

BLACK SHEEP

CHAPTER I

Leaning on the guardrail, Rolf admired the world. He was at the top of the fifth tower, the one that looked over the city. From here he had a complete view of the horizon. He just had to turn his head, twist his neck as far as it could go and then back to first position. Like that he had a view of the world.

Rolf smiled. No, you couldn't see everything from a single spot. The world was too big. From the suburbs, which were already far off, his eye could drift toward the hazy horizon. Beyond, and very gradually, was nothingness. The ground merged with the sky, by rising up. If he kept looking higher, he'd have to close his eyes because he'd be gazing into the sun. He could always open them after passing it by, then he'd see another part of the sky and shortly another part of the horizon.

See, this world had the shape of a huge egg with the Sun inside. You could go around the Sun without ever leaving the ground... at least theoretically. Practically, it was really too long and too risky. Since the world was around 600,000 miles at its smallest diameter and double that in the widest part, it was preferable to use the aircraft that followed a secant line across the oval space. It greatly shortened the trip. As for the travel time, already brief because of the unparalleled speed of the aircraft, it was made even quicker by the shortcut. Not to mention, of course, all the dangers lurking around the unknown territories between the cities.

But, naturally, you had to follow the secants that didn't form a very wide angle with the ground, otherwise you'd need a spaceship. And then, you'd have to keep your distance from the Sun if you didn't want to be vaporized. That's happened to spaceships in distress whose pilots miscalculated the trajectory—at the limits of the gravitational layer from the ground, they got caught in the magnetic sphere of the Sun.

Rolf pondered all this. The grandeur of the world overwhelmed him, but he felt more than just awe. And anyway, this kind of sacred fear that big things emanate is always a little unsatisfying. Of course, there were official theories. But who was really satisfied with them?

He glanced around him. The terrace was almost deserted at this early hour when it was still chilly. Only one other person, maybe 20 yards away, who shot him a quick glance. A glance that he felt was both ironic and sympathetic at the same time. Without knowing why, he answered with a vague smile. Without knowing why? Of course he knew! Rolf needed to confide in someone. Too many things were tormenting him deep down inside.

Responding to the smile, the man came over. "Not very warm," he said when he was close enough not to raise his voice.

"Oh," Rolf replied, "within an hour you'll have to take off your coat. But in an hour..."

"Yes?" the other waited. "In an hour..."

"I'll be at the office," Rolf finished.

"And me in the lab," the man replied.

He looked at Rolf and tilted his head, an asymmetrical head with almost colorless eyes. A friendly smile played on his lips. "It's all so beautiful, isn't it?" he stretched out his arms to the horizon.

"Indeed it is," Rolf agreed. The conviction of his response made him forget the banality. He added, "But it's very complicated..."

"Ah!" the man nodded, "it certainly is complicated..."

Rolf said nothing. Was the other stroller interested in metaphysics, astronomy, all those sciences steeped in politics? Maybe he preferred not to talk about things like that exactly because of the politics involved. But as if to prove Rolf wrong the guy finished for him:

"It's complicated even in light of the official interpretations."

He leaned closer, looked back over his shoulder to make sure nobody was listening, then went on, "To tell you the truth, I don't know if those interpretations really explain everything."

He raised up his two open hands in front of him and cried out, "Attention! I'm not doubting anything, get it!"

He lowered his voice worriedly, "But maybe there are one or two details that might have been... how to say it... left out."

Rolf looked at him sympathetically, "One or two details? You think so?" He stifled a laugh, then kept silent—a silence full of innuendos.

The man's eyes widened, "What, do you know something? Something that the authorities would rather keep secret? Obviously, you work in a very important bureau..."

"Pretty important," Rolf gloated. "You want me to tell you?"

The man stepped back, still holding his hand out front, "Oh, don't tell me anything you don't want to. Suppose I assume more than you mean..."

Rolf was still smiling, "Friend," he assured him, "I can see you're like me—dissatisfied. And I can also see that you're too smart to misunderstand my intentions."

He took a deep breath before continuing. "We agree that in an hour it'll be hotter than it is now, right?"

The man nodded, "Certainly."

Rolf's smile grew, "And the Sun is stationary even if it appears to move?"

"Naturally."

"So, it's the world that's revolving around it?"

The man nodded again vehemently.

"These are the official theories," Rolf went on. "But do you feel like you're revolving or do you feel like you're the one that's stationary?"

"Well... I don't know what to say..."

Rolf slapped his own chest, "Me, I'll say so myself. We have to be revolving or else we couldn't explain the temperature and the change in light with such regularity every hour of the day. Which proves that the official theories are right. As long as the Sun isn't in the center of the world..."

The man frowned, "If that's all you want to talk to me about... it's a good thing your logic resulted in this conclusion."

Rolf shook his head and suggested, "You don't see where I'm going with this." He gestured to the Sun, then to space. "The inside is just fine. It's the outside that bothers me."

"You're showing me the outside," the man grumbled.

Rolf lowered his eyelids and shrugged, "I'm showing you the inside of the outside. I call the inside what we see outside and the outside what is beyond the inside."

The man slapped his forehead, "You're making my head spin. I'm going."

Rolf grabbed his sleeve, "Let me explain. Since this world is an egg-shaped bubble and this bubble, inside of the Earth that stretches out in every direction, I can say that the space is inside space even though we say 'I'm going outside' when we leave our house. That's what I mean by saying the inside is just fine."

The man scratched his forehead. "Yes," he said reluctantly. "I see. And what's your problem with the outside?"

"I don't have a problem. What they say bothers me, that's all."

"Seriously, it bothers you?"

Rolf took his cue, "That the Earth is an infinite sphere in which our world is the center, I mean. If there were other bubbles, they would also be the center since the center of something infinite is everywhere inside of that thing..."

"So?"

"So? If the ground I'm on is revolving around the sun we see, the earth and the rocks that fill the infinite are also revolving at the same time."

"Those are the official theories, yes!"

"Oh, yes!" Rolf exclaimed with almost wild ecstasy. "The official theories. What I don't like is that they totally exclude the possibility of other inhabited bubbles."

"They don't talk about them."

"I know! Of course, they don't talk about them because if they did, they'd have to deny it."

"Why's that?"

Rolf snorted. “Don’t you see, you big dummy, that if the infinite is full of earths revolving around us and if this infinite contains other bubbles, these bubbles are also revolving around us, which means their land can’t be revolving around their sun?”

The man’s colorless eyes looked lifeless as well, “In short, the theories are false if there are other bubbles?”

“No,” Rolf riposted. “Simply that these other bubbles aren’t regulated by the same astronomical system as ours. And ours is necessarily the only one—doesn’t that seem to you to be a little... anthropocentric?”

“And if it were?”

“It wouldn’t be saying much for its accuracy. But I’ve got better.”

The man’s face lit up. He was all ears.

Rolf took a deep breath. “Suppose the Earth didn’t fill the infinite. I said suppose.”

“Good,” the listener huffed, “because it contradicts official theories.”

“Okay. So, suppose the world, our world, is like a shell and that space outside it exists, that it’s as free as the space inside. Well, we could be revolving around our Sun while other bubbles or rather other shells are also revolving around their own inner suns. Thus, we’re not special, which, for me, sounds better.”

“That’s completely absurd and against the...”

“Against the official theories, yes, but not absurd. I won’t go so far as to say that the theories themselves are absurd, but... look, I’m dazzled by the majesty of my idea. I see all these shells revolving around their centers and at the same time around a common sun. Which would mean that our Sun, seeming to move in a certain way, would really have a different movement from what we think. Is this, too, truly absurd seeing that we don’t even feel our own movement around it?”

“Pure madness.”

“No! And I see this common sun, itself the center of another huge shell revolving around it and embracing all the others I talked about. And this vast shell is nothing but a superworld revolving around a supersun and so on to infinity. Do you know what it would take to find the first proof of my superhuman cosmology?”

The man opened his eyes wide without answering.

“We’d have to search for the existence of little shells between us and our Sun. their existence would weigh heavily in favor of my hypothesis.”

“No astronomical observation has ever revealed them.”

“But what if they’re miniscule, eh? If they’re miniscule? They might also be inhabited by tiny men just like the superworlds would have people much bigger than us. No one would notice.”

The other guy smiled paternally, “I’m going to tell you something. You notice too much. And since you’re naïve and careless, you share your clever conclusions with any old stranger. Any old stranger is me, obviously. And me, I work for the knowledge police. So, you’re going to come with me quietly and not make trouble.”

He led Rolf, who had turned pale, toward the elevators.