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ANTERRAN 1

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Synopsis

"ANTERRAN tells the story of the people of Talifa, creators of the Black Cube technology. They used to call it the Sok'as..."

Introduction

We discover planet Talifa, just before the real story begins.

Narrative

Daily life on planet Talifa. Millions of years ago.

Many people walk in the street of an hi-tech city. Most of them look like human beings: they're the Talifan people. We can see them talk with other alien creatures and androids, and they seem to live peacefully together.

Most of these people use strange devices in the form of black cubes or black dies, sometimes wearing them on their glasses, sometimes carrying them as backpacks, or even integrated in their own bodies. They seem to use them as telephones, music devices, power sources for their cars... All around them, the skyscrapers integrate these artefacts in their architecture. Some of these black cubes also fly in the streets, like drones. It is a society that relies totally on this "black" technology.

Suddenly someone cries loudly, taking his head in his hands, the eyes showing terror. Somewhere else, black marks appear on the face of another Talifan, who rips off his cloth because of the pain, howling like a beast. He yells and jumps on one of his fellows before killing him.

In the background, there is an explosion. People run in the streets, but they're not panicked: they've become mad. They fight against each other, they destroy the droids, the cars... Close up on an inhabitant, with the eyes dilatated by madness... It's a scene of apocalypse.

Narrative

DAY 0

In the sequel of the story, the catastrophe that happened on this day are known as Day 0.

That is we will see about the events on Day 0. We will now learn what happens a few years later, and how people deal with their new situation.

Narrative

Eight years later, in the city of Ebo'Epk.

This scene takes place in a dark room. It's a kind of shelter, protected from the outside. A young man (between 25 and 30 y.o) is sitting before a Qbe computer. We don't really see his face or his age, as he is only lit by the screen before him. However he seems sane of mind, which makes a contrast with the previous events. He is typing a text on his keyboard. It's a kind of testimony.

Testimony

(the following appears as text and is not illustrated)

"The war has begun. That's crazy, we all believed in peace and modeled our civilization on the respect for the other. How can we become an example for different people in the universe if we are unable to sustain a stable society? I assume this is all because of the Sok'as, but I'm not exposing this publicly, as the Sok'as ARE now a part of us, and noone would listen to me if I faulted them. I still believe in this experiment and I'm sure that one day, our work will be recognized as one of the greatest inventions ever. But this technology should have been limited and studied much longer before being implanted everywhere on Talifa and used for civilian purposes. Profit, always profit...

We already witnessed the end of the Daeties on their own planet when they decided to use the HCFD-8 gas for their air-conditioners. We warned them that this gas would damage irremediably the ozone layer and lead to the destruction of their world. They didn't listen. It was their right. But are we going to live the same kind of scenario, with war instead of gas?

In one way, the experiment has become a success, as we built the A.R.K to save the knowledge of civilizations about to die. We would be the first ones to 'benefit' from the result of our work... Except that none of us would live long enough to see if it was definitely a good idea.

How could things go wrong in just a few years? It's been half a century since we started to use the Sok'as, and our lives improved immediately, but we should have noticed the evolution of the mental state among us Talifans. We became obsessed by the Sok'as, which led us into a mentally unstable society. Nothing but the Sok'as had any importance to us, and it quickly became a subject of dispute.

Here and there, localized incidents happened... and things became worse when the president tried to take measures to prevent this wave of madness. I wonder if I'm myself safe of mind, or if I distort reality under the effect of the Sok'a. What I know is that I'm here to launch the program A.R.K, and try to send in its memory the latest events.

If one day someone finds this recording, then you should know that the A.R.K program only chooses civilizations that are in danger. So, you shouldn't care about what happened to us Talifans or whatever you decide to call us, but you should care about your own civilization! Analyze and review the issues on your planet, and if you find a way to solve or reduce the problems, do it! You probably won't have a second chance...

Oh, one last thing : leave the A.R.K as soon as you can, the Sok'as might interfere with your health too. While this technology has been a major advancement, it can have very dangerous side effects..."

This ends the introduction.

Part 1

The young person has finished typing his text. By reading it we just learned that he's a scientist. He presses the "Enter" key on his keyboard to save his testimony. Tired, he glides into his chair, head back.

SCIENTIST
Aaah...

He doesn't wear the equipment of a scientist. He looks more like a warrior with some kind of big futuristic glasses. He probably past through difficult days. There's a kind of laser shotgun near his desk.

The small room around him is a bit lighter now. We can discover a very messy place, full of old papers with mathematical formulas, photos of the old world, rests of food, and many old devices that do not use the technology of the black cubes. There is also an old calendar. The dates were manually scribbled and replaced by new ones. We can read: Year 8 after Day0. Then: Day 425. Day 426. Day 427. ... and so on (it is not the Earth calendar, years can have more days, and days can be shorter).

Above the days, still on the calendar, there is a kind of advertising for the technology of the black cubes. The word "Sok'a" is clearly written next to a Cube, which helps the reader to understand that a Sok'a is a Black Cube.

Next to the computer of the scientist, there is a small figurine or toy representing a cat (or anything else). It is a primitive Artificial Intelligence that can have a simple conversation with someone.

CAT AI
You have been working for 2 hours. Are you hungry?

Scientist
Not really...

Cat AI
I feel a lack of confidence in your voice. Is something wrong?

Scientist
(tired)
The world has colapsed, millions of people died. The survivors are, on the one hand, our useless government and its army, and on the other hand, those junkie mutants that we call Suck'rs, who wander in the streets like savage beasts. The two of them are at war, and on top of that they keep using the Sok'as, the old Black Cube technology that caused all this mess.

Cat AI
Stanl'ey, you're depressed. It is too dark in this room. My

sensors detect that the weather is sunny outside: why don't you go play sports?

STANL'EY

You don't understand the situation, do you?

(he groans)

We had this discussion yesterday...

Cat AI

You need someone to take care of yourself. By the way, are you hungry?

Stanl'ey stands up from his chair, hits the AI (which falls on the floor), and stops before an enormous pile of papers. He takes a large box looking like a Cube of cardboard and reveals a TV screen that was hidden behind. There's an old report playing on it. It shows an important man being interviewed. The name written on screen is President Pater. It's the record of a past inauguration of a new building with a gigantic black Cube inside.

Stanl'ey

(still holding the cardboard box)

At this time, life was so easy.

(sighs)

I should delete these old recordings.

Cat AI

(face on the floor)

Watching old videotapes will not improve your situation.

Stanl'ey

This is the most sensible thing you ever said.

(to himself)

All these memories... I wonder if they will be saved forever in the Kula, as soon as I can activate it?

He looks at the cardboard box in his hands, turns it to hide the labels on the other side, and compares it with the gigantic black Cube shown on TV. Same shape. A Cube, almost black in the dark room.

Stanl'ey

(nostalgic)

I still don't understand why the Sok'as suddenly became dangerous, they seemed so perfect...

(At this stage of the book, with the different clues given previously, it should be clear that the black Cubes are called Sok'as.)

The young scientist walks toward the Cat AI and crouches before it. He looks at it.

Stanl'ey

(to the Cat AI)

I should upgrade your memory so you can remember the past events correctly. If I died, who would tell our History to Oliv'r? He wasn't in town on Day 0, and he was too young. He didn't witness the end of our world with his own eyes, but it's important that he knows... Someday he might want to learn more about the old civilization.

Cat AI

You're being too pessimistic. Oliv'r would be so sad if you died. Why don't you go play in the sun outside together? By the way, are you hungry?

Stanl'ey

(thinking of it)

Yes...

He picks up the Cat on the floor and puts it back on his desk.

Part 2

Behind the strong metallic door of the shelter, a sound of footsteps raise, quickly followed by the calls of a young boy.

YOUNG BOY
(loudly)
Stan? Stan! Stan!!!

The door opens and Stan picks up his weapon. Oliv'r appears. The young boy (between 10 and 15 y.o) is protected by a thick suit and large leather boots and gloves. He doesn't have a weapon, but a flying satellite device is following him closely. It's a kind of automatic defense weapon, not very powerful, but it is useful for a kid of his age. This device doesn't use the Black Cube technology.

Stanl'ey
(worried)
Oliv'r? Are you alright?
(lowers his gun)

OLIV'R
(happy and excited, but also out of breath)
I found it!!!

Stanl'ey
The shuttle?

Oliv'r
Yes! At the exact spot we found in the old newspaper.

Stanl'ey
I don't believe it! After all this time! Come on, take me there.

Stanl'ey runs outside of the shelter, following the kid in what seems to be an old underground parking. The remains of vehicles were destroyed by large pieces of concrete fallen from the ceiling, but the whole structure still looks strong. Lots of electric wires fall from the top. Stanl'ey stops before a narrow path, that used to be sewers.

Stanl'ey
Did you get there through the sewers?

Oliv'r
Yeah, as you asked. They're safe, but it would be much faster to take the shortcut in the old market streets. We would gain nearly an hour's walk.

Stanl'ey
Ok. Then I go first. Follow me!

Oliv'r
Be careful, I heard a group of Suck'rs around there.

Stanl'ey
(angry)
That sucks...

Oliv'r
(smiling)
As usual!

They leave the path to the sewers and head for the exit of the parking. Stanl'ey is on guard, ready to make fire. They finally reach the first sidewalk outdoors. It's raining a lot.

Stanl'ey
(looking at the rain, cynical, reminding the AI Cat)
"Why don't you go play in the sun outside", huh!

For the first time we discover the city after the events of Day 0. Everything is totally destroyed, as we can imagine after an apocalypse. The streets are quiet, there's no light behind the windows of the last buildings, accidented cars are stacked at every crossroads. There's no one walking around, no sound, the rare survivors are probably hidden somewhere, doing unknown things with no witness of their madness. Large broken pieces of concrete block the path here and there and a lot of small fragments of black Cubes can be found on the ground, scattered like broken glass. The ruined city looks grey, sad, desert. The rain doesn't help either...

They progress slowly in the streets, hiding behind walls and dark shadows as much as possible. Stanl'ey is very careful, tensed, holding firmly his laser shotgun. Oliv'r is just behind, checking their back and making sure that they're not being followed.

At a distant crossroads, they discover a Black Cube that was not broken, still perfect. They're far from it, but it's obviously intact and alone in the middle of the street. Anyone can see it, including potential enemies.

Stanl'ey
A Sok'a alone here... A trap?

Oliv'r
I'm surprised it was not already taken by a group of Suck'rs. They're so addicted to the power of the cubes that they'd kill each other.

Stanl'ey
I'd better destroy it from here.

He starts zooming on it with the scope of his gun.

Oliv'r

It wasn't there when we came the other day.

Stanl'ey

You're right. That's why I think it might be some sort of trap.

Oliv'r

I know that you don't trust this technology anymore, and want to avoid it at all cost, but you told me once that the Sok'as used to be everywhere in your life, and very useful too. I think we should get closer and study it.

Stanl'ey

(irritated)

No! As a scientist I know much more than you do, but still don't know that much about them. Never forget that they're the cause of all that happened on Day 0. All the Talifans became dependent of this technology, and most of them transformed into Suck'rs... These mutants are addicted to the Sok'as: it's proof that there's something abnormal with them. We should not take any risks.

Oliv'r doesn't answer. Stan aims carefully. He waits, hesitates and finally stops aiming.

Stanl'ey

(sigh)

We're too far... Come on.

The two of them start moving carefully toward the black object.

Part 3

While getting closer to the Sok'a, they both discover a small gathering of people who were hidden in a blind spot before. Stan immediately stops and hides with Oli behind what used to be a large water tank. What they see is not very encouraging. It's a group of five Suckr's with a very nasty look. Even though they used to be nice Talifan people in the past, these monsters are now scary creatures with no souls. They're almost nude, since they ripped off their clothes on Day 0 when the terrible events occurred. Their faces show the characteristic black marks that are caused by their addiction to the cubes. It's as if hundreds of small black crystals had erupted out of their skin to create long and thin scars. Their eyes seem different; they are probably the most evident sign of madness of these mutants.

Stanl'ey
(looking at the group)
As I thought...
(to Oliv'r)
Think they're the ones you heard earlier?

Oliv'r
Prob'bly. I was in the sewers and couldn't count them. I'm sure they've been attracted here by the Sok'a.

Stanl'ey
(thoughtful)
Mmmh...

Oliv'r
Hey! Look!

The kid points at a silhouette on the ground, in the middle of the group. One of the Suck'rs makes a step in this direction and suddenly kicks the object or creature with all his strength. The cry of a girl follows, and the person who's just been savagely hurt tries to stand up.

Oliv'r
It's a girl! Stan they're attacking a girl!

Stanl'ey
Calm down or they'll hear us. Look, she could just be one of them. You know that they're completely mad, they could have decided to kill each other to decide who will take the Sok'a. Let's have a look...

Stanl'ey adjusts his special glasses and starts zooming on the group. The view of the Suck'rs is disgusting, so he just focuses on the victim. She's still lying on the ground, exhausted. Stanl'ey suddenly becomes red as a tomato and doesn't say a word. Oliv'r is impatient to know more.

Oliv'r

So?! Is she alive? What's up, you're acting weird suddenly! Is she dead already?

Stanl'ey

(splutters)

No... No! It's just that... she's completely nude.

Oliv'r

You mean... like the Suck'rs?

Stanl'ey

Definetely not! She's just damn good! One of the most beautiful creatures I've ever seen!

Oliv'r

Let me see!

(they fight for a second)

We have to save her!

Stanl'ey

No, she's probably as insane as anybody. It's no use, and I doubt we can defeat five Suck'rs. Come on, let's get going.

They start moving again in direction of the old market streets, and try to stay as far as possible of the Sok'a and the ennemies. But they can't stop thinking of this young woman left alone. Being killed by five Suck'rs is just too horrible: they can use the power of their Sok'as to make the pain last longer. Indeed, Suck'rs are so additected to the Black Cubes that they have the ability to use their power, which makes them terrible opponents.

The two heros stop and look at each other: they have taken their decision and will do their best to help her.

Stanl'ey

(to Oliv'r)

I don't want to see you sulking for the rest of the day.

They suddenly jump out of their hideout, ready to make fire. Two of the awful Suck'rs, already looking more or less in their direction, snort an unintelligible word. One of them is immediately killed by a well placed shot from Stan. The second one tries to run before being halved by a laser beam. The small flying satellite of Oliv'r is still smoking when the three last mutants realise what had just happened.

Stanl'ey and Oliv'r need a few seconds to reload their weapons. Just enough for the Suck'rs to make an incredible jump and hit them. Stan loses his gun and the satellite is sent away out of control. The two heroes run towards the girl to try save her with despair.

Stanl'ey picks up his shotgun on his way and shoots another mutant. However, the horrible beast is now well aware of the danger and uses the power of his own Sok'a to create an energy shield of Yellow Matter (particles emitted when the power of a Black Cube is used). The shot is stopped by the shield and Stanl'ey is charged violently in return. While he falls, he realises that Oliv'r has been stopped by another Suck'r who is about to blast him with a "magical" lightning.

When his head hurts the ground, the time slows down for Stanl'ey: he looks at the horrible face of a Suck'r who just jumped to crush him. This enormous and hideous body will befall on his chest and flatten it in no time.

But suddenly, the face is distorted by a shot of yellow light that came from the left. The power of a Sok'a. The mutant is pushed away by the attack and Stanl'ey is saved. Saved by the accursed Sok'a technology... Disturbing. The rain now falls in his eyes, he's lost.

In his field of view, the girl from before finally appears. She gives her hand to help him stand up. She's even more beautiful than he thought, even if he still cannot really see her face. While most Talifan people have dark hair, hers are clearly golden, just like the Yellow Matter of the Sok'as.

Oliv'r appears too and shakes his friend casually.

Oliv'r
Come on, it's not a dream.

Girl
I'm Cl'ar. Nice to meet you.

Stanl'ey accepts the hand of the girl and stands up... The five Suck'rs around are dead.

Part 4

Stanl'ey, Oliv'r and Cl'ar have finally reached the shuttle that they were looking for. It used to be a flying vehicle connecting two major cities: Epo'Epk and Cytania (the capital). It's still written on a large rusty signboard. The abandoned shuttle is now half burried under rubble, but can still be repaired to take off.

Stanl'ey removes his own jacket and gives it to the girl, who's still naked. While she wears it (it doesn't hide that much her body), he looks severely at her face. She's around 20 or 25 y.o and very beautiful, but a large black scar crosses her head. It's the mark of the Sok'a, the same than the Suck'rs before: these small black cristals encrusted in her skin are evidence that she's accursed. Also, she's brought with her the cube that they saw earlier at the crossroads, and it is now levitating over her shoulder. Stan doesn't like that and keeps his distances.

CL'AR

(to Stanl'ey)

Stop staring at me. I'm not going to turn into a mutant.

Stanl'ey

No? Your face says the opposite. All people who became addicted to the Sok'as on Day 0 always had these marks before they transformed. Everything tends to prove that you're contaminated. I don't even talk of this cube that follows you. We had no idea it was yours, and that you could use its power. Do you know they're dangerous?
We can't trust you, even if you killed three Suck'rs to save us.

Cl'ar

(amused)

You call them "Suck'rs"?

Oliv'r

It's because the Sok'as suck for...

Cl'ar

I understood, thanks. Yet, I can assure you that I'm not addicted to it, and won't become one of these beasts.

Stanl'ey

(suspicious)

And how can you be so sure? It took several days to most Talifan people before they mutated.

Cl'ar

I'm... special.

(to Oliv'r)

So, shall we repair that ship?

Oliv'r follows her happily inside the shuttle. Stanl'ey is pissed off and just stays behind.

In the shuttle, Cl'ar sits in front of the commands and starts pushing buttons randomly. It's obvious that she knows nothing about it. Oliv'r watches the scene and finally takes place in a passenger's seat behind. As nothing seems to work, the girl knocks the control panel.

Oliv'r
Give up, Cl'ar. The batteries are empty and you will damage it.

Cl'ar
Then I can just use the power of the Sok'a to...

Oliv'r
It won't work. We chose this old model of shuttle for a good reason: it was created long before the infatuation for the Sok'a technology. Stan is the only one who can fix it.

Cl'ar
So he's a kind of... mechanic?

Oliv'r
Sort of. He's a scientist. And a good one, contrary to what you think. He participated to several projects relevant to the Sok'as, which is the reason why he is so angry now. He prob'bly feels guilty for all the dead people it caused.

Cl'ar
I see. I thought he was afraid of the power of the cubes.

Stanl'ey
(finally arrives)
Who's afraid of what?
(to Cl'ar)
Listen. We just met you, and you look like an evil witch. I don't see why you should come along with us.

Cl'ar
And who will stop me? You?
(silence)
You act like a mom with that kid. Not sure you have what it takes to defeat me.

Stanl'ey
You never know. What do you want?

Cl'ar
Companions. Friends. Can you believe this?

Stanl'ey

No. Though it seems obvious that I cannot get rid of you.

(to Oliv'r)

I have fixed the batteries while you were talking. We're ready to go.

(to Cl'ar, showing the pilot's seat where she is)

May I?

Stanl'ey wants to take the commands of the ship. Confused, Cl'ar immediately jumps to the next seat. Oliv'r fastens his belt.

Everyone's finally ready and the door closes. Soon after, the reactors begin to roar. Rubble slide along the cabin making a lot of noise. The shuttle takes off and soon flies over the ruined city. Bye bye Epo'Epk.

Part 5

The shuttle is now flying over a vast desert. The landscape, as far as we can see, is made of sand, rocks and canyons, and there is very few vegetation.

Inside the ship, everyone is quiet. Stanl'ey pilots with great confidence. Oliv'r is sleeping behind him and Cl'ar is cross-legged, doing a kind of meditation. Her Sok'a is levitating above her head, like an antenna. She suddenly opens wide clear eyes and asks.

Cl'ar
What is the ARK?

Stanl'ey
(dazed)
What?! Who told you about it?
(he looks at the Cube)
Don't tell me that you...!

He didn't finish his sentence: for some reason, he's so furious that he released the command levers of the ship, with the idea to grab the Cube and throw it outside. As a result, the shuttle starts to fall. Oliv'r wakes up and screams in panic. Stanl'ey regains self-control and rectifies the flight. It all happened very fast, and now anger and distress are past.

Stanl'ey
(severe, to Cl'ar)
Did you use the power of your Sok'a to read our minds?

Cl'ar
(confident)
Yes of course, you don't tell anything about your plans.

Stanl'ey
I don't believe it. You have asked to trust you. And now...
(silence)
Well. You're about to learn everything about the ARK. Soon. Everything you needed was a little patience. Happy?

Cl'ar
Listen, I'm sorry.

Stanl'ey
Can you read my thoughts right now?

Cl'ar
No...
(Stan is not convinced, she insists)
No! I just get feelings, ideas. Sometimes. When someone has something strong in mind, the Sok'a can share a word with me.

In fact it doesn't work with you, there's a kind of barrier. I was focused on Oliv'r while he was asleep.

Oliv'r

Me? Don't do it again! It's private!

Cl'ar

OK...

(to Stanl'ey)

Hey, the Sok'a technology... You know how it works, don't you? I mean: telepathy and all.

Stanl'ey

No, I never studied that part of the problem, it was the job of other scientists. I don't know much about the powers related to the talifan body. I learned most of it on Day 0... (he stops, it's too hard to remember the past events)
Oli, we arrive at destination.

Oliv'r

(excited, looking through the window)
Really? Where is it? I can't see it!

Stanl'ey

It's hidden.

(to Cl'ar, serious)

Listen carefully, girl. I think I can learn to trust you. The kid seems to like you quite enough, so I will make efforts. However, never ever use the power of your damn cube on any of us, whatever the reason. Never, or I'll kill you. You hear me?

Cl'ar

Sounds clear enough. We have a deal.

Stanl'ey

Good. Then I'll show you the ARK and its secrets.

The shuttle is now ready to start the landing procedure and the pilot targets a large crater on their right. However the'y won't land inside the crater itself, but on a mound next to it. All around there are remains of construction vehicules, scaffolding, cranes and piles of building materials, all of them burried more or less by the sand during years.

The landing is a success. When Oliv'r runs out of the ship, he soon realises that the mound covered with sand used to be the roof of a building of some sort, made of flat concrete, just like a short airstrip.

Stanl'ey releases something from his pocket. It's a kind of control remote or tablet. After initialization, he presses a few buttons and enters a secret password.

Stanl'ey

Oliv'r, Cl'ar, I am pleased to reveal project Abapoha R'na
Kula, Shelter of the Black Tower: the ARK.

He presses a final button. In the middle of the crater, a magnetic field makes waves over the landscape, and slowly reveals the shape of a giant thing. The invisibility of the ARK ceases and an incredible flying saucer appears. It is made of a giant dome of thick glass with several corridors around, all of them placed on a large plate of metal where reactors are visible. The whole structure, shining under the sun, is now visible from far away and is a beautiful proof that Talifan people knew how to build extraordinary things before Day 0.

Cl'ar

A spaceship?!

Oliv'r

Exactly! And Stanl'ey is the last scientist alive knowing about it.

Cl'ar

(excited)

Come on! Open the door, then!

The three of them start running in direction of the airlock...

Part 6

Using his special tablet, Stanl'ey opens the Airlock. It is a small compartment closed with two systems of doors. After passing through the first doors, they discover a very clean atmosphere illuminated by red lamps.

Stanl'ey

(truly excited)

To think that I didn't come here during years! I'm glad we could finish the construction before Day 0.

(to Oliv'r)

Oli, close the doors behind us, there's a button on the wall.

As Stanl'ey progresses in the airlock without looking back, he doesn't realise that Oliv'r was not listening. Indeed, the young boy is following Cl'ar and, as they were walking together in a single file through the narrow entrance, he became suddenly aware of the charm of the woman. Like hypnotized by the back of the girl, despite the jacket arriving at mid-size, he doesn't hear the instructions of Stanl'ey. In fact at this precise moment, he doesn't think at all. He comes back suddenly to reality when Cl'ar shows something in the middle of the airlock, shouting joyfully.

Cl'ar

Look at that!

She runs behind Stanley and stops before a spacesuit. It's a very light, close-fitting model, not bulky at all, very comfortable. It looks more like a soldier equipment. The suit comes with all the necessity, including an hi-tech shield that can be carried on the back. She unwears the jacket given by Stanl'ey earlier, and quickly puts her new outfit. She just leaves the helmet and the laser gun.

Cl'ar

Ah! I feel much better, now!

Oliv'r

(a little disappointed)

You sure you don't want the gun?

Cl'ar

No it's ok, I don't need it.

(her Sok'a flies above her)

Let's rejoin Stan, he somehow forgot us behind.

Indeed, the scientist has already passed the second system of doors of the airlock. They find him in a dark room full of commands and strange devices. Probably the bridge of the ship.

Stanl'ey and the others then walk in another corridor. They climb a kind of ladder and reach an immense room. It has the shape of a

dome, and is located in the exact center of the ARK. The walls are made of the thick glass they saw earlier, and through it they can see the sky 360°. They don't have a view on the surrounding desert, because of the peculiar shape of the ship.

But the most interesting in this central room is without a doubt the presence of a black tower, reminding a kind of obelisk or monolith, standing right in the middle. It is constituted of several identical Sok'as stacked one on the other. Each Sok'a is around 30x30x30cm, and the tower is made of 10x10x50 Sok'as, that is to say 15 meters high and 5000 blocks!

Oliv'r
(to Stan'ley, happy)
So that is your famous Kula.

Cl'ar
Impressive.

Stanl'ey
The R'na Kula: the black tower, yes.
(to Cl'ar)
Oliv'r already knows the big lines of the project and I'm sure he'll be glad to explain.
You can also ask more details to...
(he stops and looks around)
Where is she?
(he writes on his tablet, a silhouette appears behind the black tower, and he calls it)
Over here!

Stanl'ey runs toward the silhouette, followed by his friends. It takes a moment to distinguish it clearly: the room is so large that the distance is misleading, and the white diffuse light is a bit blinding.

The silhouette looks like a Talifan seen from afar, but while they get closer, it becomes obvious that it is an android. This robot has the appearance of a female person and seems quite evolved.

ANDROID
Welcome back, master Stanl'ey.

Stanl'ey
Thank you.
(introducing the droid to Oliv'r and Cl'ar)
This is an AI that manages the main functions of the ARK. We call it the Kula Observer, or in short: 'ko'. She's the most evolved droid ever created, and her mission is to stay on board for the next centuries. She's like the mechanic of the ship, you see?

Android
I prefer the word 'nurse' that you like so much, Master.

Mechanic is for old systems, and the ARK is like our child.

Oliv'r

Nice to meet you, m'dam!

Android

Nice to meet you Oliv'r. Please call me AI'ko.

Oliv'r

You already know my name?

AI'KO

Yes, Master told me everything about you.

Stanl'ey

(showing his control remote)

I stayed in touch with AI'ko during the last 8 years to explain her the situation on Talifa. She was left alone and the ARK project was on standby since... well... you know: since Day 0 and all.

Oliv'r

Why does she call you 'Master'?

AI'ko

Master Stanl'ey has taken care of myself despite the distance between us. I am grateful for the time he spent talking to me, telling stories and updating my systems to make me feel like a talifan being and a close friend. We've been having a kind of symbiotic relationship, sharing our deepest fantasies.

Cl'ar

Interesting...

Stanl'ey

(embarrassed)

Thanks AI'ko, I think they heard enough! I'm going to check the status of the ARK and see if everything is normal. In the meantime, why don't you explain them some more interesting things? I'm sure Cl'ar has lots of questions.

With these words, the scientist runs closer to the Kula and, while looking at it, starts entering data on his tablet.

Cl'ar

(delighted)

So? What can you say about this symbiotic relationship?

While they are talking, important events prepare outside. A cloud of sand is visible at the horizon, proof that an important move of troops is in progress. Something bad is going to happen: hundreds of military vehicles and soldiers are currently heading for the ARK...

Part 7

Cl'ar and Oliv'r are talking with AI'ko.

AI'ko

The ARK was created when the world was at peace. The idea behind the project was truly ambitious : it is supposed to become the biggest database ever created in the universe. The function of database is provided by the Kula: constituted of thousands of Sok'as, it has the ability to store a very lot of things in memory.

Cl'ar

I remember that the cubes were used individually by the Talifan citizens to save memories, music, pictures, videos and feelings during all their life. The possibilities given by one single Sok'a are truly awesome and usually even the smallest ones, with the size of a dice, were not used over 80% of their capacities. I can't imagine the possibilities given by a tower of that size... It's almost scary.

Oliv'r

Exactly! That's why Stanl'ey kept the project secret and safe. He's the last scientist alive to know about the ARK.

AI'ko

And about the Kula! The spaceship itself is only a protective shell for the tower. It is also the only way we found to send it in Space and gather precious data in different galaxies for the next couple of centuries.

Oliv'r

The ARK cannot house living beings for several years in space, so AI'ko is here to make sure that everything works according to the plans.

Cl'ar

It all sounds truly impressive, but what are we supposed to do with all the collected data?

Stanl'ey comes back and has finished working on his tablet.

Stanl'ey

(in answer to Cl'ar)

'We'? We will do nothing! If the project works - which is far from certain in our current situation - then it is meant for future generations and other civilizations. It's a proof that our people have ever existed. Our knowledge could be useful someday to someone who finds out how to use it wisely.

Cl'ar

(joking)

Now I can see clearly that you're a mad scientist.

Stanl'ey

And you don't know the best: we're ready to take off! I have checked all systems and the ARK is operational.

Oliv'r

(jumping for joy)

Great!

Cl'ar

(panicked)

Wait! Was that your plan from the beginning?

Oliv'r

Yes. We want to leave this planet and start a new life. Talifa is dead, people have transformed into scary creatures. The most basic life supplies are more difficult to find each day. If we launch the ARK, all will be different.

Stanl'ey

And I really want to start this mission, in memory of all the scientists who worked with me on the project. We have to do it for all the people who died on Day 0, and to avoid such a disaster in other worlds, in other galaxies.

Cl'ar

(suddenly angry)

I'm sorry but we can't leave Talifa.

Stanl'ey

We didn't ask you to come. Do as you wish.

Cl'ar

(threatening)

You don't understand me. I'll do what it takes to stop you. Give me your tablet.

While Cl'ar and Stanl'ey confront the gaze, a hubbub is heard in their back. When the three heros and the android look behind, they realise that an army of soldiers is now pointing their guns on them. An important man walks in the middle. He's wearing a long black coat, like an executive officer of some sort.

MAN

Yes, do as she asks: give her the tablet, so she can give it to me.

Stanl'ey

(to Cl'ar)

Who is that? Did you betray us?

Cl'ar

No, I...!

Man
Come on, nobody recognizes me?

Oliv'r
Oh I know! You're that guy I saw on TV. You're...

Man
(laughing)
Ahah! You're smart, boy. I'm president Pater, leader of Talifa.

Stanl'ey
(to Oliv'r, severe)
Didn't you close the doors of the airlock as I asked?

Oliv'r
(embarrassed)
I, uh, was quite busy at that time.

Stanl'ey
I don't believe it...
(to Pater, courteously)
Mister President, I can't give you my tablet. This is a scientific project and it is ready to begin. If you threaten us, I will press this button and the ARK will take off, taking all of us in Space with no possible return.

But while Stanl'ey brandishes his control remote, Cl'ar steals it from his hands.

Cl'ar
As I told you, we're not leaving Talifa!

Stanl'ey
What the...!

Cl'ar
As promised I didn't use my Sok'a on you. You should be happy.

PATER
Good girl. Now, give it to me.

Cl'ar
No. I have my own convictions, and they're probably very different from yours.

Pater
(sighs)
Then you're not better than this little genius. Unfortunately, I have no time to waste.
(raises his arm, commanding his army)
Ready to shoot!

Stanl'ey

Wait!

(trying to calm down the situation)

Wait, wait... You don't really care about the ship, do you?

Pater

No, we want the Kula. The rest of project ARK is none of our business.

Stanl'ey

That's what I thought. Maybe we can find a common ground, then. The kid and I, we just want to leave Talifa.

Pater

You're losing your time: I see no reason to treat with a scientist. What I want, I take. The situation is too critical.

Stanl'ey

(enraged)

You were the head of government on Day 0! Did you not kill enough people yet? It seems that the curse of the Sok'a has made you as mad as the mutants!

The army immediately reacts and fires Ai'ko as a warning shot. The android is destroyed in no time, and her head falls on the floor.

Stanl'ey

(petrified)

The Kula will never work without me! The Kitrinos were not injected, and it's just an empty block of black ore.

Cl'ar

Kitrinos?

Pater

Kitrinos? What is that?

(notifies his soldiers to lower their weapons)

Be clear and precise. Is the Kula operational?

Stanl'ey

No. The ARK can take off, but the tower is asleep. In case you didn't notice, I'm scared of the Sok'as since Day 0, and I don't want to mutate or become mad. I see no reason for the Kula to be awakened as long as I'm onboard.

Pater is thinking, looking at the scientist to see if he bluffs or not. Cl'ar takes advantage of this moment. Against all odds, she gives back the tablet to Stanl'ey.

Cl'ar

You can still save AI'ko. Download her memory in your tablet, I'll make diversion.

No sooner said than done...

Part 8

Pater's army is totally taken by surprise. An incredible storm of golden particles, the 'Yellow Matter' of the Sok'a, suddenly arises in the room, surrounding Stanl'ey, Cl'ar, Oliv'r and the remains of AI'ko under an energy dome. The soldiers make fire, but their shots are immediately stopped by the protective power.

Holding her Sok'a in her hands, Cl'ar summons another kind of "magic": terrible lightnings hit several ennemies, bringing confusion in the troops. However, Pater waits quietly in the middle of the battlefield, as if he was also protected by a mysterious strength and didn't have to fear anything.

Cl'ar suddenly becomes invisible and the shape of her body goes through the protective field, leaving Stanl'ey and the others all alone. The scientist panicks while trying to retrieve the memory of the droid. The transfer is in progress, but he has to check many parameters on his tablet, while checking that Oliv'r is safe. Around them, more soldiers fall on the ground, defeated by the invisible Cl'ar, who hits them by surprise with her own hands. From time to time, she becomes visible again and does a short-distance teleportation until she reaches another ennemy and kicks him. It's amazing, as if she had the powers of a superhero.

Cl'ar clearly tries to reach Pater, who finally decides to make a few steps back. More lightnings hit his four bodyguards and he's now alone. The rare soldiers still around are hesitant and scared, most of them are now weaponless. In a final cloud of 'Yellow Matter', releasing all the power of her Sok'a, Cl'ar appears in front of Pater, screaming him all her rage and disgust.

Pater, calmly, takes an object in his pocket, inside his black coat. He opens a small case where a black die is being kept for special occasions. Before Cl'ar can reach him, he takes the die in his hand and uses it to neutralize the power of the girl. She falls on the floor, exhausted and lost, unable to understand what had just happened. Pater walks toward her and kicks her face violently. The protective field surrounding Stanl'ey and Oliv'r disappears.

Pater orders to the remaining soldiers to gather and make fire. Stanley can save Oliv'r and dodge the attack, but his control remote is broken during the move, and the head of AI'ko is totally destroyed by the shots.

Stanl'ey
(yells, watching his broken tablet)
No !!!

Pater
(restyling himself serenely)
You do not make things easy, guys.

(looking at Cl'ar, who tries to stand up)
You have good potential with the Sok'a, but you clearly miss training. Careful, girl: trying too hard to use it, you might lose your soul.

(close up on the black scar of Cl'ar, angry face)
You don't have much time before you turn into a mutant. You should have used your power sparingly.

Stanl'ey and Oliv'r run next to Cl'ar and help her stand up.

Pater
I'm not the monster you think. You're free to go, if you give me control of the Kula.

Stanl'ey
(ironizes)
Not a monster? I think you're as mad as all the victims of the Sok'a. Anyway it's too late:
(he shows the broken tablet)
Nobody can initialize the black tower, now. The systems could only be accessed with this unique tablet.

Pater
Then you're useless.

The ancient president beckons his army to kill them. At this very moment, an explosion happens outside the ARK. Everyone falls off balance and a soldier runs in the spaceship screaming:

Soldier
Mutants!!!

Cl'ar takes the occasion and gathers her strenghs. She catches Stanl'ey and Oliv'r by the hand and they suddenly disappear. They're seen running in the airlock, where they hit the guards, before taking the direction of their shuttle.

The scene they discover outside is terrible and illustrates perfectly the current war in progress on Talifa: Pater's forces are facing a hord of Suck'rs. Soldiers vs Savage beasts. Using their military vehicles, the army launches missiles and several explosions occur here and there. The Suck'rs still continue their progression, superior in number and fearless. The army finally decides to draw off and they all gather inside the ARK.

Stanl'ey and the others don't lose a second, and in no time the shuttle takes off. They look at the ARK one more time, taken by ennemies from the inside and outside, and their dream of leaving the planet evaporates silently. They will not see again the incredible spaceship before long...

Part 9

The shuttle has landed at the top of a rocky mountain in the desert, with a good view on the surroundings, in case they had been followed. The three characters have already lit a fire, because it's the night now and the weather is cold. Instead of getting some well deserved rest, they're quarelling...

Stanl'ey

(to Cl'ar)

I knew it was a bad idea to let you follow us! None of this would have happened without you, and we would be travelling in Space right now. You owe us some explanations! Why did you want that much to stay on Talifa? I don't believe that you stole the control remote from my own hands!

Cl'ar

(as angry as him)

I didn't steal it, I just wanted to change your mind and found no other way! Didn't I give it back, after all? You're blinded by your dream of another world, and you don't realise that Talifa can be saved: we should help each other, you two are the first people I met that have not become mad, or who are not involved in this war against the mutants.

Stanl'ey

Not involved? You think we're not, after what just happened?

(takes a short breath)

Whatever! You've not answered my question. What is so great on Talifa, that required us to stay? Do you realize that you also destroyed Oliv'r's hopes for the future?

Oliv'r

(saddened, looks at Cl'ar right into the eyes)

He's right, I really wanted to leave this planet. I was too young on Day 0 and I don't remember well the events. What I know is that all happened because of the Sok'as, and that you have one with you, Cl'ar. You see, I never used them and, maybe they're awesome, but my life is good without this technology.

(looks at Stanl'ey)

But it's also your fault. You should have explained her the situation and our plans from the very beginning.

Stanl'ey

(outraged)

My fault?! I don't believe it! You were supposed to close the doors of the ARK. That was a very simple task, but you failed. (pointing at Cl'ar)

If she hadn't been there, I'm sure you would have done everything correctly.

Cl'ar

(holding her head, tired)
Listen, guys, I... er... You shouldn't argue with each other because of me.

(exhausted, she refrains against the shuttle)
I did not clearly analyse the situation on the ARK, and that it was so important for you to leave. I'm very sorry.
There's something else I must tell you... I...

But she couldn't finish her sentence. She faints and falls on the ground.

Stanl'ey
Cl'ar, what's the matter? Hold on!

Oliv'r
Cl'ar! Cl'ar!

The two of them run to rescue her. Oliv'r doesn't know what to do and takes her hand. Stanl'ey checks her breath and pulse, but makes a bad face. Not good. Then he looks at her Sok'a, fallen above her shoulder. He violently pushes it away, thinking that it might be the cause of the disease, and may also wound Oliv'r and himself somehow. He stares at the black mark on her face...

Stanl'ey
Move back, Oliv'r.

Oliv'r
Why?

Stanl'ey
I'm afraid she might turn into a Suck'r soon...

Oliv'r
No, it's impossible! She was fine until now. She's just tired because of all that's happened!

Stanl'ey
I wish that were the case... Look, I admit that the recent strain could be the cause of her unconsciousness, but I feel she has reached her limit, and that the curse of the Sok'a finally tainted her.

Oliv'r
(severe)
You have to help her. You have to try! I know what you think, but she saved us in the ARK. She gave all she had, for us and AI'ko.

Stanl'ey
(sudden idea)
AI'ko! Of course!

He runs in the shuttle and brings back his broken tablet. He looks at the damages and seems quite relieved. He turns it on.

Stanl'ey

Good! The main systems are still working. There are several important functions that will not work, but most of them are related to the ARK. It's not a problem right now. So let's see. If I do... this!

(he hits a button)

AI'ko, can you here me?

AI'ko

Master? Where are you? My eye cameras are offline, all I see is darkness. My memory is also very limited and I can't seem to make a single move with my body.

Stanl'ey

'ko, I'm very sorry but you've been shot by a soldier in the ARK. Your original body was destroyed, but I swear that I will find a solution as soon as possible. For now, we're in big trouble. An army took control of the ship and all I could do was transfer your main systems in my tablet before we escape. The Kula is safe for now, I think.

AI'ko

I feel so narrow in this little box. I'm afraid I can only use 6% of my abilities. Can I help you in these circumstances, Master?

Stanl'ey

Of course you can! Look, I'm with Oliv'r here. He will make the request himself.

Oliv'r

Hi AI'ko!

AI'ko

Hi Oliv'r.

Oliv'r

You see, Cl'ar is sick and has lost consciousness. We are very worried and we would like to save her. We don't know what to do, and we have no first aid here nor in the shuttle.

AI'ko

I just found the GPS function of the tablet and could use it to define our current location. It seems that we cannot reach any town quickly enough to seek for medecine. However I have detected the presence of a Sok'a very close to us. I would suggest that we use its power.

Stanl'ey

Can you use the power of this cube by yourself? Maybe... if I

find a way to connect it with the tablet?

AI'ko

I had several capacities with my original body that could retrieve specific data in the Sok'a, but it was very limited. The power you seek has to be activated by a talifan being... (Oliv'r seems ready to try) ... and preferentially by an adult.

Stanl'ey

Take your time to think, AI'ko. There's probably another way around to save Cl'ar.

AI'ko

Master, you won't like it, but you're the only one around who can save her, and you'll need the Sok'a.

Stanl'ey lowers the tablet and looks at Cl'ar. Everyone stays silent and waits for his decision. He looks at the black cube carefully but lowers his head, confused...

Stanl'ey

I swore I would never use one of these things again. It's too dangerous. When I think of Day 0, I just... (tears run down his cheeks)

AI'ko

Master...

Oliv'r

Then I will do it. To save Cl'ar!

Stanl'ey

No, Oli, I... You can't! It could destroy you!

Oliv'r

Cl'ar has been using it a lot, just to take us out of the ARK. I don't care if I have these black marks on the face. I will resist as long as possible, and I won't turn into a Suck'r.

Stanl'ey

(angry)

No!

(he jumps on the Sok'a and takes it)

I'll do it. Just give me some time to prepare myself. I've not used one of these things in several years.

Oliv'r

Thank you.

AI'ko

My database tells that "healing" is just a basic function of the Sok'a. You should not have to use it for long, and would

probably not be affected by the curse. The risks you become addicted are around 3%.

Stanl'ey

3%... Yeah, it's not as if I was going to use it everyday. Then that should do it, I'll be safe.

He puts his hands on both the cube and the body of Cl'ar. The Yellow Matter rises and surrounds them both...

Part 10

On the next morning, they're asleep around Cl'ar. She's the first one to awaken, but won't get up. She just picks a gourd of water in the hand of Oliv'r. She realises that the tablet of Stanl'ey was placed against the shuttle. The camera of the tablet is directed to keep an eye on her.

AI'ko, inside the tablet, decides to engage the conversation.

AI'ko

Good morning, Cl'ar. How do you feel?

Cl'ar

As if I had been dancing all night with a bunch of Suck'rs...
(moans)

But what about you? I'm glad Stanl'ey could save you.

AI'ko

Thank you. Master always tries to save his friends. I feel a bit cramped in this small box, but I'm getting used to it. I found out how to use all of its functions. They're very basic, in fact, but very different of my original body, so I had to learn everything. I was very happy to access the camera systems and open my eyes again.

Cl'ar

(uneasy)

Were you... monitoring me?

AI'ko

(silence)

Yes.

Master Stanl'ey thought that you might become a mutant, because of the last events. He was very tired after he healed you, so he asked me to stay on guard, just in case...

Cl'ar

I see...

(suddenly surprised)

Did you just say that he healed me?

Cl'ar stands up in the instant, looking for her Sok'a. She finds it near the fireplace, which one extinguished during the night. Her sudden move woke the others.

Oliv'r

Cl'ar!

Cl'ar

Hey.

Stanl'ey

(tense on his shotgun)
How do you feel?

Cl'ar
Much better.
(with a smile, finally)
Thanks to you.

Stanl'ey
Good. I had no idea what to do and how to heal you. I see you didn't become a Suck'r... yet.

Cl'ar
I think I was just very exhausted. Taking some rest really helped. Did you... use the Sok'a yourself?

Stanl'ey
(embarrassed)
Yeah... I just didn't see any other way.

Cl'ar
(severe)
Never do it again!

Stanl'ey
(upset)
What?!

Cl'ar
I mean... I know you don't like the cubes and don't want to use them. Just leave it to people who are not scared.

Stanl'ey
When these people are almost dead, I have no choice but to do it myself.

Cl'ar
I...
It was a compliment, in fact.

Stanl'ey
Then it was very clumsy! But I'm getting used to your manners. Anyway, I have to learn more about the Sok'a: it's my mission as a Talifan scientist. We don't know what awaits us in the next days, now that we're stuck on this planet, and maybe I'll have no choice but to use it again.

Oliv'r
Don't worry: that's our home! Let's do our best to be as much happy as possible here.

Cl'ar
The kid is right.

Stanl'ey

It's something I understood while trying to save you. As I said earlier, I think I can trust you, but you have to tell us the truth now. Why did you want so much to stay on Talifa?

Cl'ar

You know the problems with the Suck'rs and how they mutated on Day 0. You were afraid of the marks on my face but the truth is that I will never transform.

Stanl'ey

(stunned)

Wait: you mean that you're like... immune?

Cl'ar

AI'ko, usually how long does it take for someone to turn into a Suck'r after the marks appeared?

AI'ko

Between two hours and four days.

Stanl'ey

(standing up)

Impossible! It would mean...

Cl'ar

Yes, there is something in my body that stopped the mutation process. I think it is possible to analyse my DNA to try and discover a cure.

Stanl'ey

(excited)

Then we could save all the people of Talifa!

Cl'ar

Exactly. In fact, when you found me in the street, I was looking for you. I had heard rumors about a scientist in the city of Ebo'Epk who used to be specialized in the Sok'a technology. I had hope that you could do something.

Stanl'ey doesn't answer immediately, but a large smile appears on his face. He turns his back and looks at the landscape with the rising sun. Then, after a few seconds, he says:

Stanley

A long journey awaits us. We absolutely have to repair the tablet and regain control of the ARK. I can make serious analysis there and probably use the Kula to send a cure to all the Sok'as of the world. We'll have to fight against more Suck'rs and deal with the army, but now I think it's worth the try!

Oliv'r is checking different things on the tablet.

Oliv'r

There are three towns arround where we could look for components to repair AI'ko.

AI'ko

We will need a new GITS-1 system to replace the old one. I suggest we visit the city of Hand'al first.

Cl'ar

Ready to go.

Stanl'ey

Then take place aboard the shuttle!

What they do right away...

End of ANTERRAN 1