

QUESTIO



A «narrative» adventure in Virtual Reality
create by Gérard Bernasconi

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SUMMARY

Discover a strange first-person Baroque science-fiction adventure aboard a decayed city-ship which has been orbiting the Earth for more than 20 years, the *Quaestio*. You wake up suddenly with amnesia and find that you're under interrogation.

Quaestio, a Latin word, translates as the Question, the Survey, or even the Torture («*La Question*» in Medieval French), is expressed in this film in a psychological form. In this VR experience, the whole plot raises many questions: where are we? What do these interrogators want from us? What is my past? What is this disease that decimates humans, will it be stopped...?

I self-produced, designed, wrote, and directed this 360° pilot episode. I also did post-production (scenery, inlay, FX) and composed the music. But however, my ambitions go beyond this pilot episode in terms of interactivity and narrative possibilities, by planning, for a future production, multiple and interactive scenarios. The subjective user-character, helped and accompanied by the artificial intelligence of *Quaestio*, will be able to influence the orientation of the scenario according to the choices that the artificial intelligence will propose to him in his quest for survival. There will be no user interface but an IA-Character exchange and choice validations by extended gaze effect on elements of the set.

The VR-Viewer finds themselves in the shoes of the amnesiac «*Prophessor*» (name composed: a *Science Prophet*, who is affected by a God Complex). So the 360° camera is subjective. The other characters can be dangerous like the *Heirs*, beings with extraordinary psychic and physical powers, or humans more or less affected by a disease that has ravaged almost the entire planet.

The narration is specially structured to introduce the mystery on several levels, notably in the «world»: is the *Quaestio* a ship, a submarine, a spaceship? Why do your interrogators, called the *Heirs*, seem to come out of an Italian Opera? In future episodes, this atmosphere will be all the more palpable as I will take the viewer into an intriguing interactive fiction, which he will have the leisure to explore in different ways with multi-scenarios. Despite characters with extraordinary powers, the *Heirs*, the *Quaestio* experience in no way follows the codes of superhero movies.

It will be a hybrid movie shot in stereoscopy (relief) on a green-screen, and embedded in a digital set created in 3D models, managed in Unity software. This allows an intuitive and transparent interactivity process to be implemented for the user.

The choice of virtual reality is relevant, because immersion in this «sick and decayed universe» and the story of its occupants is a major component of the narration of this story. Physical narrative clues (scenery elements, screens, objects) are placed in each «scenosphere» (360° scene), like the pieces of a puzzle, in order to «return» memories to the viewer-Prophesseur. The artificial intelligence of the spaceship will guide the user towards these narrative clues as an actor in the story but also as an «interface» for VR navigation. The *Quaestio AI* creates a bridge between fiction and reality (User Interface) by addressing the user-actor.

The approach is aimed at an audience fond of mixing the genres of science-fiction, action films, thrillers and psychological dramas. *Quaestio* is a 3x15 minutes mini-series or a 45 minutes film depending on the viewing device. Two versions are envisaged: a male and a female user. The choice will be made before the VR experience starts. This dossier presents the male version.

THE PITCH

2088, humanity is consumed by a degenerative disease due to human neglect and the destruction of the planet's resources.

The *Prophessor* awakens without any memory of his past in the *Quaestio*, a decayed ark to save the last humans in orbit around the Earth for more than 20 years. He's being questioned by four strange people. The psychological pressures they put on him at every interrogation, make him anxious and torment him more and more. During the second interrogation, an Artificial Intelligence addresses him as an aside. An implant allows him to hear it and read information on the retina of his eyes without everyone knowing it. AI helps him escape from his cell. With memories that it will submit to him, he will gradually discover his past, the ambitious and indifferent researcher that he was. The pieces of his mental puzzle will gradually fit together and make him discover an horrible truth.

In the past, in despair of his wife's death, his limitless ambition and his failure in the face of the pandemic that decimated humanity, he used his children as laboratory guinea pigs and took advantage of their ingenuity to goad them into incest, between brothers and sister, in order to continue his experiments based on the «natural» reproduction of a new DNA that only they possess. The *Prophessor* also discovered their extraordinary powers and, as adults, their desire to enslave the rest of the survivors, and trapped and cryopreserve them. But by continuing his experiences without giving way to exhaustion, he found himself victim of an accident that hurted him and released his children from their «sleep».

The interrogation of the *Prophessor* begins at this point. His eldest son, Drak, has telekinetic powers and wants to own his sister Mirva for himself alone. Talbo, Drak's brother and faithful lieutenant, is a man of excessive strength who has an inexhaustible thirst for violence. Mathias, Mirva's twin brother, both born aboard the *Quaestio*, is more ambiguous, both with regard to hatred of his father and the romantic feelings he has for his sister. He's a mind reader. Mirva apparently has no particular power, apart from that of a wild and sensual seductiveness, but she holds a particular hatred for her father who deprived her of her teenager innocence a few years before. Today, she has difficulty repelling her brothers' attentions because she has found love with Eve who is beginning to show the first symptoms of the pandemic. His goal is to save her and leave the *Quaestio*.

Artificial intelligence reveals to the *Prophessor* the possibility of a return to a decimated but disease-free Earth. A fratricidal battle will now take place between Drak and Talbo against Mathias and Mirva. She will have to ally herself with her father and forgive him in order to save Eve. The *Prophessor* cannot stop Drak from killing Mathias, but Mirva eliminates Talbo so his father can help him escape. However she is resigned to the fact that Eve will die and that the *Prophessor* will abandon her once again. By attempting total redemption, the latter will try to change the curve of fate by accepting the consequences of his immoral actions and by taking new decisions always supported by Artificial Intelligence. After many confrontations, Drak is defeated, and trapped into a disintegrating *Quaestio*.

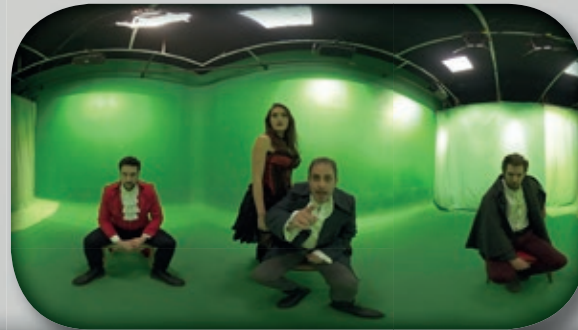
In the last shuttle scheduled for a return to earth, the *Prophessor* seems alone in the company of artificial intelligence. Yet he joins Mirva and Eve, whom he heals thanks to Mirva's genes, because she has healing power, in both a physical and psychological way.

ARTISTIC NOTE OF INTENT

When the idea of this experience emerged in me, it was in the form of a question (*Quaestio*), that of emotion as well as its propagation through a story in the first person and, how to navigate there being at the same time in the plot and close to the user. Creating a bridge between the fictional world and ours was the solution, it is part of the concept of «**narractivity**» that I developed. *Quaestio* is a VR experience that explores new writing techniques I have been using for the past two years, on my blog, virtuascript.fr. I created these writing techniques in order to improve the grammar of VR, to contribute to the building of 360° narration: to see and feel a fiction differently.

In a second stage of my creative and narrative process, it was absolutely necessary that this subjective character undergo an interrogation, followed by a survival impulse in the form of his need to escape, the result of which obliges him to recover his memory. When I imagined this story, the idea of discovering the past of a brilliant but immoral man, who ends up having a revelation about himself and reaching a new balance, seemed obvious to me in relation to the direct impact on the user in subjective view. My research revolves around the emotional involvement of the user-VR and his organic relationship with interactivity. The organic relationship with interactivity is described by a control of navigation through action and dialogue with the story's universe and the other protagonists of the VR experience, always immersing the user a little more. In our case this dialogue will be between the *Viewer-Prophessor* and the Artificial Intelligence of *Quaestio*.

Once again, the option of carrying out this experience in an immersive environment was imposed by the intervention of a «character» that only the *Prophessor* can hear, Artificial Intelligence. This one advises him, gives him multiple logical options in the narration because it is the AI which pilots the ship and which assisted the *Prophessor* before his accident. But, like the old spaceship, it is faulty and suffers from computer bugs, it does not have all the answers and asks the *User-Prophessor* to intervene. It is really the fictional and real interface that connects the two worlds, the *Quaestio* world and ours. Thanks to the combination of the subjective character, the interface represented by the AI and an adequate narration to link them, the user asks himself the same questions and feels the same emotions as the protagonist. He has no more memories than the latter and discovers his past at the same time as he makes the choices that the *Prophessor* should make. This is the concept of «narractivity»...



LITERARY NOTE

Some original references

Quaestio has drawn some of its inspiration from *Pierre Bordage's Abzalon*, much of whose story takes place in a gigantic city-ship and in the metal architecture of old buildings, such as those of *Gustave Eiffel* or more modern achievements such as the building with «[glass sails](#)», the *Louis Vuitton Foundation* building by architect *Frank Gehry*. But the source of inspiration stops there, because the particularity of the *Quaestio* story is to have been born from the imagination of its author.

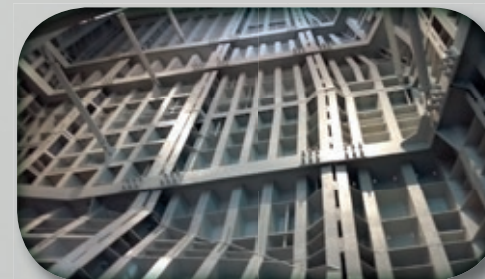
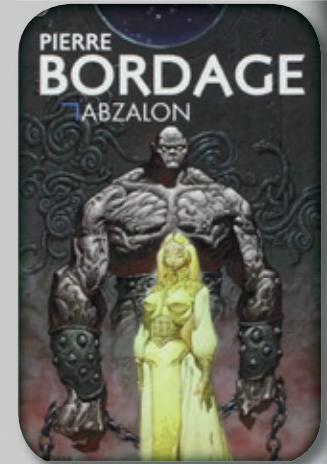
Of course, as an admirer of Wes Anderson, Tim Burton or Jeunet-and-Caro (*Delicatessen*, *Amélie*), graphic and original universes are part of my culture.



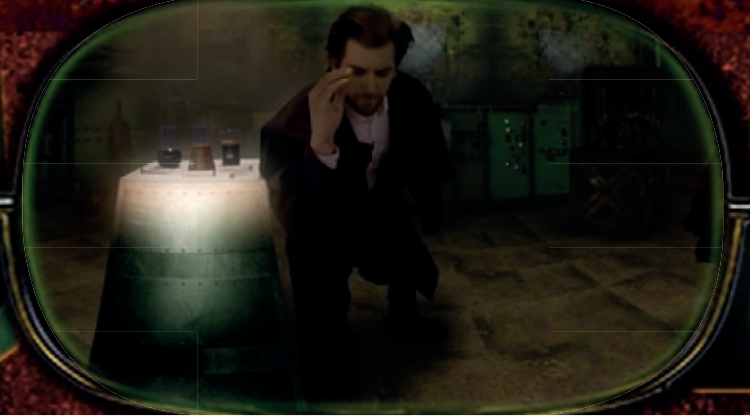
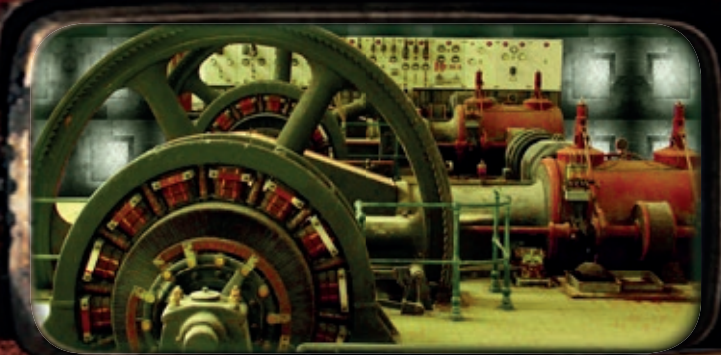
Nothing is created by chance: the universe's obsolete, scattered and decadent mixture echoes the challenges of the story itself. The minds of the *Quaestio* passengers are as disturbed as this city ship is.

Everything is out of control and it is at the end of its life. This is seen through the strong presence of the graphics of the sets and can be heard thanks to spatialized sound where creaks, leaks and mysterious whirrs concert supports this atmosphere on the edge of chaos.

The costumes also reflect the extravagance and megalomania of the *Heirs*. These clothes have a story, because when they came out of cryogenics, the Professor children quickly discovered the ancient place of culture of the *Quaestio* (also a megalomaniac building), an Italian theatre damaged by the passage of time. They chose stage costumes to dress themselves, resembling tragic heroes of Italian Opera.



MOOD BOARD



INTERACTIVE DEVICE 1/1

In this part of the dossier, the interactivity proposals do not concern the pilot episode presented, but future episodes.

Particularity and filiation with cinema and video games: transition kinematics

Quaestio offers, between some VR scenes, scenes in non-interactive HD format, intended to link two stages of the story and ensure narrative meaning. These kinematics calibrate the rhythm, thanks to the more sustained editing that they contain, thus balancing the long scenes proper to Virtual Reality. They create a «reflexological» link, a new crossbreeding, an unconscious reference, between cinephiles/gamers and VR-spectators. These cinema mounts are fixed and locked on the user's head movements to avoid any sensation of nausea. The narrative and rhythmic objective are their reasons for existing, but these kinematics are also justified by the unconscious states of the *Prophessor*-user-VR: symbolic visions, «reveries».

Rendering engine: UNITY or UNREAL ENGINE

I want to be able to integrate 360° scenes filmed on a green background, ready to be embedded in 3D sets on one of these two game engines. I foresee three possible devices, responding to three types of broadcasting structures.

Device: Festival

This device is sensory and immersive on the physical level, but also simple to set up in order to be easily welcomed in all VR events. In a space of approximately 8x10 meters, the user is led to move according to his choices proposed by the artificial intelligence. The path feels like walking on metallic ground and is topographed and synchronized with Unity or Unreal Engine.

The participant is asked to put on a haptic suit, put on a VR headset and sit on a swivel chair. Then he is taken by a person to sit on the ground against a rudimentary wooden bunk. These two steps are repeated with different haptic sensations evolving with the scenario. Then the AI directs the user to his escape where he must slip into a reconstituted and secure conduit, making the user feel confined. From this stage, the participant moves in a corridor and an empty space, with various temperatures and smells, until the end of the experiment. Sensors at the ankles synchronize the sound of the steps on the metal in the headphones.

The user has no mandatory action to perform in order to move up in the story. Each of the choices proposed by the AI leads him into a branch of the scenario. He has no reason to refocus on himself, he can let himself to be guided. The whole device converges towards a single goal, the most intense sensory immersion possible. Finally, the passenger/user frequency will be about one person every 5 minutes.

Device: Diffusion in reduced space, 6 DoF (6 degrees of freedom)

The 6 DoF Space remains physically immersive. The six degrees of freedom allow the user a strong and innovative experience. This option is completely thought out and rewritten to satisfy festivals that do not have a structure that can accommodate the «Festival Device», and it is a variation of it. The application is lightened by topographic settings of the virtual on the real (synchronization of spaces, conduits, corridors, etc), but the user can still move within a limit of about 2x3 meters in order to communicate with Artificial Intelligence and navigate in the experience. He can choose to sit and stand up whenever he wants.

INTERACTIVE DEVICE 1/2

360° cinema broadcasting

With the intention of a larger diffusion to a city public, as festival distribution remains reduced, a third version of, with linear narration in the form of 360° video, will be available a few months after the festival releases. In this version the points of view will be those of the «author-director» and again the whole will be written specifically for this medium.

Cross-media approach

Still with the intention of broadening the distribution/promotion of this science fiction thriller and creating a minimal business model, a flat film version is planned for the following year.

Stereoscopy

When the user is immersed in a monoscopic 360° film, the «plating» of the video on this sphere is visible. Stereoscopy (3D relief) takes on its full dimension at 360° unlike 3D on a cinema screen which trims everything that is out of focus. The future of 360° films also lies in 3D vision and the 6 DoF. The user must be able to move within certain limits. The 3D decors will also take on all their depth.

360° green screen

A must for the shooting of this hybrid experiment, it must be built on the basis of a large diameter cylindrical green wall in order to be perfectly uniform and to reduce post-production inlay times. This is the experience I was able to get from the pilot shot in self-production with four green walls arranged in an impractical rectangle to get adequate lighting.

Sound Management

Sound is spatialized and realistically managed (character placement, loss of volume and certain frequencies at a distance).

Pauses: I study the possibility of being able to make visual pauses, leaving to the user the possibility of reflecting on his choices in his course. In this case, the music, the sounds of ambiances must not be cut during these pauses. Sound backgrounds, ship noise, leaks from faulty machinery, etc, continue to exist and are sometimes managed randomly or directly linked to the context of places and animation (machines, robots), etc.

The music must be renewed by a system of multitrack loops (minimum 8 tracks) with random triggering to avoid the repetitive effect of a classical music loop or, to avoid the management of a file too large in bytes by its great duration. The rhythmic parts are separated from the harmonic parts, and from the melodic parts. Changes, sequences, apparitions and disappearances of tracks are done randomly and under certain conditions managed in programming. This real-time «mixing» must not affect either the tempo or the synchronization of the tracks between them. The musical themes will be written by me so that harmony and tonalities are respected.

LINEAR SYNOPSIS

A man wakes up gagged and handcuffed to a chair in a glaucous room with rust-green metal walls. Four inquisitors surround him: three men and a woman of wild and disturbing beauty. He doesn't remember anything. Who is he? Where is he? What do these people want?

His inquisitors seem to want to play cat and mouse and, from this first interrogation, they feed on his terror without really looking for answers. He learns from the latter that he was clinically dead, but «regenerated» by them in order to be questioned. Driven by anger, the most impulsive of the three men, Talbo hits him and knocks him out.


Unconscious, he has visions: A man conducting scientific experiments - Locked in a cell, emaciated people screaming in terror and madness - An explosion - Frost-covered cabin doors opening - A body lying in the middle of a fire...

He wakes up in a cell where his strange cellmate reveals that he has been interrogated by the *Heirs*, psychopaths with extraordinary abilities who recently took power. But the man in the cell suddenly recognizes him and, terrified, struggles and knocks him out.

Once again unconscious, he dreams of the *Heirs* coming out of dilapidated cryopreservation booths - The four *Heirs* approach a body lying on the ground - He hears cries coming from the cells, a sick face with a crazy look, suddenly sits on the porthole of the door.

He wakes up, confined into a medical lab as strange as it is old. The *Heirs* suggest that they know each other... Before being drugged for questioning, a synthetic inner voice addresses him and written information is displayed on his retina without the knowledge of his torturers. It is the Artificial Intelligence of the place where he is, in the form of an implant, which reactivates itself. The injection is painful and hallucinogenic: The voices and faces are distorted, his terror rises a notch. Nightmare visions remind him that he conducted researches on the human genome to combat a degenerative pandemic that affects humans. This Genome+, he injected his wife and himself. Emaciated, desperate humans beg him, hold him... His wife dies in his arms, he screams his despair. Voices call him the «*Prophessor*», the scientific prophet...

The *Prophessor* is emerging from his hallucinations. He is alone and begins to put the «pieces of the puzzle» of his past back into place thanks to the information from the AI. But the respite is short. The *Heirs* suddenly arrive and begin to make him speak. They want access to his locked lab. His security system, if forced, can destroy all information. They torture him psychologically, by accusing him of the degeneration of humanity and confronting him with a particularly sick and contagious human being. Then in turn, they slap him, hit him, except Drak, who chokes him to the limit of asphyxia and breaks a few of his fingers, using his power of telekinesis. Artificial Intelligence tries to calm it but it has defects, bugs... It goes out.



Despite the pain, the *Prophessor* does not remember the access code. Mirva, as angry as she is excited by the session, asserts: «It's time to get it over with, and I think you'll enjoy it... FATHER!». She lifts her dress and chokes him between her thighs, he faints.

The *Prophessor* wakes up while Drak opens a cage full of rats, former experiments diformed subjects, and locks him in his cell for the pleasure of tormenting him. Scared, he stands on his bed while Drak laughs away. The rats swarm at his feet, then, end up turning away to run under the bed of his vanished former cellmate. The rats and their squeaks fade away and finally disappear. Intrigued, he discovers a ventilation grille under the bed that masks a larger passage surrounded by twisted and rusty sheet metal plates. The AI reactivates and advises him to use the passage and find his «Labo».


He enters and crawls into the narrow, dirty conduit, lined with cobwebs. A few lost rats startle him by running away. Once out of the conduit, he carefully walks the corridors. In many cells, the degenerated humans he saw in his hallucinations, are locked up and parked like animals. The AI proposes to find the way back to his laboratory and the access code.

The *Prophessor* finds some reflexes and artificial intelligence, despite its failures, delivers the last missing information: The Heirs, are his children «modified» by Genome+. They had planned to decimate the rest of the sick humans and a merciless hegemony over the population preserved from the disease. Disagreeing with them, it had trapped them and plunged them into endless artificial sleep. As it searches for a way out of this place of horror, the AI reveals that it is called *Quaestio*, the same name as the city ship in which he is trapped. It has been orbiting the Earth for over 20 years, stuck waiting for a return to a «healed» Earth. Artificial Intelligence is the soul of a vessel in an irreversible critical state. The *IA Quaestio*, however, seems to hide some truth from him that he cannot detect.

After hearing this new information, he is first shocked, desperate... Then, the AI gives him the keys to a procedure of self-destruction of the station, in case of a total epidemic and the existence of a survival shuttle destined for a return to Earth.

Suddenly, Talbo, who found the cell empty, forced his way into the lab, now outside the protection procedure. He rips off the last metal plates with his bare hands and rushes to his father to kill him. As he is about to kill him, Talbo is electrocuted by Mirva.

The *Prophessor* wants to know? Why do they hate him so much? Mirva reminds him of the last and most painful memory that *AI Quaestio* hid from him. After their mother's death, he became more distant than ever and, obsessed with his research, on the verge of madness. He discovered that the superior race he had just created existed only by natural procreation between himself and his wife. They had injected themselves with Genome+. Cloning tests, carried out to speed up the process, had given only stillborn monsters. Only his children had the genetic heritage to perpetuate the breed by «natural» ways.



In his ambitious madness and indifference, he had taken the decision to abuse his children's naivety to convince them to have incestuous relations between brothers and sister to perpetrate the «new» race. She was only thirteen years old and she hates her father even more, because in her innocence, she took pleasure there and the worst... She's apparently sterile from Genome+.

As an adult, she discovered and understood the immorality of this situation the day she met Eve, her true love that she had to hide from her brothers. She remembers her first physical contact with her, when in making love to her, her anger had left her for the first time. Today, her incestuous relationship with her brothers has ceased, but she is still «at war», under the violent influence of Talbo, Drak's sadism and the pitiful tenderness of his twin, Mathias. But Eve recently became ill and was quarantined with other degenerate humans.

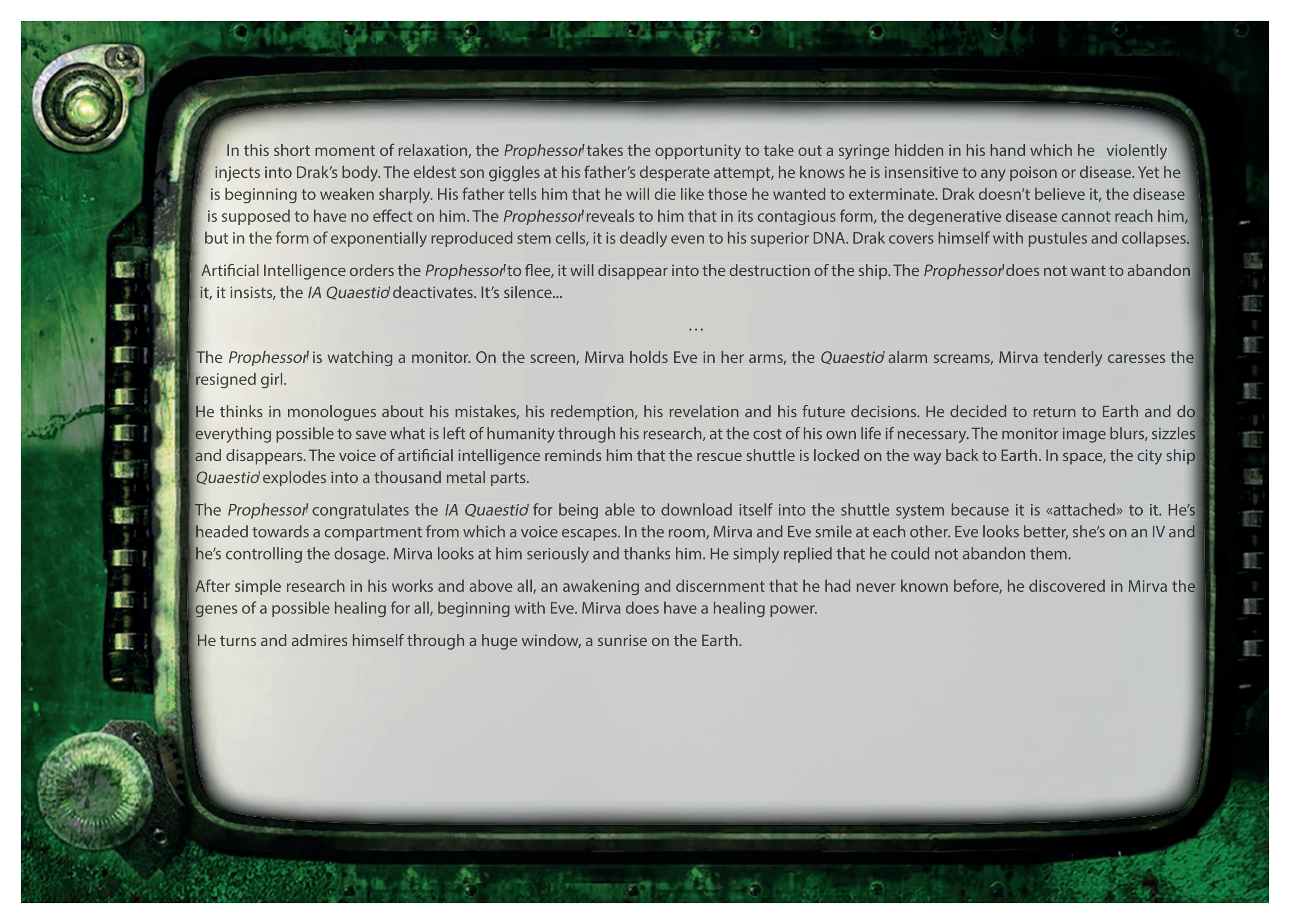
The *Prophessor* is in tears, he asks for her forgiveness and finally accepts the fact that he has been such a monster. He admits to his daughter that he held them responsible for the death of his wife, the one he still has trouble calling «their mother». She died delivering twins. They had become strangers, just the result of his research, his anger had turned into cold and calculated indifference.

Mirva still hates her father, but he must help her save Eve and destroy this ship she hates. Lost, shocked by the discovery of what he has done, the *Prophessor* does not answer, he remains frozen without a word. Mirva, shakes him, threatens him but he doesn't move. Collapsed and resigned, she confides to her father that she has little hope because, even if he makes a decision, he will prefer to save his research, rather than his children, as always. She goes to join Eve, preferring to die at her side.

Artificial intelligence brings the *Prophessor* back into reality through images of his wife, positive images of his past. He recovers and makes his choice: he starts the self-destruction procedure of the *Quaestio*, recovers all his work, samples of stem cells and flees to the backup shuttle.

The station's deafening alarm sounds and all cell doors open. The captive and sick humans invade the corridors and attack the guards. Still accompanied by the *IA Quaestio*, the *Prophessor* has to make his way through a strange dilapidated Italian theatre, the station's former cultural site. He finds Drak and his younger brother Mathias arguing about their sister, their father, the situation they are missing... He hides, searches his pocket. The tone rises very quickly between the two brothers.

Mathias, with his power, perceives that his brother wants to kill him but he does not have time to react, Drak retains him and asphyxiates him. The *Prophessor* can no longer remain indifferent, he unfortunately intervenes too late, Mathias is dead. Drak gloats to see his father's distress and reproaches him for not having reserved Mirva for him alone, because he is the eldest. He's taking over his father's body. His breathing becomes hoarse, wheezing, he has trouble breathing. A bad smile distorts Drak's face. Artificial Intelligence, to help the *Prophessor* to resist, mentally repeats to him a mantra in loop: «stem cells, stem cells...». Drak comes very close to enjoy the show and gives his father some air to make the agony last.



In this short moment of relaxation, the *Prophessor* takes the opportunity to take out a syringe hidden in his hand which he violently injects into Drak's body. The eldest son giggles at his father's desperate attempt, he knows he is insensitive to any poison or disease. Yet he is beginning to weaken sharply. His father tells him that he will die like those he wanted to exterminate. Drak doesn't believe it, the disease is supposed to have no effect on him. The *Prophessor* reveals to him that in its contagious form, the degenerative disease cannot reach him, but in the form of exponentially reproduced stem cells, it is deadly even to his superior DNA. Drak covers himself with pustules and collapses.

Artificial Intelligence orders the *Prophessor* to flee, it will disappear into the destruction of the ship. The *Prophessor* does not want to abandon it, it insists, the *IA Quaestio* deactivates. It's silence...

...

The *Prophessor* is watching a monitor. On the screen, Mirva holds Eve in her arms, the *Quaestio* alarm screams, Mirva tenderly caresses the resigned girl.

He thinks in monologues about his mistakes, his redemption, his revelation and his future decisions. He decided to return to Earth and do everything possible to save what is left of humanity through his research, at the cost of his own life if necessary. The monitor image blurs, sizzles and disappears. The voice of artificial intelligence reminds him that the rescue shuttle is locked on the way back to Earth. In space, the city ship *Quaestio* explodes into a thousand metal parts.

The *Prophessor* congratulates the *IA Quaestio* for being able to download itself into the shuttle system because it is «attached» to it. He's headed towards a compartment from which a voice escapes. In the room, Mirva and Eve smile at each other. Eve looks better, she's on an IV and he's controlling the dosage. Mirva looks at him seriously and thanks him. He simply replied that he could not abandon them.

After simple research in his works and above all, an awakening and discernment that he had never known before, he discovered in Mirva the genes of a possible healing for all, beginning with Eve. Mirva does have a healing power.

He turns and admires himself through a huge window, a sunrise on the Earth.