

# Irekle Qoştar



*Abstract: In a decaying post-digital world on the brink of ecological collapse somewhere in Northern Asia, a disillusioned sound designer embarks on a mysterious assignment to maintain speaker stations playing artificial bird sounds.*

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This was a \*bad\* neighborhood.

It smelled of damp plaster and stained mattresses—the acrid stench in nostrils that never really goes away. Samir cleared his throat and looked around. Breaking through the heavy, leaden clouds, the feeble light of early dawn exposed a cluster of run-down, dilapidated houses and narrow pavements strewn with varied trash and discarded bottles.

“Is there actually someone living there?” Samir stopped, habitually attuned to what seemed like absolute, almost tangible silence. It should have been a densely populated area, with maybe five or even \*ten\* souls scattered around every square kilometer. Somewhere in the rear of this ugly architectural maze, dishes rattled. “Of course, it’s just too early,” the listening apparatus wasn’t betraying him, at least for the moment—a brief respite. Samir sighed and continued his journey through the shadows; a scarcely audible cough echoed from somewhere above. A light flickered on in one of the nearby apartments: the remnants of what had once been a piece of noble ancient architecture were now vomiting a hideous structure made of artificial wood and metal, clinging, like the rest of the dwellings, to the building’s eroding facade.

Centuries ago (\*or was it even earlier, before the GLOW?\*), this district had been a city center. Perhaps the company’s extensive library held polyvinyl chloride discs (PVCDs) with recordings made of its bustling streets, or even some silverprints that could showcase this neighborhood in its pre-decay glory. In his younger, more zealous days, Samir would surely have conducted proper ex-situ research before undertaking an assignment.

It didn’t really matter now.

The pungent smell slithered into his nasal cavity, through the nasopharynx, until Samir could practically taste its repulsive essence on the tip of his tongue. A tumbler of gin and tonic could’ve been handy now to wash the stench away, or at least a



beer. “But drinking at 8 a.m., on duty?” It took some effort to shove these thoughts aside. Samir reached for his backpack, unzipped it, and started searching for a water flask. In one clumsy movement, the contents spilled out: his working badge, a standard pack of replacement PVCs, a couple of transistors, a bunch of smaller radio-electronic components, a meticulously drawn map marked with a linear curve pattern formed by a dozen bold red dots, and, lastly, a corporate flask made from fine stainless steel.

Distracted, Samir picked up his badge and stared at it blankly. In his hand lay a square piece of thick cardboard, stamped with the company’s name, IREKLE QOŞTAR LTD, at the top, and his name at the bottom: SAMIR FIRÜZÄ-ULI. A then-handsome young lad with lively, piercing black eyes and a cheeky smile gazed at him from a faded silverprint stapled to the center of the card. Shifting his eyes to his reflection on the shiny surface of the flask, Samir beheld a weary, aged human being with a few visible scars shining through his hairy chin—a battered, heavily wrinkled face that could really benefit from a few extra hours of sleep. He tried to replicate the smile from the silverprint, but the best result he got from this endeavor was a hideous, sarcastic grin. It felt as if this cheerful fella on the badge was somehow mocking Samir, serving as a reminder of the fact that his best days were long gone.

Samir despised this face, this badge, and this job. If there were still remnants of the pure awe he felt the moment he landed his \*dream profession\*, they were now buried deep beneath layers of exhaustion and self-loathing, seasoned with liters of cheap alcohol. (\*TRY OUR LATEST OFFERING—EXQUISITE MELODIES OF ANCIENT NIGHTINGALES METICULOUSLY CRAFTED BY OUR TOP-TIER BIOPHONIC DESIGNERS, TAILORED EXPRESSLY FOR YOUR LIVING SPACE. IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THESE ENCHANTING SOUNDS, A DELIGHTFUL REMEDY TO ALLEVIATE STRESS AND ANXIETY!\*)

Back then, the \*badge\* version of Samir simply couldn’t resist boasting to everyone about how working as a biophonic designer at the world’s most innovative company in the field wasn’t just amazing but also significant. If only the distorted reflection on stainless steel could retroactively enlighten this idealistic little brat to the fact that he would end up sculpting useless sandcastles for wealthy jerks while the world crumbled around them, crafting some grotesque decorations to stroke their egos. “Sugarcoating the bitter pill,” as a person, once very important to him, had politely dubbed it.

It was another painful recollection—throughout all these years, he still felt like an abandoned child. Professor Aygöl Şämsiäkızı... a name familiar to every biophonic designer, and a true pioneer in the field. Decades ago, she had led a small group



of researchers who recreated the voices of over one hundred extinct bird species. This marked a foundational moment for the company, now a classic in the IREKLE QOŞTAR (IQ) catalog and an unattainable goal for Samir and his colleagues. Professor Şämsiä-kızı was a living legend, whose influence extended far beyond both the academic realm and the company she co-founded. But she was also his mentor, guiding Samir through the intricacies of the profession, and perhaps even a friend—at least, that’s what he thought back then. It goes without saying that the company lost a \*valuable asset\* when she decided to quit nearly two decades ago, seemingly without any proper reason, just vanishing from the radar. Samir knew the reason, though. There simply wasn’t enough sugar in this world to mask its bitterness.



The company name, once draped in romanticism and nobility, now also seemed ludicrous: “Free Birds... Like if there were any real birds left...”

Samir had been just a little baby when the last of the insects met their demise. Before that, mammals and invertebrates were the lone survivors on this forsaken planet. It’s not like humanity was \*all\* that mournful over the insects’ vanishing act. In a radiocast Samir once tuned into, the host spun spine-chilling tales of colossal mosquito swarms assaulting humans nearly three centuries ago—just as the last of the birds took their final bow.



The feathered creatures were the initial departures, leaving an unfillable void in the planet's biosphere. Over the next couple of centuries, it was deserted by fish, followed by amphibians and reptiles. Of course, none of them vanished in the blink of an eye—they just lost the ability to reproduce at some point, and eventually, there just weren't any left.

Mammals, the last frontier of living species, were supposed to be next in line. A century ago, those attributing the decline in birth rates to species extinction were deemed radical thinkers. Now, it was just common knowledge. And it was hardly a drama—this world was simply exhausted, and now, at last, it was finally settling into its eternal sleep. The best humanity could manage was to play pretend, ignoring the inevitable, so the work of those like Samir was still considered valuable.

There were also other signs of impending doom. When the feathered ones had flown away forever, the first minor ITEMAs were officially recorded. Short for Intra-Terrestrial Electromagnetic Anomaly, it was a term the scientists of the past had used to describe a sequence of ephemeral yet intensely potent electromagnetic radiations of a then-unknown nature. Initially confined to rather small territories, no larger than a single square kilometer, these bursts of energy wreaked havoc on devices employing magnets in their construction: headphones, refrigerators, electric toothbrushes, credit cards, you name it. As the world hesitated with responses, the anomalies grew more powerful, expanding their sphere of influence until the arrival of GLOW, \*the Global Wipeout\*. The last and most formidable of anomalies—a sudden erasure of all digital data, rendering every storage unit and microprocessor useless. A brilliant, fleeting flash that annihilated centuries of knowledge acquisition, of what we, humans, arrogantly deemed \*progress\*. On the day of the GLOW our collective mind finally became spotless, and we were forced to embrace its eternal sunshine.

Taking a good gulp, Samir capped the flask and started cramming everything back into his backpack. He let his gaze rest on the map.

The assignment had felt a bit \*off\* from the get-go. There was an unmistakable tension in the voice and posture of the department director during the briefing. "Samir, this is our \*special\* client; don't you dare to mess it up," he said, nearly hissing, beads of sweat rolling down his face. When the director used the word "special," he usually meant obnoxiously rich, but this time, it didn't quite feel that way.

The job itself was undoubtedly weird: Samir was tasked with the full maintenance of twelve standalone speaker stations, arranged in a curved line spanning about five kilometers. The line of stations extended from what had once been, it seemed,



a chestnut grove, through the city's slums, to its center. It looked like a path, or something leading the way, but for whom? Each speaker station he encountered appeared to be custom-built for this very specific use, maybe a decade ago. For starters, these boxes used bizarre radio components he had only seen in old books—nothing like the usual combo of two sine wave oscillators, a cheap resonant filter, and a ring modulator the company used to mimic the songs of robins, warblers, wood pigeons, and, of course, nightingales for the IQ standard package. (\*ENHANCE YOUR OFFICE SPACE WITH OUR NEW BIRDSONG PACKAGE! WHEN INTEGRATED INTO YOUR WORKING PLACES, THESE SOOTHING TONES WILL ENCOURAGE A BOOST IN DOPAMINE PRODUCTION, SKYROCKETING YOUR EMPLOYEES' PRODUCTIVITY!\*)

\*These\* boxes utilized relays and tube transistors that he had never seen before, accompanied by something resembling a Brownian noise generator. It was a delightful *mélange* of wires, solder, and radio components; pure chaos, orchestrated by someone's skillful hand. A bundle of PVCs wallowed in Samir's backpack, unopened: none of these weird boxes used a standardized polyvinyl chloride disc player. In an instant, Samir recalled his university days when Professor Şämsiäkızı had amused her audience with the tale of the technology's emergence, a story she presented as a testament to how our species was both obnoxiously arrogant and adorably sentimental. Unlike most pre-GLOW technologies, irretrievably lost because, evidently, the people of the past believed digitizing everything was a \*brilliant\* idea, the prototype of the modern PVC player surfaced in the hands of a lesser-known media archaeologist in a half-abandoned museum somewhere in the Far West, the outskirts of civilization. It came along with a colossal collection of ancient electronic music. Surely, the person who curated this entire collection was considered an oddball among their contemporaries, who must have thought, "Why cling to these polyvinyl chloride discs when we digitized everything ages ago?"

For most IQ installations, maintenance was a breeze. Open the box, check the hardware, replace the disc, close until it clicks, voilà! On the contrary, these speaker stations required not only special attention but also a dash of patience. More importantly, their outcome wasn't anywhere near a \*soothing tone\*. It was a sharp shriek, followed by a sequence of muffled tapping and chirps—a desperate, piercing signal shot into the gray, indifferent skies. From old books on biophonic design, Samir vaguely recalled that this type of sound had something to do with flight calls, but he wasn't certain. Did it aid these majestic ancient creatures in migration or maintaining their flock? Was it a form of communication at all?

Who built these, and why?

The cold drizzle kicked in out of nowhere. Miniature droplets,



like secret agents, stealthily infiltrated the unfolded map, morphing its surface into a landscape of tiny lakes and rivers. The sickening stench intensified, clinging to the air. A few bold liquid invaders breached Samir's defenses, creeping down the nape of his neck, causing an involuntary shudder. "Definitely not just a beer. But only after the job's done." The last red mark lingered on the map, untouched, somewhere right there, in the center of this dampened labyrinth.

From the darkness of the alley, a sound emerged, so faint that only a trained ear would catch it. "This has to be the last one," Samir mumbled, moving toward the source.

There was something eerie in this part of the district, with only a handful of abandoned buildings scattered among heaps of refuse, fractured stone pathways, and murky puddles. Some of the pathways led to fenced-off areas, adorned with bent and rusted metal bars sticking out from the ground. This uncanny architecture evoked images of ancient penitentiaries, relics Samir had briefly seen in a book chronicling a long-gone world. Could they have encaged wrongdoers in the heart of the city, exposed for all to see? To a modern man like Samir, it seemed inconceivable, yet he had learned much about the cruelty of bygone societies from a handful of historical documents that endured into his time. However, not everything around seemed to adopt the same barbaric approach; there was something else. Beyond the fences, a number of structures displayed ancient moldings and mosaics, with most teetering on the brink of crumbling and barely recognizable, yet still beautiful. Most of them were symmetrical, featuring convoluted patterns of curling branches, depictions of various animals, both real and mythical, and, occasionally, inscriptions in an extinct language. Samir couldn't pinpoint the exact language, a fusion of Greek and Latin characters, and most inscriptions were too damaged for thorough analysis. Some of the depicted mythical creatures were quite amusing, especially those resembling oversized shorthair cats sporting grand wigs. As Samir navigated through, he encountered these wigged cats here and there; there was even a remarkably preserved monument featuring one of them, its lush mane adorned with a crown. This creature seemed to symbolize something important, yet the thought slipped away in the morning haze.

The source of the sound grew increasingly louder.

It was truly a testament to the skill of whoever crafted this speaker station. Even from a distance, it resembled a masterful orchestra performing a rhythmic medley of various whistles, clicks, and cascading melodies. Samir, no longer walking slowly, was almost sprinting toward the source, guided like a child eagerly led by his parents to a long-awaited moving silverprints session. The beautiful symphony emanated from a semi-ruined pavilion, its facade barely holding onto a weathered sign with



only three characters left: the first resembling an arc, possibly a mathematical symbol or a Greek letter, the second a Latin “T,” and the third a mirror image of an “N.” A distinct birdsong now echoed from within.

Samir pushed aside what remained of the door and entered. The room was dark, and the sole ray of light shining through a hole in the roof illuminated a small patch to the left of its center. There, atop a mound of moss and stones, rested a peculiar artefact, a structure made of twigs, grass, and other natural materials. Resembling a straw hat flipped backward by someone’s will, the artefact, like the scene in general, defied belief. Perched on the edge of this structure was the source of the captivating sound—a tiny living creature that could fit in the palm of his hand. Its lively, shiny eyes resembled two drops of black resin, and below them, an oblong anatomical structure caused the term \*beak\* to flash in Samir’s mind. The creature’s head moved quickly from side to side, displaying more curiosity than fear. Covered in multicolored plumage, predominantly varying shades of brown with a bright patch of blue feathers below \*the beak\*, its small body was supported by two fragile-looking legs. Another creature, similar but lacking the blue collar, emerged from behind, pausing briefly before joining the first at the edge of the straw construction. Observing a third character, likely the youngest, nestled within the structure, Samir discerned the artefact’s purpose—a cozy sanctuary for its tiny inhabitants, two proud parents and their fledgling... How was that even possible?

To Samir’s left, a standard IQ speaker box was mounted on the wall. Trying to be as discreet as possible, he unlocked it with a soft click. It was a decoy without any wires or radio components, housing only a small jar containing a few dozen oval-shaped capsules, seemingly organic. A note attached to the box read, “IF it happens, give them two capsules per week. The stuff is really nutritious, and they will know how to share it. Good luck, A.Ş.”

The trio of feathers resumed their singing. They performed one piece after another with mastery, pausing briefly only to erupt into a new series of sounds. It was the new music of the waking world—vigorous and enchanting, something unheard by any living human yet. It was a source of pure joy.

Samir stood there, unable to move, listening intently. His fatigued face illuminated with a bright, genuine smile, finally resembling the young lad depicted on the badge. The rain ceased, and a spring breeze carried the scent of fresh grass, dispelling the sour stench of the slums. The clouds slowly parted, making way for the ascending sun.

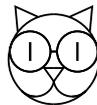
A new day was dawning.



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## BIO

Stas Shärifulla, aka HMOT, is a Basel-based musician, researcher and artist working with sound and decoloniality. Born in East Siberia, with Bashqort roots, Stas is studying the political potential of various musical and listening practices through live performances, lectures, interventions and sound installations focused on the issues of extractivism, collective memory and identity-based oppression.



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