairman of the Area Board would like to convey enormous gratitude to the crew of the Arktika for the vital role that you have played in this transition. He says: "The example the Arktika has set and the process it began, though initially difficult have proven the ability of humanity to strive beyond the controls of cultural heritage and statehood."

He put the pad down and looked up again at the men and women hungry for reward, some whispered to each other, some grinned. 'Now, in recognition of your role, the company has decided to award all permanent crew members - past and present - fifty thousand Transitional Futures Bonds. In addition, each of you will receive one week of paid shore leave and a commemorative one hundred Euro bill, which I'm assured is a somewhat unique and treasured artifact.'

Between two fingers, he held up the example that the Captain had given him. A presentation of adornment and glorification, with a woefully submissive paper bill secured in the middle. As crew members, they were - from this moment - employees of the European Equestrian Union, the latest utopia on Earth just founded a few hundred miles away. No borders, no cultural barriers, a hyper-libertarian haven away from the repressive anachronism of the Volga Pact.

The paper Euros were a cynical gag from the management. Hard currency, emblazoned with sigils of nationhood represented the last ambassadorial bastion of the countries that the European Equestrian Union had now fully dissolved. These worthless cultural curios, commemoratively embelished with the image of the ship, would be awarded to the men partly responsible for their debasement. Somewhere, high above him in the chain of understanding that reached from the eichelons of directorship down to him, someone was really enjoying this joke.

Now the nations, like the currency, were worth nothing to anyone. Trade-able as antiques and future folk legends opposed to recorded history that showed the bloody trail of empires, states and republics across history.

The Scientist

She was leaning over the workbench in the quiet of her lab. A few hours ago, a young male trader had crashed after a risky bet and had been rushed down to sick bay by the orderlies. Now he was comatose on the bed behind her, an eye-watering cocktail of anesthetics and neutralisers were flushing weeks of neurological abuse out of his system while she studied the object on the tray in front of her.

She glanced over her shoulder to observe the cadaver-like stillness of her patient. She knew never to be sympathetic. Her role was not to tend to the qualms of the traders, the various maladies and melancholics that came as side effects to the soaking of the mind in the sickly sweet concoction of chemicals elicited by the eddies and flows of their work. She was here to study, to learn and to report. Detachment and scientific objectivity were crucial.

She looked back at the object on the sample tray and picked it up. Ironic then, that despite this regulated detachment, no-one would ever call the object she held a 'horn.' The scant literature that made it from her desk, through company policy and into academic journals or even public consumption referred to extra-cutaneous keratin nodes, epi-structural anderma, fissures, ruptures, cutanea, facilitated super-chemical cranial expansionisms, modular keratin embellishment or simply samples or materiel. No-one would say 'horns' with the grotesque effigy of the bull markets riding atop the bow.

Even the most plebeian and vulgar of the visiting company executives would only ever refer to 'growths' or at worst - 'mutations.' The veil separating the traders from agricultural terminology was rapidly thinning but no-one seemed to care and the carefully managed objectivity of her work seemed to further this perception.

What was this vessel if nothing more than a farm? The traders were exhaustively milked for their ability before being released to pasture, to wallow in the gluttony of their success sharing in whatever unique brand of hedonism appealed to their addiction-addled minds before being called up once again to serve, forever branded with their choice to trade.

In most cases, the traders were so drunk on their own excesses during their time on the boat that they barely recognised the physiological changes in their bodies. The sick bay might receive a new trader complaining of dizziness and nausea - usually, albeit falsely, attributed to seasickness by the medics there. A week later the first growths would begin and by that point they were too far gone to notice as their vision desaturated, leaving nothing but shadowy outlines, and their perception of time slowed, stretching minutes into hours and they could communicate in nothing more than monosyllabic grunts. Here they existed outside the markets in an awkward middle ground between human and animal. Vastly intelligent, with hyper-sensory awareness, but unable to interact with the world around them beyond blank gazes at screens or violent outbursts at the slightest provocation. Then of course were the horns, the most outward sign of these animal changes.

The best she could do was regulate this transformation. To enact some measure of ease in this transition for the beasts they'd created.

The Security

Another fight had broken out in the trader's mess. He wasn't a security officer by training. In Kiev he had been a psychologist and he was acutely familiar with the violent outbursts of unbalanced minds. It alarmed him that the ship had no official psychologist on board, just the neuro-geneticists down in the labs next to the sick bay. Those secretive white-clad strangers who stayed away from everyone, rarely seen and certainly never seen alone.

As he ducked and weaved his way through bulkheads and corridors down to recover what might be left of the aftermath he felt pangs of sympathy, as he always did, for these herd animals, packed into their ring and forced to fight each other and the world for the piecemeal psychological reward they received.

He arrived at the R&R room in time to piece together a notion of the events. The one now residing in sick bay had been watching the Arirang Festival, a contentious enough media spectacle on land let alone aboard this pinnacle of individual competitiveness. The mass games had apparently enraged one of his peers, now bloody and fuming in the protection of two of his officers. The Festival was loosely forbidden for just such a reason. Ideological conflicts did not sit well in such a tense environment and the sight of a million individual unified to a common cause, working for something larger than themselves could confuse and enrage a trader like red to a bull.

He'd seen lesser traders gaze for hours at the processions of pom-poms, glitter and lights, transfixed by these robots from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the cyborg augmentations of the Kim family and the world. They rippled and bowed, swelling and spreading at the call of some unknowable whim. Such a display of power was alien and perfect to the traders. They saw it every day in their numbers, as they manipulated the flows of the world but it was nothing to the display of the games. He recognised that and he knew that this was something manifest of their desires.

Of course, it stood at polar opposite to the Equestrian ideology, a system of individualism and transnational beliefs could never condone subscription to the nationalism and cultural homogeneity of such an authoritarian system. But he remembered his great grandfather, a survivor of the Soviet Union, a man who loathed all communism stood for, a man who cheered the coming of the markets as much as he jeered the dismantling of the politburo. He remembered how his grandfather would describe the Soviet military parades, the ceaseless procession of tanks, missiles, troops and jets, all marching synchronically in step to the beat of the socialist idea, and he remembered how his great-grandfather looked. Those same glazed eyes, the jaw loosening and the lips slackening, his hands gesticulating the air in a vain effort to recreate his awe anew.

He looked down at the bloodied antagonist. His eyes had the same ill-focus. As if fixed somewhere outside the room. Soon, measures would have to be taken to separate the traders. These confrontations were becoming too common and too costly for the management and traders like this one would have to be separated and confined to avoid the heightened conflicts of ideology that their mental make-up encouraged.

Archangel

The port of Arkhangelsk is anglicised as Archangel. This relic of Russian history sprawls along the eastern bank of the Northern Dvina for almost fifty kilometers. At the delta the city fades away into the great White Sea that borders the north of European Russia. For hundreds of years, this city was the Empire's link to the West. Between 1918 and 1920 the city was a stronghold for the White Army and acted as the rallying point for the supporting British and American forces known as the 'Polar Bear Expedition.'

Glancing along the eastern bank of the Dvina yields an underwhelming panorama of hunched grey blocks - the urban camouflage of Soviet architecture. Arkhangelsk's decline began with the First World War. The 'Murman' port was dug in around four hundred kilometers to the north-east on the Scandinavian Peninsula as a hub for supplies from Russia's allies. Its more accessible position and the infrastructure put in place to support it during the war guaranteed the newly-named Murmansk as successor to Arkhangelsk.

In the late twentieth century the construction of oil and gas pipelines across mainland Russia and into Europe replaced its ports and shipping lanes as export highways. After the Soviet era, the huge nation came to rely more and more on cheap product imported from its southern and eastern neighbours of China and Japan and gradually the ports' activity dwindled.

A dozen or so anonymous cargo vessels still jostle each other daily en route to Canada and northern Europe laden with specialist technology, Russia's prized vodka, caviar and industrial machine parts. The anonymity of these vessels is sacred - a camouflage against the rise in piracy and a cloak of deniability in the wake of the devastating environmental naval accidents of recent times. They blend seamlessly into the tired urbanism of the port, most likely on account of the staggering presence of the Mobile Trading Platform Arktika. She sits on a dry dock, dead center on the Dvina, glowering at the dying city's waterfront. Barring huge red teeth along endless portholes. She is a vast, mechanised monster, trapped and furious at the mercy of the citizens she terrorises every day. ***The Arktika is from another time, a reminder of both the glories and failures of the USSR and the opportunism of the Equestrian Councils. She sits, a favourite for tourists, a real symbol of power, silently enraging the Volga Pact and its leaders as it makes mockery of their ideals.***

She's a beast from another world that doesn't belong in the midst of these quiet, superstitious people of the North, a colossal bright red testament to someone else's future that Arkhangelsk never found itself swept up in.

Fifteen years ago the Arktika was tugged through the estuary and up the Dvina to have her fission heart replaced but plans changed. She was too old and frail, a valid prototype, a useful experiment, a successful first foray but simply not worth refitting. She was stripped, researched, evaluated and eventually history left her behind to suffer the same fate as Arkhangelsk.

Now her young spread across the Arctic waste that she would call home and vessels bearing her name launch into the sky to search out new pockets of wealth. Her innards lay strewn around her dirty dry dock and only the occasional creak reminds Arkhangelsk of the colossal, crashing roar she once made plowing through the endless ice of the Arctic.