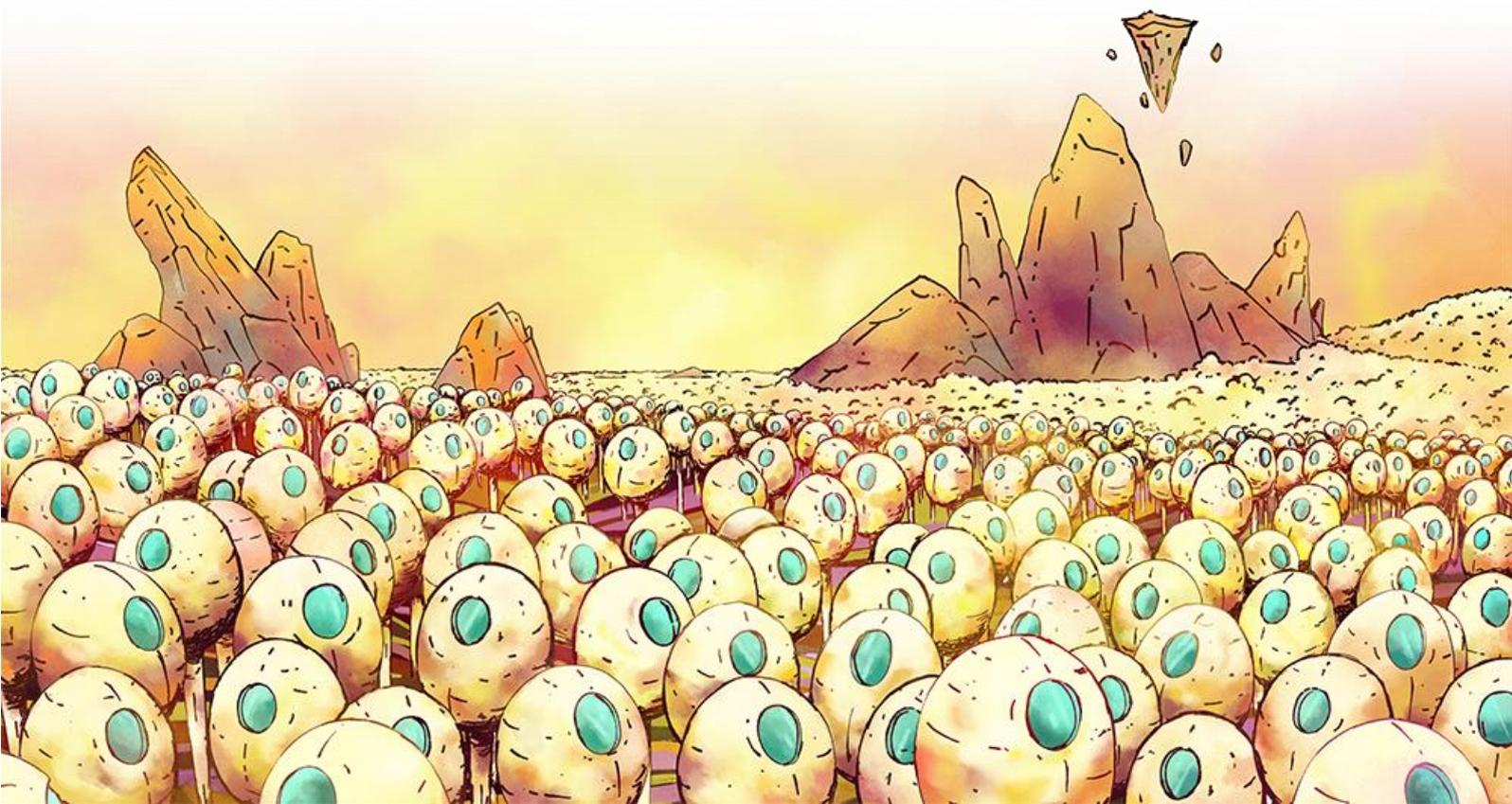


The Fullness Of Paradise

By Dariush Alavi

Chapter 5 – The Pleasure Cocoons



Although I had floated through the crystal clouds several times by this stage in my bewildering journey – still not entirely able to abandon the conviction that it was a sleep-induced fantasy – the shock of being thrust back into that extraordinary skyscape was almost palpable.

Once again came the certainty – albeit short-lived – that the tiny shards drifting around me would be sure to cut my skin, followed by the now familiar realisation that they would do me no harm. Once again came the momentary struggle against the lack of control over my drifting body, to be replaced by a sense of surrender – a release of myself to the unseen energies around me. And once again came the sight of that figure in the distance, her shape little more than a speck against the luminous background.

By now of course I knew better than to force my way towards her. I merely continued to move whichever way the tides and eddies in the clouds chose to push me, keeping my eyes focused on her faraway shape, as certain as I had ever been of anything that while I watched, she was moving her fingers through her dark hair. Did she know me equally well, I wondered. Did she recognise me by my gestures, by how I held my arms by my sides, by the manner in which I moved my head in order to find a gap amongst the clouds?

As before, I called out to her, and as before, when her answer came, it did not arrive through the air, but sounded in the deepest parts of my mind. A sapphire-tinged reassurance that we were both on the path on which we were supposed to be: that we had achieved a great deal and that it would not be long before this journey was at an end.

I believe some corner of resistance within me may have tried to convince myself one final time to make an effort to wake up – to grit my teeth and force my being to find itself back in my bed. But the part of me that knew this would be futile was now stronger and more persuasive, bolstered by the unavoidable presence of my new hand, by the subtly altered, dimmer vision through my new eye and by the change in the tone of the sounds that now entered me through my new ear.

Was it this final addition to my body that was now allowing me to detect a new sound, the presence of which I don't believe I had appreciated until that point? A bubble of noise, like a conglomeration of voices, so distant and so faint, that it was easy to dismiss it and ignore it. Had it always been here, I wondered, hovering behind the clouds, just out of the reach of my hearing. I tried

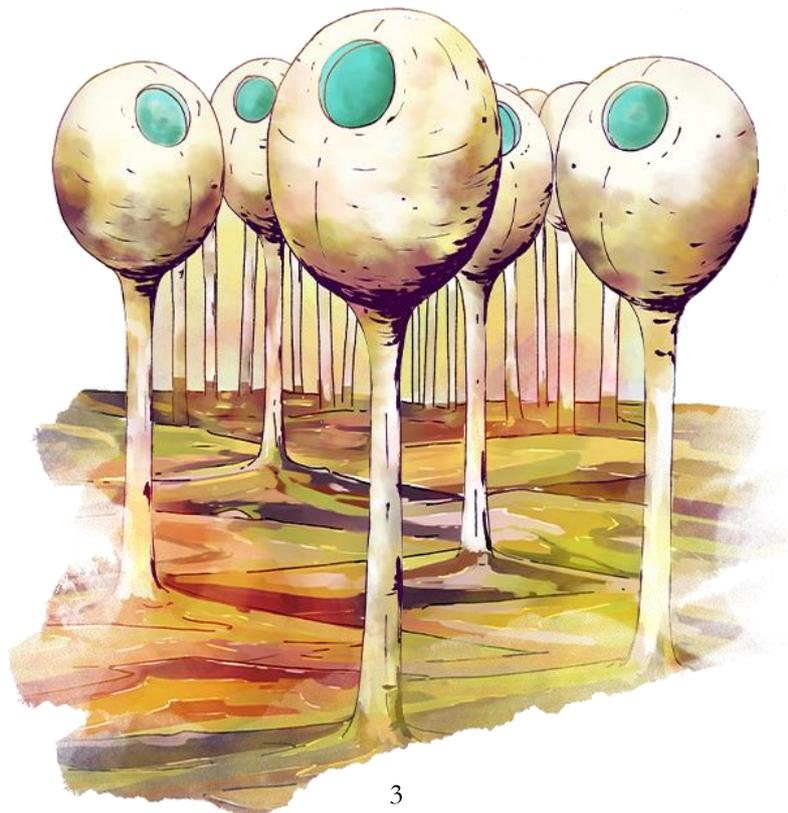
to focus on specific details within the sound, but they eluded me, fading away each time I attempted to grasp them.

After an immeasurable length of time – by which I mean to say I had no way of ascertaining whether it was long or less than brief – the sounds vanished, the prism-shifting colours beneath me parted and I saw a new vista present itself on the ground below.

My first thought was that I was about to set foot in the midst of a thick jungle. The colours were dominated by greens and browns. Slim, human-sized, organic-seeming structures covered the entirety of the territory, like trees. A thin mist hung above and within them, shrouding them in a veil of dew.

As my body floated closer, it became clear that the objects I was approaching were not trees, and that this was no forest. To be sure, the structures did appear to be growing out of the ground, but this too seemed to be less than natural, and the pods – which is what the structures resembled – also displayed signs of having been manufactured.

I drifted nearer to them and I could see that the colours I had observed were being cast by invisible lights shining from both the floor and the sky. They formed a moving pattern of browns, reds, greens and auburns across the pods, creating the illusion that they were bending and swaying in time with some non-existent breeze.



Perhaps what was most remarkable was that the entire place was silent. There seemed to be no movement, no inherent noise, no hum of machinery. Indeed, my initial impression was that there were no people here at all, although this turned out to be false.

Finally, my feet touched the surprisingly yielding ground – its softness not unlike that of a bed of soil – and I was able to take a closer look at my surroundings. Everywhere I turned, my vision was overshadowed by the pods. They filled the area around me, and their arrangement on various levels – as though they had sprouted from undulations and hills – took up the whole of the skyline.

These constructions – constantly in the glow of the shifting lights – were largely opaque, except for one small window or porthole towards their top. And it was when I decided to peer more carefully through one of these portholes that I gained my first inkling of the events that would mark this strange wilderness.

Inside the pod was the figure of a human being – in this case, an elderly woman, her hair long and white, her face marked by deep furrows, her eyes closed. Looking around, I could see that she was not alone: all of the pods contained a figure, seemingly in a state of rest or sleep. Mile after mile, for as far as my eyes could see: hundreds and thousands of these smoothly-shaped enclosures, each one presumably housing a silent, unmoving person.

I stared a good deal longer at the woman in the pod nearest to me. That now-familiar instinct within myself – a thought framed in a shade of blue – told me that she was the person to whom I needed to stay close, that hers would be the tale with which I was about to be presented.

I waited for some time, curious to discover how the next facet of this journey would unfurl.

As nothing appeared to happen – not the slightest movement or sound anywhere within the reaches of my perception – I felt all I could do was continue to stare at the face of the woman. And it was then, after having studied the most minute details of its composition, that I discovered it was not still at all.

On an infinitesimal level, it was, in fact, in constant motion. There, inside that pod, with no movement at all detectable in any of her limbs, the woman's face was a theatre of the tiniest expressions. Her mouth twisted, her eyes darted to and fro beneath their lids, her nostrils flared, her brow furrowed, her ears twitched. Almost none of this was noticeable at first. Indeed, even though the movements were unmistakable once I had detected them, they were so small in magnitude that there

were several moments when I was certain I had imagined them, and that the woman's face was completely motionless after all. But no, there was another twitch, another twist.

It was tempting to try to imagine what was causing these changes – what dream was eliciting such a range of reactions – but I had no evidence with which to form any meaningful suppositions, other than the sense of enjoyment that seemed to radiate from the woman's face. She did not appear to be distressed in any way. Quite the opposite: all the nearly-missable signs pointed to an experience that was pleasurable and welcome.

I waited longer, looking for some indication of what I may have been expected to do, but none was forthcoming.

Eventually, with the same silence that was the hallmark of that eerie setting, one section of the pod containing the woman pulled away and turned into a door. It opened, swinging on hinges I could not detect, and revealed the slender frame of the woman. I saw that her bare arms were pricked by hundreds of sharp needles, each of which was attached to a wire that coiled its way into the fabric of the cocoon. The points where the needles pricked the woman's skin were red and sore, in parts oozing a few droplets of blood.

A sound emerged, playing within the pod, close to the woman's face. A voice.

"Pleasant awakening," it intoned. "As you open your eyes, you are permitted to recall that the life you consider yourself to have lived is a narrative selected by you some years ago. You chose it from the options available to you on the basis that it would bring you the greatest amount and intensity of pleasure. You have now reached a periodic reflection point. You may choose to return to your pre-selected life and continue to experience the same levels of absolute pleasure, surrounded by representations of those you consider to be nearest and dearest to you. Or you may choose to leave and never to return. As ever, if you opt to resume the experience, you will have no knowledge that it is a pre-selected narrative. You will now be given the customary period of time to make your decision. Be aware that at the previous five reflection points, you opted to return to your pre-selected narrative life."



The voice faded and the woman opened her eyes: sharp, bright twinkles of grey. She looked around, and as she took in her surroundings, it was with complete certainty that I knew what she would say next.

“So, it has fallen to me. Rabu, you have come to help me make the choice.”

She smiled, and although a sense of relief could be detected in her eyes, there was also a tint of fear.

Yet again, the sound of that name tugged at something in my mind. And on this occasion, I was certain that I was on the verge of connecting it to a concrete memory: a hazy glimpse of a face, casting a benevolent gaze upon me, saying that word to me. Calling me by that name.

Or was this a false certainty? Was I beginning to construct a memory purely as a consequence of the number of times I had now been addressed by that unfamiliar word? At that point, I was not yet sure, and I had no opportunity to dwell on the question, because the woman spoke to me again, with urgency in her voice.

“Rabu, I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see you standing here.” She paused. “What I mean is that I am *incapable* of telling you. I cannot find the words. How curious. I feel I should be able to find the words to express my emotion, and yet I cannot.” She shook her head, as though trying to dispel this worrisome notion. “But if it has fallen to me, then we must hurry. It won’t be long before I have to make my choice, and the enclosure is sealed again.”

I knew what would occur next, bracing myself for that feeling of being unhitched from my very being. My consciousness spun across the space between us – losing sense of what was above me and below me. I tumbled towards her, whirling through the air. And then I was within the pod, staring out at myself.

I felt myself settle into the confines of the woman's body, but although I expected this to be followed by a sensation of the weight of her older limbs, the brittleness of her bones, no such feelings came. Indeed, my main impression was of an absence of feeling: a numbness. I looked down at her arms, certain that the sight of those tiny needles would bring countless pinpricks of pain, but these too appeared not to be registered by her body in any way.

Then, as had happened in the other settings, I heard her thoughts, echoing inside me.

"They told us this is how we would restore the fullness of Paradise. They said this was what we had to do. Agree to be placed within the cocoons – each of us in our own, individual space – and succumb to the pleasure that would fill every layer and corner of our bodies. That was what was needed, they said. Pleasure. Pure, absolute and *boundless*. And private. Each of us giving in to the ecstasy of our private pleasures, contributing to the journey that would bring us closer to achieving the fullness of Paradise.

"It was not difficult choosing the form that I wanted this pleasure to take within me. The pre-selected narrative, as they call it. All of the options were tempting, but there was one that stood out from the others straight away. A heady tale, filled with the faces and eyes and bodies of my favourite people. Situated in the most enticing landscapes I had ever experienced. Awash with the most irresistible enticements. Sounds and sights and smells and tastes and textures.

"And oh, how real they were. How real they *are*. Even now, in this brief moment when I have a respite from the experience – when I am encouraged to reflect on my choice, and I am aware that it is not, in most senses, real – even now, with this knowledge, I cannot deny the reality of the life that is lived inside me while I am within the cocoon. It would be impossible to deny its reality. It is as real as anything I had experienced before my time here.

"How do I begin to describe the pleasure to you? You may have some inkling of its depth now that we are sharing this frame with each other for a period, but I wonder if even this brief

cohabitation will allow you to appreciate how profound the pleasure is. How overwhelming. How entirely sense-consuming.

“It fills you from all sides, from all possible angles, from all imaginable layers. It appears to have no beginning, no build-up, no gradual approach. From the moment it starts, it is complete and extreme. And I cannot tell you in which parts of myself I experience it most. It runs across the skin over my entire body. It is on the tips of my fingers. It brushes past my face, along the back of my neck. It enters all of my intimacies. It is all-present and ever-present from the second it begins.

“But even this does not tell you what the experience is like. How do I actually describe pleasure to you? If I were to imagine that you had never experienced any pleasure yourself, what words would I need to choose in order to convey to you what surrendering to pleasure is? What it means. Surely, one of its defining characteristics is that it defies words, it goes beyond their concrete, limiting descriptiveness.

“I could compare it to other words, but this would be nothing more than another way of skirting around the impossibility of a true explanation. The impossibility of articulating the joy – the complete, physical, reason-abandoning joy – that is pleasure.

“It is complete. That is certain. It leaves room for nothing else. As the cocoon overwhelms my mind with the narrative I have selected, the enjoyment with which it fills me is entirely itself. It is totality. Inside the cocoon, there are no doubts, no worries, no hesitations. There is no need for them. All that matters is the endlessness of the pleasure. It is the endlessness that is of the utmost importance. The pleasure cannot be permitted to stop. It cannot be allowed any interruptions. It is always wave after incessant wave of the most complete sensation.

“It is physical. That much is certain as well. Although I now realise – briefly – that the experiences have no *material* reality, inside the cocoon, they are as real as anything I have ever encountered. And that is because they come to me through my senses. At the same time. All the most pleasure-seeking parts of my body – my living, blood-filled body – are seduced by images designed to keep me at the highest imaginable pitch of ecstasy. And I am happy to be seduced. And to *remain* seduced. By all those visions. Think, Rabu. Think of all the visions that have ever prompted stirrings of pleasure within yourself and then multiply them by a number you are scarcely capable of imagining. And then multiply them again. And then try to tell yourself that this level of pleasure is what you

experience during just one moment you spend within the cocoon. Because the next moment brings you yet more pleasure. And the next moment still more pleasure. Of a magnitude you would never have any ability to conceive. All your senses overcome at the same time by sensations which you never have to associate with any guilt, any fear, any embarrassment. All there for the taking. All there for your surrender. And you do surrender. So willingly. So deliciously.

“And yes, it is reason-abandoning. In the cocoon, you cease to be a creature of thought. Although some part of you still undergoes the experience in recognisable terms – you perceive sights and sounds and smells that some aspect of you identifies – this is entirely secondary to your time inside the narrative. In fact, it is almost unimportant. Because the pleasure is not filtered by any thought. It just is. And the more you deliver yourself to it – the more you move yourself away from the constraining pull of reason – the greater it becomes. Even when you think it could not possibly become more profound. Even when you believe that there are no parts of your being left to entice, to tempt, to please. Everything becomes about the senses. And thought is redundant. Thought becomes nonsense. And all that matters is all-sense.

“I am failing to explain this adequately. I know I am. But believe me when I say that if I have given you any taste of the profundity of the experience in the cocoon, then it is a mere fraction of what it is, in fact, like. No words will ever capture it. Not ever. Because words are formed from an entirely different sort of *material* – a sort that cannot grasp at the essence of what pleasure truly is.”

Her voice stopped, and I could hear how rapid her breathing had become inside her body; I could feel the frenzied beat of her heart. With my being still inside her consciousness, I ran her hands across her arms, as though trying to dispel a shiver. And I noticed that the gesture brought her no relief. As her fingers ran across the skin of her arms, trying to avoid all those needles, she felt nothing. The movement was hollow.

In the next moment, I felt the revolving tumble of the exit from her body – the world turned upside-down, my vision spinning – and I was returned to myself again. When I saw the woman inside the cocoon, the expression in her eyes told me that she had been taken aback by the sight of her own frame through my eyes.

“My face,” she said, her voice aghast. “I saw my face, Rabu! I’ve grown old. I’ve grown so old. How long have I been here?” She brought her hands to her lips, her nose. And her eyes grew more horrified. “I cannot feel my face. I cannot feel it. Surely, I should be able to feel my face.”

Did I then summon the sapphire voice to my mind, or did it appear unbidden? Or was the distinction losing the importance it might once have had? In whatever way it emerged, the words it spoke to me were clear, and they told me what I had already realised.

Without a moment of doubt, I placed a hand on my arm, just below my elbow. And then, ignoring the sharp agony that accompanied the movement, I began to peel off my skin.

Even now – despite having undergone a similar ordeal several times – I cannot quite convey the oddness with which the pain was somehow able to exist alongside the complete lack of hesitation on my part. And my memory of how this occurred remains hazy and indistinct.

The skin continued to peel away, yielding to the pull of my hand. A few moments later, I found myself presenting it to the woman in the cocoon. And then, after a matter of seconds, I looked down at my arm and saw her skin in place of the patch I had just removed: paler, more wrinkled, covered in dark spots, but seamless and secure, as though it had never been part of any body other than mine.

The woman opened her eyes wider in shock, she ran her hands along the new stretch of skin on her own arm, and then the words emerged, as though propelled through her mouth by a force beyond her control. “With peaceful will,” she said. “With peaceful will, and once again bring voice to Fullness.” She shook her head. “The words, Rabu. They are not mine. Do you know what they mean? I was told to speak them to you. By a sapphire voice.”

I tried to smile while committing these new lines to memory. They clashed with the ones I had heard before, and yet some sort of shape seemed to be emerging, if only I could hold all the lines in my head and bend them to some form. But each time I tried to focus my thoughts on them, they slipped through the cracks in my mind.

The woman ran her hands once again across the new skin on her arm, gently tugging at the needles. And now tears emerged in her eyes. Now her body shook with the overwhelming convulsion of a single sob. She gasped, like a diver leaping out for air after an eternity trapped under the surface of dark water.

"I can feel it!" she shouted. "I can feel the pain, Rabu!" She scratched the surface of the skin with her fingernails. "I can feel it. And it's heavenly."

A light shone over her head inside the cocoon and the mechanical voice returned. "Your reflection period is nearly complete. You will soon be asked for your decision."

The woman looked at me, her eyes filled with terror. "I must leave, mustn't I, Rabu?"

She looked at the pods around us, all those greens and reds and browns being projected onto their surfaces. "I was told this was the way to the fullness of Paradise. But I have spent so many years here without reaching it. And I think I realise that if I stay, I never will reach it."

Her hands reached up to her face, and this time, as her fingers brushed across her eyes and her lips, it was clear that some measure of sensation was reaching her consciousness. She shook her head: more tears emerged.

The voice returned. "The reflection period has ended. Your decision is now required."

With tears streaming down her face, the woman took one look at the interior of the cocoon, and intoned some words.

In response, the needles pulled away from her skin – leaving a few droplets of fresh blood – and retracted into the depth of the cocoon. The woman stepped outside. Behind her, the door moved, closed, and the lights that had until now been beamed onto the pod faded.

"What have I done?" the woman said, her face haunted, as though she had just been forced to abandon the most treasured of possessions. "Never again will I... Never again will there be anything like such pleasure." Her words were choked by more tears. But then I saw the muscles in her jaw tighten and she stood up straighter, more resolved. She ran her hands across her arms, her neck, her chest. "But this... this pain I feel. This pain of my form. The pain of physicality." She looked at me with a smile. "It makes the memory of what I have experienced more acute. It makes the pleasure even more intense. And I did not believe such a thing could be possible. That I would have to abandon the pleasure in order to realise how blissful it was. And how it can never be repeated again."

As she spoke, I could hear that tell-tale sound behind me: the quiet whisper of thousands of grains of sand cascading onto each other.

"I shall find others," she said. "I will wait for the right moment. I will show them what you have shown me, Rabu. And then together, we will abandon this place, and find a different way to the

fullness. A better way.” Her tears were now combined with unmistakable happiness on her face. “Or at least, we shall try to.”

I believe I may have had a chance to give her one final smile before throwing back my head, letting go of my body and falling straight into the pool of sand that I knew had formed behind me.

