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THE LIVING CURRENCY¹

It had just gotten dark when Oona set out to the large enclosure, her arms straining with the weight of two large buckets. The fence made its familiar metallic creak as it first swung open and then close. Reddish termites swarmed about inside the buckets; hopelessly looking for a way out, she thought. But wasn't she just projecting? Could ants feel angst?

She walked for about ten minutes, her steps heavy, lifting tiny clouds of dust, until she reached the burrows. She kneeled down and tipped the buckets, unloading their contents on the sandy ground, near the openings. Like each evening, she hoped to catch a glimpse of Scar, Maude or Puk, the least elusive of the group, poking their snouts out of their dens. But she seldom did. Pangolins are famously introverted and shy, even amongst themselves, so she usually had to do with seeing them from a distance, having retreated for quite a stretch. She took her binoculars and sat down, waiting for them to come out for their food. There were eleven of them in total, a mix of genders, ages and species; coming from both Asia and Africa. A motley crew of underdogs, destined to be trafficked and killed for their coveted scales but who had miraculously evaded their fate, wounding up in deepest Arizona. Pangolins had been the most trafficked wild mammal in the world for at least two centuries, more than rhinos, elephants and tigers combined. In 2220 there were no more rhinos or elephants, and only a few scattered tigers in Asia. Pangolins had also been mostly wiped out as a wild species. The majority of the remaining specimens were (in)bred in farms to be trafficked.

Pointing the binoculars at a few different spots, she adjusted the lenses with delicate precision. After a while she saw Jacob coming out, snuffling the ants as he walked out on his back legs, his front claws clasped on top of each other like a good-humoured grandmother. Oona stirred at the sight, flooded with tenderness. Out of another burrow came the white-bellied Maude. She stood up and looked around, snuffled some of the ants around her but then set out to find her own. She was very fussy and preferred to source her own food. Oona caught a close up of her face for a moment, her long snout, the start of the scales in the area between her eyes like a precious helmet, the round little ears. Oona wanted so badly for them, and her peers across the world, to be safe. It was such a unique, strong sensation, what she imagined maternal instincts would feel like. She remembered the mission in which she came across them, piled in a filthy plastic tub, shaking in their defensive rolled up positions.

She had been part of a group then, engaged in massive sting operations. They would rescue the pangolins and hand them over to an underground network of conservationists and specialist vets, who would look after

them and hopefully, in due time, release them back into their natural habitat. But Oona knew this would often see them end in the same situation all over again: re-captured, trafficked, horribly murdered, their scales tore away, their meat eaten. There was something about this small group she had rescued that felt different. She didn't want to hand them over, part with them. She made a snap decision, loaded them on her small craft, flew to Paarl to illicitly buy extra fuel, enough for a transatlantic flight, and then flew all the way to Arizona, to the lands that had belonged to their family for generations. She was the last one standing, the rest of her family had succumbed to either some form or other of environmentally-triggered cancer or to SARS-CoV-2, the virus behind the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that had started 200 years ago and had slowly wiped about 66% of Earth's population.

It had certainly been tough. The grounds of her Arizona ranch were sandy enough for the pangolins to be comfortable, but the habitat was way too dry for them. Regardless of their origin, they were all used to a lot more humidity and some woody, shaded areas. Oona created a sort of irrigation system to bring water to their large enclosure, so they could bathe in puddles, which they loved, and so that she could plant some trees and bushes for them to climb and find shade. It was a folly, but it was *hers* and she laboured daily, painstakingly, over it. Her one dream was for her pangolins to breed naturally, but in three years it had not happened. She didn't lose hope of seeing again a pangolin pup, much like Pooja had been when she first saw her, curling in terror next to June, her mum.

Her former colleagues were still in touch with her, despite Oona having gone rogue. They would communicate in code, through radio waves at least monthly. They were still rescuing pangolins, and she always volunteered to take more animals in her sanctuary. After having kept all her pangolins alive for more than three years in the desert, undetected and unencumbered by the powerful network of poachers, they were starting to take her seriously. She welcomed these chats, stilted, reproachful, technologically mediated and clunky as they were, since they represented the only form of human contact she'd had for years. She still hadn't told them about her experiment. It was early days.

She put her binoculars back in her saddle bag and

stood up, dusting herself off. She walked back towards the house, where her dogs greeted her with their usual enthusiasm. She fussed over them for a while and then walked around the house towards the large sheds in the backyard, where she had set up a precarious laboratory, lit by a string of neon lights, noisily intermittent, which annoyed her enormously. Production of those lights had stopped about a hundred years ago, and the ones you could find in the black market were always old and faulty. Oona's ranch was powered by solar radiation. There was plenty of sun in Arizona, and her energy reserves tended to be optimal, but for some reason the supply tended to jerk, with short power-cuts constantly interrupting the stream of light or the tools she was using. Still, most systems managed to function, including the small distillation station she had devised and set up near the shed, which made the brackish water that came out of the well potable. About ten years ago the water, which had been fresh and drinkable, had become hugely saline overnight. The distillation system she had devised procured water for her, her dogs and the pangolins. None of their bodies could tolerate the amount salt of the well water. At first, Oona had thought that the pangolins could at least bathe in it, but they tended to drink it and their scales quickly got dry, some of them even falling off.

Dragging the old wooden stool and sitting at the table, Oona stretched her arms and turned on the small overhead spotlight, shining it on five small and flat objects. They were her latest "specimens"—faulty, insufficient attempts to synthetically replicate the pangolins' scales. Those scales were their protective shells but also their downfall. They were useful against animal predators because, when under attack, they could simply roll into balls and the strong and hard keratin of their scales was enough to protect them from their enemies' teeth and claws. But when it came to humans, the fact that they were rolled into neat balls only made it easier for poachers to simply pick them up and fling them into bags and cages. They were utterly defenceless. For decades and decades pangolins had been hunted down and trafficked for a number of purposes. First of all, for their scales, which were used in many traditional Chinese medicine remedies. Once killed and flayed their meat would be consumed like a delicacy. Of course, the claim that had spread like wildfire at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, linking the zoonotic process whereby the SARS-CoV-2 had jumped from animals to humans via

those consumed pangolins, hadn't exactly helped their cause. Many had also been killed in a pointless attempt at containing the disease, before scientists finally traced the virus' origin to bats. But, spurious rumours and all, the blind faith in the curative properties of their scales had taken such a strong hold in a population plagued by a growing number of unknown diseases and ailments their market value had skyrocketed exponentially. Once they had become such a precious, and increasingly rare, matter, the scales swiftly entered the domain of currency. Certain goods—particularly traditional Western medicines, drugs, medical equipment and some weapons—could only be traded for pangolin scales, which exacerbated the whole poaching enterprise.

Since setting up in her family's ranch with the pangolins, Oona had been trying to create a surrogate of the scales, which could be both exchanged as currency and also grinded and used in traditional potions and other concoctions. She knew there was no serious research to back up the belief that the scales had strong curative properties, so she only needed to be able to generate something that looked the part, without having to worry about replicating their supposed active principles too. Her goal was to produce a vast amount of these fake scales, as many as were required to saturate the market, bringing down their value and the relentless need to poach and breed the animals. But the polymerization process she had devised wasn't good enough, yet. The methacrylate monomers she was mixing with benzoyl peroxide and then hardening under solar light still didn't have the right consistency or look of the scales. They weren't hard enough, ochre enough, beautiful enough. They still looked too fake, too *human*. A couple of centuries ago, humans had indeed used this technique as part of the cosmetic fashions of the time, applying long synthetic nails, like sharp claws, on top of their own nails. They were called "gels" and had fell out of favour as soon as the first climate wars had started ravaging the cities.

She opened a drawer from the rickety desk and grabbed a handful of cowrie shells, which had made a comeback as one of the most widely used forms of currency, coinciding with the final exhaustion of Earth's metal resources a couple of decades ago. There was no more gold, silver, tin or copper to be mined and turned into coin. Electronic and plastic money had disappeared of the mainstream too, ever since the internet had been hijacked and returned

to the hacker sphere due to the lack of metals and minerals required to build new computers and smart phones. The remaining Earth civilisations had thus had to turn their sights to other materials and practices, including a return to the gift economy. Around that same period the sharp rise in the temperature of the oceans had turned out to be deadly for the predators of cowries, octopuses and crabs, so the population of these molluscs had thrived. There was enough now supply of them to be a viable matter, but the means to harvest them in the sea and to validate each specimen as a real cowrie were being controlled by certain groups, which made them perfect currency material.

Oona handled the cowries in her hand, listening to sounds they made as they rubbed against each other. She was fascinated by these hardy little shells, and the stories they contained, the places they had seen. Along with the pangolin scales, cowries were the most coveted "gifts". She opened another drawer and rummaged around its contents, an assortment of gift currencies she had assembled over the years during her missions abroad. Copper sticks in different shapes, khipus, spade-money, knife-money, bridge-money... She thought about all the death and unrest generated by the greedy desire to hoard all these. Organic, like the scales or cowries, or inorganic like these metallic objects, they had all undergone a journey from being considered magical to their complete debasement. Could they ever be true gifts, or could they only ever be material forms of oppression, symbols of exploitation?

At that moment the radio crackled up.

The low drone that indicated the start of a broadcast began humming. Each night, at 9pm, Oona received an encrypted report with updates on weather specimens which were essential for the ranch's solar power upkeep. Last week, for example, a storm had taken her breath away. A bolt of lightning had suddenly shattered the sky, generating massive spheres of ionization that had shot downwards and then upwards. The resulting red sprite hung high up in the sky, like a glowing jellyfish. Oona kept a record of these atmospheric and astral events. She was most interested in the radio frequencies emitted by celestial objects, but hadn't yet been able to build a radio telescope. Her projects accumulated at a greater speed than her self-taught knowledge. For now, she was attempting a method to gauge the different

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types of radiation with her own body, soaking up electromagnetic transmissions with the conviction of a sun worshipper.

She quickly realised this wasn't the usual weather report.

She listened.

"WYQP9XW to CHY5DKT, WYQP9XW to CHY5DKT. Do you copy? WYQP9XW to CHY5DKT, WYQP9XW to CHY5DKT. Do you copy?"

Oona scrambled to reach the radio transmitter.

"CHY5DKT to WYQP9XW. I copy."

"CHY5DKT, a ship belonging to the Arterox network has been detected near your coordinates. Its ETA is ..."

Before she had even heard the end of the sentence, Oona started running back to the pangolin compound. A few miles away, a ship could be seen hovering in the sky.

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