

August 20: Mosquito Day

Chapter 1

IF THE SYSTEM hadn't stalled Antar would never have guessed that the scrap of paper on his screen was the remnant of an ID card. It looked as though it had been rescued from a fire: its plastic laminate had warped and melted along the edges. The lettering was mostly illegible and the photograph had vanished under a smudge of soot. But a four-inch metal chain had somehow stayed attached: it hung down in a rusty loop from a perforation in the top left-hand corner, like a drooping tail. It was the chain that tripped the system, not the card.

The card turned up in one of those routine inventories that went flashing around the globe with metronomic regularity, for no reason that Antar could understand, except that it was what the system did best. Once it got started it would keep them coming, hour after hour, an endless succession of documents and objects, stopping only when it stumbled on something it couldn't file: the most trivial things usually.

Once it was a glass paperweight, of the kind that rain snowflakes if you turn them upside down; another time it was a bottle of correcting fluid, from an irrigation overseer's office just south of the Aral Sea. Both times the machine went into a controlled frenzy, firing off questions, one after another.

Antar had met children who were like that: why? what? when? where? how? But children asked because they were curious; with these AVA/IIesystems it was something else — something that he could only think of as a simulated urge for self-improvement. He'd been using his Ava for a couple of years now and he was still awed by her eagerness to better herself. Anything she didn't recognize she'd take apart on screen, producing microscopic structural analyses, spinning the images around and around, tumbling them over, resting them on their side, producing ever greater refinements of detail.

She wouldn't stop until Antar had told her everything he knew about whatever it was that she was playing with on her screen. He'd tried routing her to her own encyclopedias, but that wasn't good enough. Somewhere along the line she had been programmed to hunt out real-time information, and that was what she was determined to get. Once she'd wrung the last, meaningless detail out of him, she'd give the object on her screen a final spin, with a bizarrely human smugness, before propelling it into the horizonless limbo of her memory.

That time with the paperweight it had taken him a full minute to notice what was going on. He was reading: he had been lent a gadget that could project pages from a magazine or a book on the far wall of the room. So long as he didn't move his head too much and hit the right key in a steady rhythm, Ava couldn't tell that she didn't exactly have his full attention. The device was illegal of course, precisely because it was meant for people like him, who worked alone, at home.

Ava didn't notice the first time but it happened again with the correcting fluid: he was reading, staring at the wall when she went deadly quiet. Then suddenly warnings began to flash on his screen. He whisked the book away but she already knew something was up. At the end of the week, he received a notice from his employer, the International Water Council, telling him that his pay had been docked because of 'declining productivity', warning him that a further decline could entail a reduction in his retirement benefits.

He didn't dare take any more chances after that. He took the gadget with him that evening, when he went on his hour-long daily walk to Penn Station. He carried it to the franchise doughnut shop where he was a regular, down by the Long Island Railroad ticket counters, and handed it back to the Sudanese bank-teller who had lent it to him. Antar's retirement was only a year away and if his pension rates went down now he knew he wouldn't be able to work them up again. For years he'd been dreaming of leaving New York and going back to Egypt: of getting out of this musty apartment where all he could see when he looked down the street were boarded-up windows stretching across the fronts of buildings that were almost as empty as his own.

He stopped trying to get the better of Ava after that. He went back to his job, staring patiently at those endless inventories, wondering what it was all for.

Years ago, when Antar was a boy, in Egypt, an archaeologist had turned up at the little hamlet where his family lived – on a strip of land reclaimed from the desert, on the western edge of the Nile Delta. The archaeologist was a woman, a very old Hungarian emigre with skin that was as brittle and closely veined as a dried eucalyptus leaf. No one could pronounce her name so the village children named her al-Magari, the Hungarian. The Hungarian visited the village several times over a period of a few months. On the first few occasions she brought along a small team of assistants and workers. She'd sit in a canvas-backed chair, under an enormous hat, and direct the excavations with a silver-tipped cane. Sometimes she would pay Antar and his cousins to help, after school, or when their fathers let them off from the fields. Afterwards the boys would sit around in a circle and watch as she sifted through the sand and earth with brushes and tweezers, examining the dirt with magnifying glasses.

'What is she doing?' they'd ask each other. 'What's it all for?' The questions were usually directed at Antar, for he was the one who always had the answers at school. The truth was that Antar didn't know; he was just as puzzled as they were. But he had a reputation to live up to, so one day he took a deep breath and announced: 'I know what they're doing: they're counting the dust; they're dustcounters.'

'What?' said the others, mystified, so he explained that the Hungarian was counting the dirt in the same way that old men count prayer beads. They believed him because he was the brightest boy in the village.

The memory stole upon Antar one afternoon, a brilliantly sunlit vision of sand and mud-brick and creaking waterwheels. He'd been struggling to keep himself awake while a particularly long inventory went flashing by. It was from an administrative building that

had been commandeered by the International Water Council – some wretched little Agricultural Extension Office in Ovambooland or Barotseland. The Investigation Officers had run everything they could find through Ava, all the endless detritus of twentieth-century officialdom – paper-clips, filecovers, diskettes. They appeared to believe that everything they found in places like those had a bearing on the depiction of the world's water supplies.

Antar had never quite understood why they went to so much trouble, but that morning, thinking of the archaeologist, he suddenly knew. They saw themselves making history with their vast water-control experiments: they wanted to record every minute detail of what they had done, what they would do. Instead of having a historian sift through their dirt, looking for meanings, they wanted to do it themselves: they wanted to load their dirt with their own meanings.

He sat up with a start and said, in Arabic: 'That's what you are Ava, a Dust-Counter, *'Addaad al-Turaab.'*

He said it under his breath, but Ava heard him anyway. He could have sworn that she was actually startled: her 'eye', a laser-guided surveillance camera, swivelled on him while the screen misted over with standby graphics. Then Ava began to spit out translations of the Arabic phrase, going through the world's languages in declining order of population: Mandarin, Spanish, English, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali . . . It was funny at first, but when it got to the dialects of the Upper Amazon Antar couldn't bear it any longer. 'Stop showing off,' he shouted. 'You don't have to show me you know everything there is to know. *Iskuti*; shut up.'

But it was Ava who silenced him instead, serenely spitting the phrases back at him. Antar listened awestruck as 'shut up' took on the foliage of the Upper Amazon.