



## Protected Paradise

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### THE CALL

It is 7:00 a.m. I slam the alarm clock and pull the blanket over my head. Yet, another day in this never-ending lockdown story. “The last COVID-25 related lockdown,” policy makers announced. Yeah, right! Nobody seems to know where this COVID-25 virus is heading. I stretch my arms and crawl out of bed. I take a short stroll to the mailbox, the only safe distance I am currently allowed to walk. Going through the post with a hot cup of coffee became one of the highlights in days of screen-based conversations with colleagues, students or research partners. A bright red envelope catches my eye.

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It has my name carefully written on the front, and is dated on April 6, 2121. Interesting ... Would it ...? Yes! A ticket for a three-day conference in the year 2121! Let's say, working congresses have just become a little more exciting now that they involve the possibility of time travel! On the agenda: "Pandemic preparedness." Would people in 2121 still struggle with COVID-25? Or perhaps they found out how to best relate to it, and would like to inform us? Anyway, the event is tomorrow, so I should start preparing.



### Invitation

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## THE RIDE

It is 6:00 a.m. I follow the instructions from the conference organizers spelled out in the invitation letter and the adventure begins. The geo-location on the invitation leads me to a huge empty hangar in the middle of nowhere, two hours outside the city. A white vehicle parks in front of me. From the outside it does not look too different from a regular car, except for the fact that it hovers above the ground. It's a luxurious vehicle with extensive space for its passengers. Wait a minute, where is the driver? A message display flies in from the left, "Welcome, Amarante, my name is Siri. Prepare for takeoff." I buckle my seatbelt and sink deep into the seat while the vehicle rushes at 200 miles an hour through landscapes and cities. For a moment I seem to lose consciousness. When I open my eyes again, the car takes a sharp turn to the left through a metal fence. "We are approaching zone A," the speaker announces. The landscape consists of impressive geological formations, as if the wind has sculptured mountains and canyons with a mixture of salt, clay and gypsum. No life and no humidity. No wonder all these vehicles hover. Tires would blow out when touching the surface.

We pass a couple of green oases surrounded by golden grass lands, with small herds of cattle grazing near the water ponds. In the far east, I discern the traces of a small settlement at the foot of a rock formation. There are small particles in the air; must be ashes. The holes in the rock formation must be the result of escaping gasses during the cooling phase of an explosion in the past, perhaps a volcano. "The rocks provide shelter to the people and protect them from the heat," the speaker explains. "In the last decades, temperatures have been rising exponentially. Some families in zone A have been moved to climate refugee camps. Others will have to stay." The final part of the journey leads us through a few small but beautiful forests. Finally, the floating vehicle drops me off at a black portal called Mandrake, a twilight zone between the outer world and LaBiomista, a green zone that hosts only a small number of citizens on a permanent basis. The place where the conference will be held.

## THE CHECK-IN

"Welcome Amarante!" I turn toward the smiling face of a half human half robot with a bionic arm and a fleshy pair of lungs attached to the chest area. An advanced merge between (wo)man-made and organic material, so it seems. While we are walking toward a checkpoint, the cyborg explains the mission of LaBiomista. A robot turns its camera-eye to me and takes a full body scan. They pull a big fancy box out of a pile of goodies and hand it to me. It contains something in between a HazMat suit and a HighTech

fashion animal skin. “Coming from the worst plague of the last century, you will have to isolate the viral load you potentially carry,” the robot explains. “It has taken years to control the virus of your time.” Then, I get my BioVYZR helmet, a big egg-shaped mask covering my head and shoulders. With its integrated air-purifying system, the BioVYZR filters both the air coming in and the air exhaled out by the wearer. The system eliminates the negative impact of the pollutants, allergens and pathogens in the air I breathe, and it prevents me from potentially infecting others. A big arrow appears on the central display of the Mandrake lodge. It points to the right, where a futuristic, air-floating horse carriage awaits.

“All aboard of LaBiomista’s open university of diversity shuttle,” shouts the horse. “Your guided tour of the LaBiomista park is about to begin.”

A flock of twittering artificial birds enters the wagon. One of them lands on my shoulder, introducing itself as PeeWee, my personal assistant for the conference. “Back in 2019, the renown Belgian artist Koen Van Mechelen started the open university of diversity as a meeting and learning place for all types of species,” it tweets in my ear. “The core theme of Koen Van Mechelen’s oeuvre is biocultural diversity, the search for the cosmopolitan chicken and the consequent interaction between art and science from an integrated perspective. LaBiomista is Van Mechelen’s ‘wonder lab,’ a site that still bears traces of a mining past and founded on a former zoo ground called Black Mountain, a garden of order and chaos, an arena of culture and nature, where cross-fertilization between different species happens and research has been integrated in daily life.” While I am trying to get used to the small bird tweeting in my ear I learn that LaBiomista has become a cooperative with more than 1000 shareholders that form a representation of all living things. This group collectively decides and manages the programs and terrain. Birds, natural ones, make up almost 30% of these shareholders. New species are introduced every day, as are new language registers and tools to transfer thoughts from one species to another. Sounds promising.

## THE ARRIVAL

Five hours of battery life and a couple of BioVYZR reserve filters later I am hooked onto a cable in my new suit. “You are now attached to the PortAbo system. Keep your limbs close to the body and relax.” A linear pattern of cables stretches like a nervous system over the terrain and moves along with the obstacles it encounters on its way. Transported by this constantly evolving system, I pass the conference zone. This appears to be the central part of the LaBiomista park, its nerve ring, from where the cables spread all over the park. The ring also connects with the communal facilities and personal spaces of inhabitants of the park. Humans reside in garden pods,

carefully positioned in between birds' nests and the cattle. Oops, oncoming traffic. The PortAbo immediately corrects the pathways of both travelers. Each cord seems to be self-controlled. Clearly the result of some exquisite biomimicry engineering. The PortAbo carries me to the outskirts of the park and leaves me on a platform in front of a majestic door. The pod, hidden behind the door, is spacious and beautiful. The green wallpaper reflects different shades over the modern furniture. I look for a light button when suddenly a cloud of fireflies lights up above my head.



PortAbo System

“They sense when you are in and then respond, you know.” A friendly face appears at the door. “Hi, I’m Honi. I also come from 2025, but it’s my second time at the conference. I already know how things work over here.”

She looks elegant in her reptile skin. I quickly introduce myself as a transdisciplinary researcher specializing in social, methodological and theoretical innovation projects. Honi is a futurist working on the co-creation of futures stories.



Conference Pods

“You can take the suit off when you are in your pod, but remember to put it back on when you go out. The PortAbo would throw you right back to the platform if you don’t wear it.”

I spend some time with Honi on the platform. We see others arrive, each wearing a slightly different suit. One of the delegates seems to be in trouble. Her hair is entangled in the cord and she is trying to grab a ladder to the platform closest to us.

“That’s what happens when you move a bit too enthusiastically,” Honi says, while making her way up to provide assistance.

“Whew, I thought I’d never get down here! Thanks for the help. I am Ebos. I study urban development and informal settlements. Nice to meet you.”

The sweat pearls are dropping from her forehead; the window of her BioVYZR helmet gets fogged.

“The condensation happens because you are wearing an older model,” Honi explains. “Look, Nes over there has the same problem. These models also have lousy acoustics.”

“Well, I must be able to swop it for a modern version, no? What if I am not able to communicate at the conference?”

“Use your twitter bird to pass the message on,” Honi replies. “Works perfectly.”

I go back to my pod that carries the label “Diversity.” The pod on my left side has “Immunity” above its door; the one on the right “Fertility.” I wonder how I ended up in the awkward situation of being locked up in a pod with the very purpose of thinking outside the box.

## THE CONFERENCE

The conference starts in 10 minutes. I slowly make my way to the PortAbo and take the time to study the environment in more detail. I spot a couple of mating lamas next to a group of dancing storks. It strikes me that there are no fences and all animals can graze wherever they want. An owl sits motionless on a wall. Wait, it has the head of a monkey—an advanced form of genetic manipulation that connects two seemingly non-crossable animals. A wolf with glass nipples moves in the opposite direction, while a herd of Galloway cows takes shelter under the Moringa trees. I am approaching the central conference zone. The PortAbo pauses abruptly



above a small egg-shaped unit. It opens and I get dropped into a chair behind a table. I see the other participants around me, all in their own units. The guests are from all parts of the world, from different disciplines, and three different eras: the past (Honi, Ebos, Nes and I), the present and the future (two guests from the year 2200). The topic for discussion is



“Collectivity”



how to best live with a COVID-virus instead of fighting against it. Among the congress delegates we also have a chicken, the White Nile, planet Mars and the COVID-25 virus itself, the last four represented by a bot programmed to translate thoughts, flows and movement into language.

It was the virus that filed the initial complaint that has led to this discussion. The chicken kicks off the conference meeting with the statement that it is necessary to delve beneath the molecule's level. "We should discover a world of genes, historical threads, chemistry and sparks, where place and organism pulsate together or apart." She continues with the statement that speciesism is the main culprit of violence against all that is not human, including the virus.

"It is indeed a clumsy and cumbersome concept," the White Nile stresses.

Planet Mars agrees. "'Personhood' is a problematic construct. It was revisited years ago but nevertheless keeps on influencing people's thought system. 'Beingness' would be a better alternative."

The virus nods. "Indeed, what is so problematic about me wanting to reside in a human lung? I mean, surely we can figure things out without me being permanently chased to the edge of extinction!"

While I find the discussion interesting it makes me a little bit uncomfortable. I can't seem to figure out the source of my discomfort, but I feel I have nothing to add. Perhaps I am too focused on my own sensory experience of sitting in a unit in which I don't smell anything and I can hardly hear what's happening in the surroundings. I can imagine other delegates' senses are better developed. Luckily, the chair of the meeting announces a small break. Good, I could use some physical contact with fellow delegates. Now that we have the skins and the BioVYZR helmets available, why not take advantage of it to take a walk in the park?

## THE SHIFT

I wander off in the company of Honi and Ebos. It's the first time in years I am able to walk closer to a colleague than the usual 1.5-meter distance. We engage in some playful behavior, such as leapfrogging and talking to each other mask against mask. I scratch my nose, at least I want to. Appears to be complicated with the helmet.

“There is a side pocket in the helmet where you can push your hand into a disinfected glove,” Honi says.

I open the small zipper on the left side of the BioVYZR helmet and strike the hair out of my face. I wonder how the delegates are eating and drinking at the reception. Or what if you sneeze or want to blow your nose? Viral infections seem to be a rare phenomenon here, though. This outfit is the gateway to a careless virus free life, right?

The storks we approach are happy to play with us. We imitate them, climb up to their respective nests and share a small moment of understanding. For a minute I feel very peaceful. Then, one of the storks pushes me out of the nest and I fall into a horse carriage. It is on its way to the Mandrake lodge. I hit a peg at the side of the carriage and I hear a ripping sound followed by the sound of escaping air.

“What is this, why is it so hot all of the sudden?”

A bead of sweat rolls over my vertebrae. Breathing becomes more difficult and the shield of my mask becomes fogged. So hot. My whole body starts to itch. *I can't breathe*. The stork tilts its head minding its own business.

Luckily, Honi and Ebos notice I am in trouble, catch another carriage and jump into the one I am in. They lead the carriage to the ground. “Here, this is where the air is escaping,” Honi says, as she presses the two sides together.

*I can't breathe*. I push the alarm button attached to the suit. PeeWee immediately appears on the scene to assist. Within seconds, the PortAbo drops a Galloway cow next to me.

“What, a cow?” asks Ebos indignantly. “Where are the cyborgs with special powers when you actually need them?”

The cow spits out a green substance onto the rupture of the suit. “Oh yek, this is really gross,” Ebos notes.

“Amarante, you need to chew some of these epigallocatechin-3-gallate rich tea leaves,” PeeWee tweets. “They inhibit reproduction of the virus via its broad antioxidant activity. It protects you against the COVID-25 evoked mitochondrial reactive oxygen species (ROS).”

Would this explain why our government invests so much money in promoting the consumption of green tea leaves?

“It prevents replication of viral substances. In their regurgitated form, they can really protect you against a ROS burst inflicted by neutrophil extracellular traps.”

Overwhelmed by the amount of new information that hits my brain, I no longer absorb the additional information my twitter bird spits out ...

“Suppressing the endoplasmic reticulum resident GRP78 activity and repression, epigallocatechin-3-gallate substances can really inhibit the COVID-25 life cycle ...”

The patch on the suit brings relief and the sound of the ventilator from my BioVYZR helmet starts to take over again. My anxiety fades. The mental weight of the helmet that hinders my movement remains though. PeeWee directs me to the nearest cable and suggests taking a rest in my personal pod. The rest of the team follows my example.

### THE INSIGHT

Bathed in sweat, I pull the Virtual Reality (VR) goggles off my head and zip my Teslasuit open. Since the internet of senses made digital environments feel real, conferences became festivals of sensory hijacking, from which we usually have to recover for days. Anyway, it is our only way to hang out with our colleagues and exchange ideas, since Covid-25 put us in lockdown again, so I won't complain. At least a VR environment activates a sense of place.

I am suddenly overwhelmed by an immense feeling of loneliness. Not unusual when coming out of a VR experience, but this time, it is reinforced by the future experience of the virtual conference. The BioVYZR helmet and the skin suit: is this what our future would feel like if we were to adopt a technological fix attitude to solve our problems with viral substances? The pain of being all put in separate bubbles—suits, helmets, individual units, personal garden pods—was real. The helmets and suits certainly kept the viruses out and prevented us from infecting each other. The material also helped us breathe in the sometimes-unbearable heat. It allowed us to interact with each other without the 1.5-meter distance rule, and hug each other again. But the ever-present screens between us and the others, humans or non-humans, left me with a cold empty feeling. Whether it is a suit or a window, it makes us physically disconnected, preventing us from skin-to-skin touch, taste, smell, sound. And although this layer of protection at first sight gave me a sense of safety, it appeared to be another dependency on technology that can easily break and make us even more vulnerable.

I take a glass of water and look at the plants on my balcony. Having a space to sit outside is a luxury these days and I often seek refuge here when the desire to escape from myself or my environment kicks in. I am lucky to have one. The obvious inequality between the people “inside” and “outside” of the precious interspecies ecosystem in the VR future fiction story actually scares me. In the story, we learned that people had to abandon their houses and seek refuge in climate camps such as LaBiomista. Families

that passed the selection could live in their own little bubble, but no-one actually knew what the selection criteria were and why some people were refused. The selected ones worked in individual pods with groceries delivered by drones, services by robots, education via screens. Sporting seemed complicated with the masks and suits. The transport and gatherings organized via the PortAbo system was an interesting idea to spread out the activity and the density of people; it created space for nature to flourish on the ground level. But, of course, it forced the species that were living at the height of trees, to move higher and make space for us. In that sense, taking a bird's-eye view on our future with the planet felt liberating. We were able to understand what it feels like to be a stork and to assess from within how much their nest actually weighs on the ecosystem compared to our housing projects.

It was great to see how non-human species became emancipated since the climate manifestations in the mid-2020s and that they gained an official right to speak and be protected. Their voices were somehow equally represented in the discussion. Apparently, a virtual environment makes it easier to put chickens, viruses, rivers and other natural elements around the table—obviously, with bots voicing their perspectives. Although the non-human voice has won terrain in the future world of research, the human-centered perspective still reigns. However, in the LaBiomista conference zone, other organisms determined the flow of the discussion and brought in their needs. While not optimal in its structure, LaBiomista is a small beacon of hope. In an attempt to restore the balance on our precious planet, space is not necessarily given back to nature here. It is taken back and we humans get our fair share, no less, no more. It is amazing how many emotions race through your system when you start realizing that you are actually one of the weaker parts in the ecosystem, at least in terms of our capacity to successfully host other organisms in our bodies, such as the COVID virus. The rupture in my suit got solved by a Galloway cow and the substances in a tea leaf. It makes me wonder what progress would look like beyond our own limited human progress perspective. The concepts “diversity,” “immunity” and “fertility” will most likely become quite central in these reflections. Could they perhaps introduce a more holistic view on our possibilities for survival?

Participating in a conference at LaBiomista, even in a virtual setting, has made me more knowledgeable about the type of human we no longer aspire to be and the sort of human we are capable of becoming. One that demonstrates and inspires an enhanced mindfulness about how our daily

choices and actions affect animals and natural habitats. This mindfulness expresses itself in the way we eat, our sensitivity to local contexts influenced by central governments and the excessive use of the natural resources this remarkable planet offers. It nurtures a system of solidarity and joined responsibility. A solidarity in which the choice not to enter or occupy a particular habitat comes more naturally than having different species compete for space.

Exactly when these thoughts are running through my head, my cat jumps from the sofa onto the table, knocking my glass of water on the ground. A cry for attention, after being ignored for a few hours. After cleaning up the mess, I open my computer, with the intention to write a few things down. The virtual conference made me realize that part of the knowledge and solutions are already available. The survival of our ecosystem will depend upon humanity's ability to recognize the oneness of all that exists, to valorize the inexhaustible potential of all that lives to generate multiple and perhaps still unexplored interconnections. As researchers we are able to analyze the potential of different solutions, not only from a human but also from a non-human perspective. Although I feel exhausted at this moment, I would willingly volunteer for the next congress edition. At least I would have some reflections to share. I consider my VR experience a conversation starter to recast my future, our future. It was an interesting game where research spaces, time settings, formats and methods were permanently reshuffled. It surely provided some relief and input on how to adapt to the crazy COVID-19 times we are currently living in.

A message display flies in from the left on my computer screen and says: "PLAY."

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