

# ***The Greenhouse at the Edge of Darkness\****

**Ugo Bellagamba**

(Law Professor, Université Côte d'Azur)

---

**ABSTRACT** This story takes place in a hypothetical future. The refusal of facial recognition has gone through the systematic wearing of digital masks preventing the identification of individuals. But, the system is not free of flaws, as shown in this short story.

---

**KEYWORDS:** Law and Science Fiction

---

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:** 1. Chapter one. – 2. Chapter two. – 3. Chapter three.

---

## ***1. Chapter one***

Before entering the Douât, Sab carefully checks the battery of his mâq; even for someone who supervises a district and is responsible for respecting anonymity in public spaces, and in all places open to the public, the sudden failure of his individual digital mask is never an excuse. At best, this would be seen as negligence on his part, resulting in a severe verdict for breach of the principle of non-identification; at worst, it could be the immediate dismissal of his supervisor's charge. Worse still, if deemed a wilful act of rebellion or exhibitionism, Sab would undergo indefinite incarceration in one of these peripheral open-air prisons, often former stadiums, where the inmates wear the mâq even while they sleep.

The entrance of the clandestine nightclub bears a striking resemblance to that of an Egyptian temple: a pronaos with ostentatious gilding surrounded the visitor with two immense cynocephalic deities in stucco. Arms outstretched, the ornamental figures join their hands to the tapered phalanges to form an ark, beyond which only darkness reigns. The place is aptly named. Sab had done his research before coming. He knows that in ancient Egyptian mythology, the Douât was the place where the dead were held; at least those whom Osiris had allowed to enter eternity. The young supervisor shivers. When one lives in a kingdom of blue light, all day long, the gaze focused on luminescent screens, adapting, from second to second, to the use made of them, and guiding people home, serving them, informing them, entertaining them, as much as to monitoring them, everyone fears the return of darkness and what it may contain. Like children who wouldn't want the night light to

be turned off. Yet in this digital society to which Sab belongs, and of which he must ensure the safety, the 'night light' is always on, and must remain so.

And yet, Sab thinks as he steps forward impatiently beneath the arch, his entire society already lives in darkness, behind the cloaking veils of systematic ignorance: ruled by the Network. Wearing connected masks called "mâqs", frantically changing avatars, passwords, and IDs from microsecond to microsecond, never seeing reality other than through the images of an augmented reconstruction, with saturated colors. Since the Hartzog-Selinger-Rhee Law of February 14, 2037, on the refusal of facial recognition and strong AI, every citizen of the Union of Nations must constantly wear the mâq in order to hide his or her civil identity, from the age of seven until their death. Most people are so used to the care services that come with their mâq, they no longer remove it, even when they are at home. Children are encouraged to wear it at home as well as at school, and, thanks to the MFM program ("My first mâq"), they receive one mâq for free at the age of three (and only few parents leave it in the drawer until the legal age). In professional life, in companies, on construction sites as well as in offices, in the liberal professions and among civil servants, in transport as well as in meeting rooms, all and all no longer focus their attention on the tasks to be accomplished only through their mâq. It is that the advantages that this standardized security device offers free of charge are legion: services tools to assist with thinking and writing, personalized organization of one's work and leisure time, financial management, permanent monitoring of biological and emotional constants, of course, co-management of social networks, necessary at a time when everyone has thousands of non-

---

\* Article submitted to double-blind peer review.

gendered avatars and whose lifespan often equals that of a digital butterfly. From a very young age, every citizen has billions of faces, millions of names. No child, no elderly person, no one suffering from illness fears the dark anymore, because the darkness has become an obsolete concept, the echo of a vanished civilization where violence and injustice lurked there like hungry beasts, ready to bite, to tear, to kill. The present times are the golden age of digital technology, the city is one of pixelated freedom, radiant ubiquity, perfect equality.

And yet, supervisors are needed.  
Supervisors like Sab.

Agents ready to hunt down those who advocate the return of the Dark.

As soon as Sab steps into the nightclub, Sab realizes that he has forgotten an essential element: his silicone earplugs. The music is deafening. The pounding beats slam into his gut, resonate in his skull, like hammers from a divine blacksmith. Hypnotic is not the word. Resisting the trance requires him to mobilize all his will. And despite that, he involuntarily starts to beat the rhythm, swimming in this ocean, drowned in shadow, and yet without fear, as if he finds a primordial element, forgotten for too long. Little by little, he becomes aware of the people around him, who dance very close to him. He perceives breaths. And, despite the music, cries. He tenses out, ready for battle, but quickly understands that these are not cries of fear, pain, even terror. These are cries of joy, even ecstasy. He begins to let himself be carried away by the atmosphere, loses balance, and a body brushes against him. Masculine or feminine, young or old? He can't tell. A perfume intoxicates him, a mixture of jasmine and white-water lily, and he hears a voice directly in his *mâq*. The voice says:

- What are you doing here, little supervisor? Do you come to find culprits? Rebels? Do you know that the Gods at the entrance only let those whose heart is free pass?

The voice is feminine, very skillfully controlled, almost authoritarian, as if used to be listened to and obeyed. And she's right about one thing: sensors were hidden in the statues, and Sab understands that he's no longer incognito. He realizes that he only made it to the dance floor because Gods, or Rebels, wanted him to. Deep down, he senses that in this place, no one follows society's

rules. He has entered a nest of rebels, who reject the port of the *mâq*.

Yielding to a crazy impulse, Sab reaches out his hand in front of him.

- Hey, you're getting bold, my little supervisor. Go ahead, look at me!

The music has suddenly dropped, undoubtedly filtered by the audio system of his *mâq*. In its place, the voice reaches him more naturally. It seems to emerge from the darkness, always as thick, and her vibrato fascinates him.

His fingers, hesitant, meet the gentle shape of a cheekbone. They glide over the bridge of a thin nose, linger more than necessary on the curve of full, but hard, tight lips. The chin, although hairless, is square, almost heavy. It is difficult, despite the voice, to determine the gender of his interlocutor. Since the advent of digital masks, being transgender had become the norm: woman in the morning, man in the evening, feminine at work, male at home, and most of the time when it comes to interacting with others. No one is to be assigned to any role anymore, to any gender, to any function. The new plural individual has obliterated the very notion of living together. With a touch of the index finger, he checks on the other's forehead, what he has already deduced from the situation: the other in front of him does not wear his identity concealment device. No *mâq* in the nightclub.

Socially, the other is naked.

- Who are you? Asked Sab
- What an impolite question!
- Every citizen must answer the supervisor!
- I am not a citizen... you have no power here in the Douât!
- I could close this clandestine establishment, said Sab.
- There are thousands of others, it doesn't matter.
- So, you admit to being rebellious.
- No, simply free and I do what I want, and I want to be myself.

And Sab feels that he is touched in turn. But not on the face. A hand caresses his neck, his shoulders, his chest, and descends... Almost without realizing it, he surrenders to sensuality and loses his sight of his mission. Carried by the music, he abandons himself.

## 2. Chapter two

Isis opens her eyes and instantly brings her hands to her face.

She wears no *mâq* and therefore has no way of knowing where she is or the time it is. She doesn't know how long she slept; she doesn't know if she is in danger. La Douât, true to its nature, swallowed everything, drowned her memories in nothingness and alcohol. Isis remembers the supervisor watching her. She turns her head, by reflex, and with the pale light filtering through dirty windows, too narrow to her liking, she sees a young man lying next to her. Young, but thinner than athletic, as revealed by his bare chest, almost hollow.

He doesn't wear his *mâq* either.

Her gaze glides over the nightstand, beyond the layer they have obviously shared, and she sees both devices, they are placed next to an old electric arc lamp. The miniaturization has reached heights and the *mâq* now looks like a translucent pellet that is placed at the junction between the forehead and the eyebrow arch and is held magnetically thanks to a microscopic implant.

Isis even knows that the very new generation of *mâq* embedded directly under the skin and riveted to the occipital bone, it is no longer possible to remove it. Let alone turn it off. The battery uses the movements of the host's body as a source of energy, and, of course, the *mâq* 3.0 never fails again. It is permanently active, and this is what makes it even more effective. Although system updates have grown increasingly cumbersome, thoughtfulness and even less respectful of fundamental rights, there is still ample room within the human skull to store them on semi-organic memory sticks. In sum, at the time when she opens her eyes to this gray future, the rebellion she claims is already about to be emptied of all usefulness. Soon, *mâqs* will no longer be applications at the service of citizens, but the condition of a frozen society.

The first reaction of Isis is to try to catch her *mâq* without waking the man, and to run away as far as possible from him, not without having previously gleaned information. She feels that, despite herself, she either needs information, she always needs information constantly, as if it were food, and above all, she hopes to avoid being apprehended when she decides to leave. But, as soon as she sketches a movement, the man opens his eyes.

- Good morning, Isis.
- How do you know my name?
- You finally told me last night, before going into a coma.

She struggles to suppress a grimace of hatred and disgust.

- If you took advantage of me, I...
- I am a supervisor, Isis, not a dirty pig. I fight against all forms of violence.
- That doesn't stop you from keeping me here against my will.
- Not at all. You can leave at any time.
- But?

Sab seems to hesitate, he straightens up, sits down in bed. His thinness is startling. Isis would like to see it differently, to idealize it, improve it, make it less ugly. His eyes, however, of a bluish gray that resembles those of tempered steel, have something disturbing.

- You can go, but without your digital mask. I must keep it. And I gonna denounce you for violation of several articles of the HSR-37 law.

Isis' heart beats wildly, she is caught in her own game. Suddenly, the situation reversed, and it is she who finds herself confronted with a brutal reality that she would have liked to never have to face. She must pull herself together, strikes back, understand this man's motives. Why did he not already called the police? Where are the drones?

She gets up, pretending to ignore that she is dressed in a T-shirt with questionable cleanliness and shorts that, obviously, do not come from her own wardrobe. Yet, she feels clean and free from all defilement, as if a nurse had taken care of her. She walks around the bed, approaches a desk overloaded with old paper books, dusty, with faded covers, as if they were too long in the sun. She takes one at random.

- A little supervisor who is with a taste for culture from what I see.

Sab smiles quietly, and despite it, Isis appreciates it.

- Let's see, she says, touching one of the books... 'True Names', by Vernor Vinge, she reads.
- A great choice, says Sab.
- Is it an essay?
- No, Isis. It is a science fiction novel. Which dates from 1981.

## Ugo Bellagamba

Isis's eyes widen. She's genuinely surprised. With the book in hand, she approaches Sab, the bed, the nightstand, and her mâq.

- 1981, it's so far, she says.
- Our grandparents themselves were not born.
- Indeed, it was a world of violence, of excesses, but already dominated by the Network.
- The digital masks didn't exist yet, right?
- No, of course not, but the question of digital identities was already there, crucial.
- Is that what the novel's about?
- Yes, acknowledges Sab, this is precisely what Vernor Vinge had anticipated.
- Can you explain it to me, please?
- No, Isis, I strongly dislike mansplaining. You will have to read it by yourself.
- You give it to me? That's very kind but I won't have time to read it, she says.

Isis is disappointed: she had counted on the fact that, all to her explanation, Sab would lose his vigilance and that she could then catch her dog, on the nightstand, and run. But that will not happen. The man, who is always closest to the nightstand, reaches out his hand towards his own mâq and positions him with a sure gesture on his forehead, while retrieving Isis' one in his closed fist. His steel-gray eyes disappear behind a shimmer of faces all different from each other.

- Oh, Isis, believe me: you will have all the time needed to read that book.

And while she understands what Sab's words imply, the apartment's only window opens on the fly, and a swarm of drones burst into the apartment. A metallic voice seems to come out of everywhere at once.

- Isis Beauchamp! You are under arrest for flagrant violation of the HSR-37 law!

Sab, meanwhile, looks away.

### 3. Chapter three

The old lady finds the greenhouse even more magnificent than usual. Each plant, each fruit tree, each flower seems to compete with ingenuity and audacity to appear even more beautiful than all the others. There, more than a kilometre above sea level, under a gigantic crystal dome, at the top of a tower of carbon and steel, hidden from all who lack the required clearances, to anyone without a real

name, stands the garden of Eden. And it belongs to her family, for generations and for generations.

The greenhouse is far from any city, any law, any form of constraint. Here, between heaven and earth, between men and gods, beauty needs no justification of any kind.

Carolyn Beauchamp smiles, and when she addresses her granddaughter, her voice is liked less stern than she would have preferred. She sees too much herself in the young woman, her vivacity, her appetite for life and freedom, and her imprudence.

- Can you understand the situation, Isis?
- Yes. I would have been dead if I'd spend one more night in jail.
- No, Isis, you would have held on. You are a Beauchamp!
- I ask for your forgiveness, Grandma.
- Enough, my dear. A Beauchamp never apologizes!

With the pruning shears in her right hand and a watering can in her left hand, Carolyn looks carefully at Isis. The old woman looks like a goddess of the untamed Nature, her hair disheveled, her face streaked with damp earth. Her wrinkles do not harden her proud features; rather they lend her a kind of hieratic authority, like that of a queen willing to do anything to shield her family from threat or disgrace. At ninety-five, she seems as fresh as the soil where she has just planted the small cherry tree that Isis offered her to facilitate her forgiveness. She smiles, confident of her power. Isis has tears in her eyes, and trembles slightly. She needs to hear the truth.

- Come on, come on, my beautiful. Don't cry. You know very well that it was impossible for your family to let you answer for your actions. The system works in our favor, since we are the ones who imposed it on society.
- What do you mean, Grandma?
- Think about it. If all the inmates must wear their mâq at all times, even while they sleep, who could you ever suspect that it's not you lying in that cold cell? Someone took your place. And without any facial recognition, no one could say that it's not you serving your sentence, you see? Officially, we are following the law, however. You're free.
- But, in this case, who then has taken my

place in the cell...?

- Don't worry about that, Isis. Many people and families owe us their lives. It's just a matter of reminding them at the right time.
- I see.

Carolyn places her tools down on a small wooden worktable whose azure paint had started to peel. She thinks that she should ask her team of gardeners to remedy it quickly. In this greenhouse - her greenhouse - everything had to be perfect, clean and exquisitely arranged. She advances towards Isis and embraces her tenderly.

- My dear, Isis, our family, and few others, rule over a world of digital masks from towers of crystal and steel where we can bare our true faces to the sun with no fear... says Carolyn.

Isis feels half dreamer, half shocked.

She finally grasps the full extent of the lies on which the society has been built. And she now recalls the old stories her grandmother used to tell her when she was little girl: how the origins of digital masks date back to the early 21st century, when researchers, lawyers, and thinkers began to recognize the dangers posed by the widespread implementation of automated facial recognition systems at the level of nation-States, all in the name of security, increasingly threatened by terrorist acts. Advances of digital technologies, coupled with the proliferation of AI and algorithmic systems paved the way for such surveillance infrastructures, integrating drones, cameras and facial recognition and identification programs for major popular events, such as the Olympic Games or the football world cup.

Researchers, particularly in Europe, were moved by it and sounded the alarm to public authorities, warning of the imminent erosion of fundamental human rights and the obliteration of individual freedom in the name of group security. In many university conferences, voices rose to denounce the abuses of facial recognition. Some even called the system a 'Trojan horse' for dictatorships, arguing that such a powerful surveillance tool posed significant risks to privacy and civil liberties. They contented, at its core, facial recognition technology was morally suspect as it was a perfect tool for oppression. Even seemingly benign or beneficial uses, they argue, could lead to normalize more intrusive

applications, ultimately pushing democracies, including the United States of America, towards authoritarianism.

And, thanks to the vigilance of these wise intellectuals, these seasoned jurists, the world had changed course; everything had been upended. Facial recognition was banned, declared illegal. Yet the issue of digital identity emerged anew, more pressing than ever. Users of social networks had become vast reservoirs of digital data, shamelessly exploited by GAFAM. Then, from seemingly start-ups, tools for protecting identity protection began to appear, and the 'mâq' gradually took shape.

- From that moment on, says Carolyn, as if she could read her granddaughter's thoughts as easily as a digital book, our family positioned itself in the market of suitable software and hardware. We were ready.
- Ready to do what?
- The mâq is, as a system of non-identification, security, the product of a private consortium that supplies all the nation-states in the world, and of which we are the creators.
- So, the mâq is the source of our wealth, of our power...
- Both already existed long before, my dear. Let's just say the mâq has increased our domination.
- And is that why we don't wear them, when we are together?

Carolyn smiles, more amused than troubled by the candor of her granddaughter's question. She steps closer to the worktable and picks up the watering can, handing it to Isis.

- Come help me, there are some roses over there that need fresh water.

Isis complies, gently brushing aside a lock of golden hair that had fallen across her forehead.

