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SUPERNOVA

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Science fiction - Fantasy - Horror

Slovenian authors
and

Guests from outer space

Speculative fiction magazine

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Slovene fantasy, which also includes science fiction, horror and more, has made some strides in the last few years, but only the hobbyist activities of the Celje Literary Society enter the European sphere. Sadly, Slovenia has neither a specialised publishing house, nor enough serious literary-theoretical research or conventions such as Eurocon or the neighbouring Sferakon. All of the professional activity on the subject of fantasy is in the domain of observing the mostly foreign genre literature.

But in this segment, I will not be focusing on the troubles of the Slovene area.

The largest event in Slovenia tied to our favourite genres is 'Na meji nevidnega' (Slovene for: 'On the Border of the Invisible'), which is the Slovenian equivalent to Comic-Con and everything that that entails. Occasionally, there appears some other event with irregular iterations.

The Celje's Literary Society, which organises Fanfest, the only Slovene festival of fantasy literature, is probably the only one that, as much as it can,

seriously and systematically dabbles in Slovene fantasy literature. The festival has been taking place for some time on the third weekend of October, as to not overlap with other conventions.

Fanfest is not a hobbyist event with lively stands of various products more or less tied to fantasy, nor does it have cosplay, fantasy quizzes, a playroom, concerts or anything else typical of such events.

Of course, this does not mean that the festival is not attractive to the wider public, but it is specialised for fantasy literature and relevant subjects. The only thing meant for a strictly professional public is the panel workshop that takes place before noon on Sunday.

The literary festival covers professional, promotional and socialising matters. The central event in the Celje House of Culture (Celjska kulturnica) is especially interesting due to its main guest Zoran Živković, who needs no special introduction.

So let's keep it brief – at the Eurocon in Dortmund in 2017, professor Živković received the prestigious European Grand Master Honorary award. The professor is represented here in this special Eurocon issue with the story »First photograph«.

The Celje's Literary Society first organised the festival in 2017, this year will be its ninth iteration and not even the COVID epidemic has stopped us. Though, in those tough years, we adapted to the circumstances and are proud of the fact that we managed to carry out the programme against all odds, partially through Zoom. Its organisation would be impossible without the financial support of the Urban Municipality of Celje (Mestna občina Celje - MOC) and the local bookstore named Antika. We also have to thank the Public Fund for Cultural Activities of the Republic of Slovenia (Javni sklad Republike Slovenije za kulturne dejavnosti - JSKD) for giving us space for the central event and some accompanying events.

The festival additionally features the active Slovene authors of fantasy, who also publish in the Supernova magazine, the only Slovene literary journal for fantasy.

The magazine has been publishing since 2016, its founder and main editor is Bojan Ekselenski and its publisher is the Celje Literary Society. Without the financial backing of the Celje Municipality and the Public Fund, the journal couldn't be published in tangible form. So far, 18 regular issues have been published and this special, let's say extraordinary edition, is dedicated to Eurocon. The Eurocon issue is meant mainly for the European fandom to introduce them to Slovene fantasy and to the magazine.

Supernova is a bi-annual journal, published in spring and autumn to cover the convention season. Aside from fantasy prose and poetry, it also publishes technical essays which can't be published in other literary journals. Of course, it also includes interviews, information on new publications, occasional book reviews and, naturally, reports from various events. The report section has been newly christened the "fantastični dogodkopis" ("Fantasy Event Report").

What can you find in this issue?

Mostly stories. Plenty of stories!

The Slovene authors are Andrej Ivanuša, Aljoša Toplak, Barbara Ribič Jelen, Bojan Ekselenski, Domen Mohorič, Dominik Lenarčič, Ivan Šokić, Majda Arhnauer Subašič, Matjaž Marinček, Miha Mazzini, Matej Krajnc, Nada Tržan-Herman and Primož Jenko

The foreign guests are representing various countries: Eric Johansson (HR), Gareth D. Jones (GB), Deborah Walker (GB), Frank Roger (B), Zoran Živković (SRB), Tihomir Jovanović (SRB), Lawrence Shimel (USA+E) and Krzysztof T. Dąbrowski (PL).

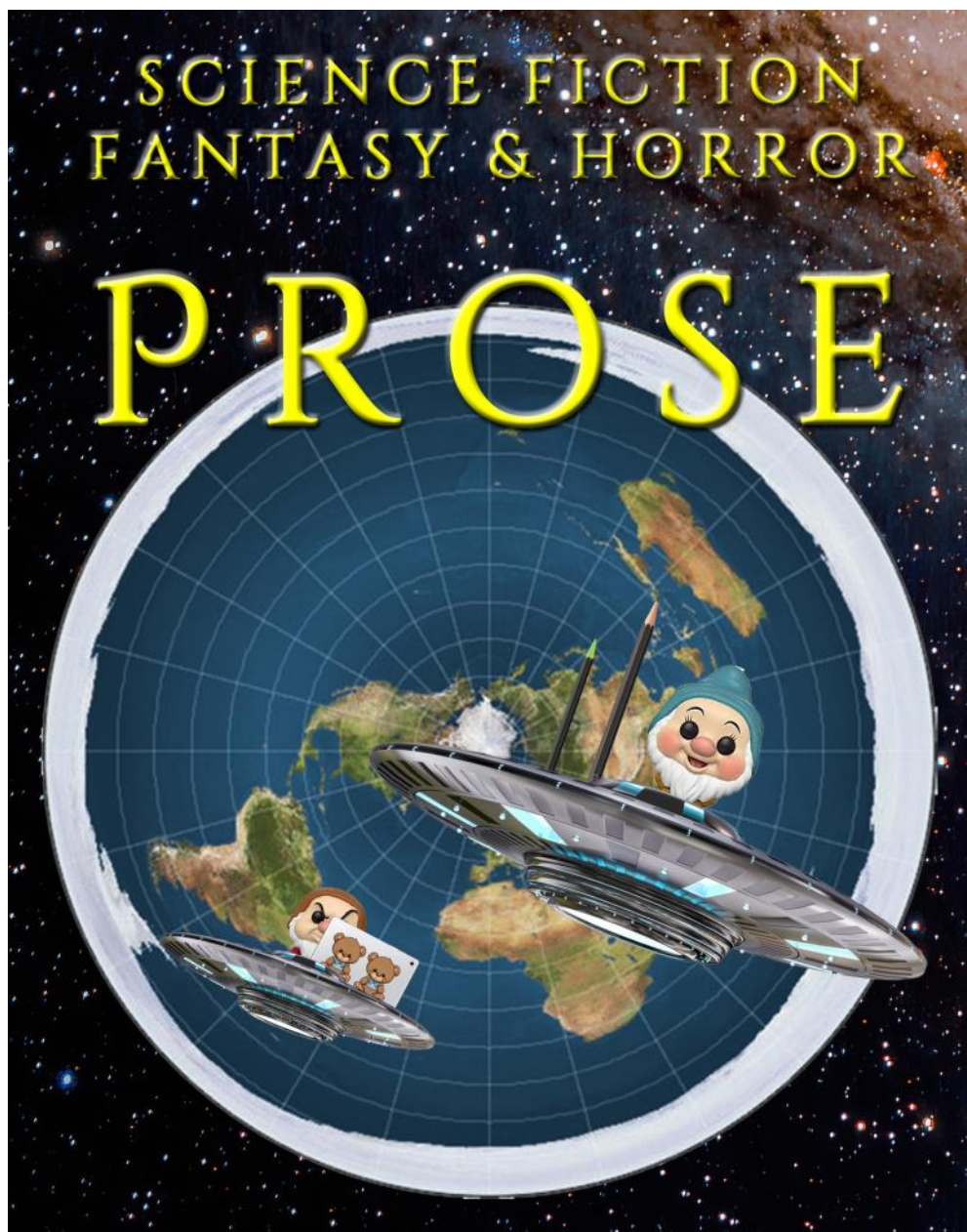
Fantasy sugar and cholesterol won't impact your health, though you may spend the night awake and reading and will be making an advert for zombies the next day.

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**Glasbena
šola Celje**

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Andrej Ivanuš

Coffee – 1 Euro

Translated from Slovene by Andrej Ivanuš

“What are you doing?” I snapped.
“We’re not doing anything, sir! You know that everything is getting more expensive. Inflation has been very high since 2065...” replied the waitress, who was patiently waiting for me to put my mu-di-de on the payment sensor. (Note: MU-DI-DE - MUlti-purpose DIgital DEvice that sees everything and knows everything. According to the terminology of the last century – mobile phone, GSM.)

“I know! But... this is not normal anymore. Just yesterday a coffee was worth eighty euros, and today it’s already a hundred euros,” I grumbled.

The waitress waited for the sensor to beep to indicate that the payment had been made. She put it in a pocket on her belt and said:

“Oh, you should have come for coffee yesterday!” Then she turned and rushed to the next table.

My friend Bojan laughed:

“Andrej, it would be best if we built a time machine and traveled back to a time when coffee was still one euro.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “If we, who work in the physics laboratory at the faculty, can’t do it, then I really don’t know who can!”

We slowly got up and left the restaurant garden at the Mugbar.

*

We were sitting in the garden at the Mugbar again. We were sipping our coffee slowly, thoughtfully and with a cheerful face. It was 2015 and the price list said that coffee costs one euro. Blessed! Unbelievable!

I broke the silence:

"We did it! We are the first people to travel through time."

Bojan nodded:

"It's true! We are the first. We are drinking coffee that costs, you won't believe it, only one euro!"

"Ha! One, one euro. But I also have to admit that it is of better quality than that plum water in fifty years that costs a hundred euros!" I emphasized with satisfaction.

"You're right," Bojan agreed. "But you know very well that it won't be long before others come up with a similar idea and manage to build a time machine. If not sooner, then in the next seven years."

"Unfortunately, that's the way it is. So let's enjoy it while we can!" I replied, taking another blissful sip of the fantastic black liquid.

*

Incredible days followed. At least once a day, Bojan and I would sit in the garden at the Mugbar, indulge in pleasure and sip excellent coffee for one euro each.

But after a month, everything changed.

When we arrived at the garden of the Mugbar, the restaurant was closed. At one of the tables, a muscular guy in an official uniform was sitting. It was immediately clear to us that the more or less expected problems had arisen.

“Good day!” he greeted politely.

We greeted him. Then he continued:

"I'm sorry, but I have to inform you that you are under arrest for..."

I interrupted him:

"Yes, of course... you are not here to drink a cup of coffee. But it means that someone else has discovered how to travel through time. Someone else has built a time machine!"

"Yes, it's true. But not just one. Quite a few scientists have constructed their own machine. But that won't work! Time travel..."

Bojan interrupted him:

"... causes causal problems. As long as there is only one, it does not affect the future. Otherwise, it triggers certain event waves and shifts in reality. But like a wave on the surface of water, everything slowly calms down and events continue as if nothing has changed."

"That's right, Mr. Bojan. However, it is precisely because of the increase in the number of time machines that changes have occurred that are noticeable. That is why the World Government passed a law in 2073 that prohibits time travel and the invention of time machines," explained the government guard.

I smiled:

"Then I don't understand why you are here?"

He looked at me:

"How can you not understand! I have to arrest you, because with the invention of the time machine you started a real revolution!"

"You can't arrest us!" I objected. "We invented the machine in 2066. The law prohibiting the invention of time machines was passed seven years later. I think that even then it will be valid that you cannot be punished for a misdemeanor that you committed before the law was passed."

Bojan nodded:

"That's right! No law applies retroactively, that is, backwards!"

The government officer smiled:

"But I won't arrest you under this law."

"No! Under which law then? The only one I can remember is..." I said, thinking deeply. I looked at Bojan and after a while we nodded to each other. We shrugged. Everything was clear to us.

The government officer got up from his chair and slowly replied:

"You are being arrested under the law on causing a general economic crisis. This law was in effect at the time you invented the machine and even before that. By using the time machine to travel back in time, to a time when coffee costs one euro, you opened the door to a global crisis. All your imitators began to travel through time and buy products at drastically lower prices. The world economy collapsed completely in the years 2073 and 2074. People are being laid off because no one buys anything in the present anymore, but only in the past. You have plunged the world into abject poverty. This is the basis on which I can and must arrest you."

We stared at each other in silence.

Then the government officer tied our hands behind our backs and handcuffed us.

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Aljoša Toplak

How a Miracle Happens

Translated from Slovene by Aljoša Toplak

A man paces about the bus stop. He looks at his watch—in five minutes the bus will arrive and then a miracle will happen. Yet this will not surprise him; it is a carefully planned miracle. In fact, the very fact that he calls it that betrays a certain perversity. If we look at him now, he appears completely ordinary: closely cropped hair, clean-shaven, oval glasses. A green tie and a brown jacket, a briefcase in his hand. Nothing special—just another clerk hurrying to work while watching the sweep of the second hand on his wrist.

Meanwhile, a few streets away, a bus is working its way through traffic. The passengers' bodies sway back and forth, they cling to the poles and stare at their phones. Among them dances a girl who is trying not to spill her cup of coffee. She grabs the strap above her head and leans her shoulder against the window. She, too, looks like a perfectly ordinary girl—dark hair in a bun, a hint of make-up, a worn jacket. But the man at the stop knows about the miracle that will soon occur, whereas she has no idea. That is how it must be: he has arranged everything, and she will simply play a part she knows nothing about. In five minutes he will step onto the bus, and then everything will change for her. It sounds simple, but the road to that moment will be complicated.

A van rocks along behind the bus. In the smoke-filled cab one of the passengers nods: "Phase one begins." Another mutters: "Marta, go." A woman squeezed into the crowd on the bus unobtrusively sprays a little perfume. The perfectly ordinary girl absently sips coffee from her cup and watches buildings flash by on the other side of the glass. She does not notice the sweetness on her tongue or the scent of spruce in her nostrils. The men in the van grin at one another. The driver clicks his teeth; the passenger beside him presses a key on a computer. At that moment the song in the girl's earphones ends and another begins. "Now she'll see," says the shaggy driver, and the man next to him nods wildly: yes, now she will.

The girl on the bus does not yet suspect how the taste of coffee, the scent of spruce needles, and the ballad in her earphones are preparing her for a role in the miracle. Yet in the laughter of the men in the van one can sense unease—they are chain-smoking a little too quickly, perhaps all too aware of how much can go wrong. The network might fail and interrupt the mournful melody in her earphones; the fifteen-year-old next to her might pick his nose, and the smell from his newly exposed teenage armpit might drown the cloud of spruce; the girl might take one sip too many and the strange sweetness of her coffee might become disgusting. The men in the van know that a person can control the world only up to a point, after which chaos takes the reins. Then all that remains is prayer, even if we are as rational and convinced of the power of reason as the increasingly nervous trio in the van. Yet perhaps that is precisely the thrill that makes them feel so alive—the exhilaration of this little game they are playing with a perfectly ordinary girl. What does she live for? Perhaps she does not yet know herself, so they can be the ones to offer her the answer. And then everything will be simple; they will have her in the palm of their hand.

The man in the brown jacket is still pacing at the bus stop. He shifts from foot to foot. He checks his watch—two minutes left. His heart pounds, sweat trickles down his back. "Just a little longer and she's mine," he says; the old woman with a tote full of vegetables beside him pretends she did not hear. "Just a little longer, Tomaž, pull yourself together..." The men in the van glance at each other. "Let's hope he doesn't mess it up now," the driver mutters, while the two passengers shrug. "Well, it'll be his own fault."

The girl looks out the window and her wandering gaze catches a child running along the pavement after his father. A Dalmatian ballad echoes in her ears, reminding her of her own father and his aftershave that smelled of spruce. She remembers childhood caramels, and suddenly melancholy floods her. Her heart trembles; she forgets where she is and where she is going—only spruce needles, music, and sweet bitterness remain. The world around her disappears; she is no longer on a crowded bus, she is a little girl again, running barefoot after her daddy across dewy grass, looking at the sun and the clouds and the treetops. How short life is!

The bus stops; the man in the brown jacket boards. In the van everyone holds their breath. The girl looks at him just as light pours onto his face through the half-open roof hatch. Their eyes lock, and the girl does not look away. “I think everything’s going to be fine,” the van driver remarks. “Thank God,” the second sighs, “one more complaint would really be too much.” The man in the brown jacket, looking slightly puzzled, steps up to the girl: “Do we know each other?” he asks. The girl silently shakes her head. Slightly embarrassed, they smile at one another. What follows is superfluous—the miracle has already happened. It is that simple when everything meshes and works as it should.

Barbara Ribič Jelen

Dream Job

Translated from Slovene by Matej Krajnc

A cookie flashes violently on the screen. Across its surface, a message appears in large, bold letters:

“Do you want a well-paid dream job in a dream location?”

Just below, in the bottom-right corner, it says in small print on a yellow background:

“Click here for more information!”

Curiosity gets the better of him. He wonders, “*A dream job?*”

A satisfied smile spreads across his face: “*Just perfect. This is exactly what I need right now,*” and he clicks.

Next, the screen reads:

“On an idyllic little island in the middle of the ocean.”

Then, on the next line:

“Accommodation and food provided!”

And:

“Payment of €9,999.99 for seven days of monitoring a newly discovered species of bird: *draco solitarius*.”

He thinks, “*What kind of strange species is that, discovered only now?*”

A new message flashes:

“Don’t miss out! A dream job that’s basically a vacation. First come, first served. Press enter to continue.”

Once again, curiosity tingles—and he clicks.

A small island comes into view as the pilot of the sports plane points to it with his right hand. It looks like a tiny green dot. As they get closer, he sees it is actually a tall mountain densely covered with trees. Its shape resembles the face of an old man with a long beard. At the base, the trees thin out, and the terrain changes into grassy plains. By the sea lies a wide sandy beach, dotted with huts nestled among palm trees. The place seems sparsely populated. He feels a bit uneasy but shakes his head and focuses on the landing in the shallows.

He's greeted by a man with waxy pale skin, dressed in a classic business suit.

His jaw drops in shock. He can't believe his eyes—someone dressed like a runway model here, in the middle of the wild on a South Sea island. He shakes his head in disbelief.

The man speaks:

"You'll be staying in one of the huts. I'll bring you three meals a day. There are no toilet facilities—do your business in the forest, and wash in the sea. Tomorrow you'll get your equipment, and I'll explain your duties. Until then, you're free."

Poof—he vanishes.

He drops off his things in the hut closest to the sea. Then he hurries to the beach and dives into the water. Nearby, he notices an unusually large jellyfish with a bright red-rimmed bell and even brighter red tentacles. Startled, he quickly escapes. He thinks he's lucky the jellyfish didn't sting him.

He lies down in a hammock stretched between two palm trees and enjoys the sunset. His peace is disturbed by a stranger's arrival. This one also has waxy pale skin and wears a business suit. In a sickeningly sweet voice, the man says:

"Sir, I offer premium organic cosmetic products. Not tested on animals, free from parabens, aluminum, and GMOs. These are high-quality products, and today only, you get a special deal: three for the price of one."

He continues insistently:

"I have a superb cream for sunburns and you'll definitely need mosquito repellent."

He stares at the man's bare chest and adds:

"And also hair removal cream."

The man babbles on about the incredible effects of creams, sprays, deodorants, soaps, and shampoos.

"I don't need anything," he waves him off like an annoying fly.

The stranger persists:

"I also have dietary supplements. They improve the look of your skin, nails, and hair. You must add probiotics to your diet for better digestion and a strong immune system."

He gets angry, and just as the man inhales loudly to continue, he shouts:

"What are you trying to say—that I'm bald? That's enough! I don't need anything. Disappear. This is supposed to be a deserted island, and you found me of all people to..."

He can't finish the thought, as he's hit by another shock: the man vanishes instantly. Just evaporates.

The sun wakes him the next morning. On the ground, he finds a pile of equipment with instructions and a note telling him where to look for the newly discovered bird species. A tray of exotic fruit lies beside it—he figures that's his breakfast. He says aloud:

"How strange. Where's the guy who welcomed me yesterday? And how did I not hear him bring this stuff? I might've had a question or two."

He enjoys the rich flavors of the fruit for a while, then sets off toward the mountain. The birds supposedly hide in the thick forest.

Just a few steps across the island's plains and a cramp twists his stomach. He barely manages to pull down his pants. A thick slurry pours out of him. Clearly, the exotic fruit had an unusual effect.

Luckily, he always carries tissues.

He continues on through the shade of trees unlike any he's ever seen. A swarm of annoying mosquitoes surrounds him. They bite him like he's a gourmet meal—or at least a blood donor. He swats them, flailing his arms, scratching himself bloody. Now he regrets chasing off the salesman. In this environment, that insect repellent would've been handy.

Eventually, he drives off the mosquitoes—but then another man approaches, again in a business suit. He looks eerily similar to the salesman, but there's something different about him. He has a stern expression and wears a face mask. His voice is sharp and commanding:

"Ah, got you. I'm an inspector from the Global Health Organization, enforcing measures against COVID-32. That's a €400 fine for not wearing a mask."

His jaw drops to his chest:

"Wha... what? But we're in the middle of nowhere, no one around for miles. Why would I need a mask?"

The inspector looks at him with pity:

"You're not off the hook. Your blood could infect the mosquitoes, they could infect other creatures on the island—and boom, an epidemic."

He hands him the fine notice—and *poof*—he's gone.

He mutters under his breath:

"This is insane. On a deserted island in the middle of the ocean, and I get fined—and I haven't even found those damn birds yet. This is torture."

He falls silent, nervously looking around in case there's another inspector for cursing.

Suddenly, he hears a loud flapping of wings behind him. He turns—and his jaw drops again. A terrifying thought cuts through him: the damn bird found him.

Sitting in a tree is a dragon-like creature staring at him like it wants to eat him. It opens its jaws, revealing three rows of sharp teeth, and breathes fire. Flames singe his hair, eyebrows, and beard. He screams in terror:

"Get lost!"

A split second later, another thought:

Now I'll really be bald.

The screen flashes a new message:

"YOU ARE BEING CHARGED €9,999.99 FOR USING THE HOLOGRAM 'DREAM JOB'."

Bojan Ekselenski

The Truth Virus or Archie Appears

Translated from Slovene by David Limon

My morning ritual is as predictable as the stupidity of politicians. First I go for a newspaper, have a chat with the woman in the kiosk, and then I return home.

I make breakfast and put the newspaper in front of me. My eye is caught by a news item on the back page about a virus that the American government is supposed to have created and which is now out of control.

So what kind of virus? The source is a website quoting some document in WikiLeaks. The virus is said to force people to speak the absolute truth! Oh yes, of course! And pigs might fly. I wanted to stop reading, but my curiosity got the better of me. Another stupid thing – the virus is spread via the mobile phone network. WTF?! This must be a hoax. This is so yesterday. If they think that such stupid stories will help them sell a few more papers, they're totally fooling themselves. The imbeciles who read this kind of thing don't touch this newspaper because it has small print and not enough photos, but serious readers will cancel if they keep repeating such "alternative news" in future.

The next part of my Saturday morning ritual is going to the market. First bread, then vegetables, followed by the butcher's and as a finale, fruit.

I nicely completed my task and then had a coffee and headed home. From afar, I spotted my primary school friend, Archie. He waved to me and I waved back.

Wait a minute! Didn't he die in a traffic accident? He was struck by a car on a pedestrian crossing outside the shopping centre. A really worthless death for an adrenaline sports enthusiast like Archie. I remembered the funeral. I wanted to say something... Archie disappeared into the crowd.

*

I shook my head. Damn alarm clock and its ear-splitting howl. Uff, what a stupid dream. I scratched my scalp and turned the light on. I shook my head as if to clear it. Very strange, if you ask me. How could I see Archie? I remembered the funeral. Had he risen from the dead? I breathed a sigh of relief that it was just an odd dream.

I hazily caught the echo of the dreamed newspaper article. I remembered with unbelievable accuracy the piece about the virus that forced people to speak the truth. Crazy.

Bleary-eyed, I got dressed and to wake myself up went to the post-box for the paper. While making coffee I slowly ate some bread and jam, cautiously leafing through the paper as I did so. At breakfast time I always started on the back page. Then my jaws froze. In mid-bite. The taste of jam disappeared, the aroma of coffee evaporated. I blanched. I began to mumble aloud what I was reading, unable to believe it:

"The virus escaped from a laboratory... The information available so far indicates that it spreads via the mobile phone network." I frantically read on. "neurological effect... those infected are compelled to speak only the truth... The first cases were denied..."

I broke into a sweat. Christ on a bike, I dreamed that! Am I some kind of Gypsy Rose Lee now?

Just let me meet a dead person and I'll know. Why didn't I dream the winning numbers of the Eurojackpot? Why don't prophetic dreams lead to profit? I put down the bread, sipped my coffee and began to whisper a commentary:

"This virus can't be real. What sort of bullshit is this? If they keep publishing such fake news, I'll cancel my subscription. A summary of a summary cites a source that cites WikiLeaks. Oh yes, of course. Will they write tomorrow about how local Nazis welcomed African refugees with flowers? Will the Pope become the greatest advocate of same sex marriage and abortion?"

I looked at the clock, which reminded me – you're late, you're late. I went to work. The last vestiges of the day were being swallowed by the coming night. The night shift always messed with my biorhythm. I pedalled my bike harder and almost hit a pedestrian who jumped onto the road without looking. He seemed kind of familiar to me. Hey, that's... I broke out in a cold sweat. Archie died seven years ago, run over on a pedestrian crossing. Of course, not by a bike... I remembered the funeral. I contributed for a wreath. At the wake, I stopped his brothers coming to blows over a tractor that belonged in a museum.

He started and his expression of surprise gave way to happiness to see me:

"Mike, is it you?"

"Archie?" I could barely conceal my astonishment. And then I shuddered. How could I take the kid to school tomorrow if I was going to the night shift today? Something didn't fit... It didn't hang together. After breakfast, the night shift. What the fuck's going on?

*

The week-end. How nice that for two whole days I don't have to go to work. The luxury of morning without an alarm clock! Yeeah... For a moment, I catch a whisper of my dream. I dreamed about the news about some kind of virus, then I almost ran over a former schoolmate who died seven years ago, and for dessert, that I was on the way to the night shift, although for years I've worked only the day shift. What a mess. With a slight effort, I found some more scraps of my dream and remembered that in my dream I had been dreaming.

Crazy.

I even remembered the question from my dream as to why no one dreams a lottery win. Why can the gift of prophesy not be profited from? I read some answers to that but it was merely witty mumbo jumbo.

The memory of the dream quickly dissolved in wakefulness and I went for a newspaper. The whole time I had the nagging feeling that somewhere, in some indeterminate way, I had already been through this. This feeling kept rattling around in my head, but I couldn't identify the real nature of it.

I had breakfast. There's nothing nicer than opening the newspaper at breakfast time. For a moment, I felt the urge to look at the back page. I smiled at myself. It couldn't be real. I put the paper down.

Every Saturday morning, I stick to a precisely defined ritual – stalls in the market and then the butcher's. I followed the usual order: bread, vegetables, meat and fruit. And then there is something else... coffee! My nostrils are assailed by the memory of the aroma of fresh espresso.

After shopping I headed towards the café, the source of caffeine nirvana. Right in front of the cute door in the small space I ran into my old friend Ivan. After the usual how are you, mate, and same old same old, he was in a hurry to tell me something:

"You must hear this. I had this weird dream. I read in the paper that this truth virus had escaped and was spreading via the mobile phone network. Then I went to the market and I bought – I remember it so vividly – bread, veg, went to the butcher's, and then, before the café, some fruit. I came here with a bag full of shopping and then, you'll never believe it, almost on this very spot ran into the deceased Archie. The one who was hit by a car on a crossing. What a stupid death for an adrenaline freak. The whole thing is crazy, as I haven't been to the market for more than ten years. You know, these..."

My face lost all its colour. He'd had the same dream as me. Shit! What the fuck's going on? Actually, in my case, it was a dream within a dream.

Well I'll be damned, we were joined by Alex. A real coincidence, as we haven't seen him since Archie's funeral.

We repeat the same exercise: how are you, mate, same old same old, then he says in a stunned voice:

"Do you remember Archie?"

We nodded. Damn it, we were talking about him because he'd visited both of us in our dreams. Evidently he's not getting on so well with everyone upstairs, so coming to frighten us in our sleep. He goes on with a serious look:

"I dreamed that I read about some truth virus, as clear as I can see you two now, and then the dream continued with me setting off for the night shift, where I've never worked and for a finale I almost ran into Archie on my bike. The deceased Archie we buried seven years ago. Dreams can be so vivid. It's unbelievable!"

Ivan gulped and I did the same. I was experiencing live my bizarre dream merry-go-round.

Shaken, I went home. Something was persuading me, some witchcraft was guiding my fingers to turn over the newspaper. And I came across the news items I knew off by heart.

The virus, which causes those affected to speak the truth, is spread via the mobile phone network.

I put down the newspaper and went to the shopping centre. Shit! This whole dream business.

*

I nervously drummed my fingers on the soft steering wheel cover and thought about my dream adventures and Archie's constant appearances. Waiting to get into the shopping centre at this time of day is really a pain. Suddenly, something jumped in front of me. I instinctively jammed my foot

on the brake. For a moment, subconsciously, there was a male body in my field of vision. And I felt the car hit something.

Where did he come from? How? I swear, the guy just jumped onto the road, almost threw himself under my wheels. I had stopped in the middle of a pedestrian crossing. I was overcome by horror. I recognised the victim's bloody face. Archie! It was undoubtedly him. How did he end up under my car? Astonishment gave way to action. I tried resuscitation. Although I did everything I could to revive him, I didn't manage before the ambulance arrived. The whole time I was shouting:

"Archie! Wake up! Get up! You're an adrenaline freak, you're not going to die beneath the wheels of my car!"

People were swarming round and making comments to each other.

"He just appeared out of nowhere. There was nothing he could have done."

"Where did he appear from? Terrible. How unlucky can you get?"

*

I awoke to a pleasant morning. I had dreamed that I bumped into my old schoolmates Mike, Ivan and Alec. How long was it since I last saw them? I couldn't remember.

The dream began to give way to the morning sunlight. First of all, the usual shopping. This time I decided to go to the shopping centre on foot, ten minutes' walk wouldn't do me any harm.

I took a carrier bag and set off. I weighed up the possibilities for the afternoon. For the first time this year, the weather would be ideal. It had to be if I was going to paraglide off that hill. Quite a few had come to grief there because of the wind. How many crashes occur because of impatience? Just let the weather hold. I stepped onto the pedestrian crossing.

All I heard was the screech of tyres.

I was in a kind of bright tunnel. I could hear a distant voice:

"Archie! Wake up! Get up ..."

The Reflection in the Seven Lakes

I was breathing heavily. How could I not be when I was carrying a paraglider on my back. The take-off point was just below the summit. Because of the winds it was worth making the effort to get up there for one of the best paragliding experiences in the world. You suddenly experience the most wonderful view of those wonderful mountain lakes nestling among sharp peaks. On the map it says the Seven Lakes.

"Ben! Wait! What's the hurry?" shouted my friend Mick.

I turned round:

"How is it that I can more easily carry a gut like this? Evidently being slim isn't everything!"

"You go up here almost every day, but it's barely my second time."

I grinned.

I heard his sullen sigh.

At the top I sat on the edge and waited for him. He finally came panting up.

I got to my feet:

"Shall we? You ready?"

"Of course!" he replied with pleasure.

We took off into space. I enjoyed the view. I was particularly enthusiastic about the reflection of the magnificent Rings of Saturn on the methane surface of the Seven Lakes.



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Knjigarna
ZVEZA MODRO-BELA PTICA

Domen Mohorič

Red Dawn

Translated from Slovene by Domen Mohorič

“Look, look, shooting stars,” said little Senji, pointing towards the north with his small, bony finger.

The falling stars did not pass beyond the horizon but landed far beyond the hills of northern Japan. Soon after, dark-red flashes painted the night sky, followed by a loud boom a few minutes later. Winds soon carried the suffocating smell of burning wood mixed with the bitter-sour scent of scorched flesh.

“Don't worry, Senji. They've only lit a bonfire.”

“Are they roasting pigs?”

“... yes.”

“I want some too!”

“No Senji, that's the Jingu festival in Hokkaido. Only the Emperor's friends are invited.”

“Do you think there will be any festivals in Tokyo that we could go to?”

“Certainly, my son.”

Fifty kilometers to the north, a festival raged; a festival of destruction and terror. It was the twenty-fifth year of the Shōwa era, the end of a historically harsh winter, and with it, the Russian bear stirred again in northern Japan. The Soviet army, supported by partisan units of the Democratic People's Republic of Japan under the command of Satomi Hakamada, continued its siege of the city of Akita. Here, units loyal to Emperor Hirohito guarded the entry to the plains of central Japan. They were the only obstacle on the Red Army's path to Tokyo.

“Brothers, stand strong! Let the divine wind push you towards the enemy, let Buddha steady your minds, and let Amaterasu fill you with the power of heaven, so that here in Honshu, standing on the land of your ancestors, you may break the backs of the Emperor's enemies,” roared Prince Takamatsu, as a hail of bombs from a Soviet plane drowned out his bellowing voice. Yet, soldiers imagined they heard him despite the noise and charged the advancing infantry of the Red Army pushing through the suburbs of Oiwake.

At the same time, amidst the roars of war, Hashimoto Ren was making his way through the forests of the Semboku region east of the city, carrying an important message. He ran through valleys, climbed difficult hills, and navigated deep ravines.

He came upon the first signs of civilization: felled trees that were used to feed the furnaces and factories of the Japanese Imperial Army. As he was about to step onto a logging road, he heard voices. They were Japanese, but he couldn't tell if they were his imperial brothers or those now marching under the communist banner. He trailed the group, quickly recognizing their emblem, a gear wheel from which emerged a wheat stalk, set against a red background. He couldn't risk being seen or captured by the enemy; it would jeopardize his mission and disappoint everyone who had placed their hopes in him.

The partisans advanced quietly and carefully along the muddy path. After several kilometers, they reached their target, a military checkpoint under imperial control. The partisans hid in the underbrush, splitting into two groups, each preparing for a flanking maneuver to eliminate the numerically superior defense.

Ren could not allow that to happen. He knew that losing even one section of the defense line could lead to the linear collapse of the entire front. Just as in shogi, a single pawn behind enemy lines could become invaluable. Chaos in the Emperor's army would prevent him from completing

his mission. He had to reach the prince. He fired his 94 Nambu pistol into the air, alerting the imperial soldiers.

The imperial soldiers swiftly formed a defensive circle and opened fire. After a brief battle, none of the partisan saboteurs remained.

Ren pressed forward, unseen and unheard. His mission left no time for words, and a single misunderstanding could prove fatal.

After several hours of hiking and evading patrols, he finally reached the city's entry point at the bridge over the Taihei River. There, he revealed himself to the wary soldiers, announcing that, by order of the divine Emperor, he carried an urgent message for his revered son, Prince Takamatsu.

They searched him but found no letter. He had burned it and eaten the ashes; now, those sacred words lived only in his stomach and in his mind. However, he carried the Emperor's seal, which opened every door in the city and brought him directly to the general command.

Amid distant explosions, the rumble of anti-aircraft guns, and the piercing cries of wounded soldiers carried away on stretchers, Ren entered the bunker, where the prince awaited him.

"State your message, and state it quickly, for the fate of the empire is being decided at our gates," said General Takushiro Hattori.

Ren noticed General Hattori's trembling hands and the iron prosthetic where his leg ended below the knee. Aside from the Prince, no one else appeared uninjured. Yet the Prince stared ahead with a vitality granted only by forces beyond understanding.

This, Ren thought, must be the Emperor's blood.

But some among the imperial family had already fallen in the war.

"They aren't immortal, as I believed as a child," he thought silently.

He bowed to the Prince and delivered his message.

"No!" shouted the Prince.

Everyone in the command room instantly paled, one of the colonels collapsed. General Hattori, drew his pistol, offered a quiet apology, stepped into the adjoining room, and a gunshot was heard.

The Prince did not react. Then, silently, he buried his face in his hands and began to sob.

"I don't believe it... it can't be true," he said, his voice breaking with every word.

"It's true, honored one. You haven't heard the Emperor's speech because you've been cut off from the world here. The Divine Nation has surrendered. The Emperor has surrendered." Even Ren's voice began to falter.

"He surrendered to the Americans advancing through Kyoto. He saw no victorious future, and judged the Westerners preferable to the Reds for the sake of the Japanese people. Thus, he accepted their conditions: surrender and his head. The day before yesterday, following tradition, he committed seppuku."

The Prince struck the wall with his fist. Ren winced at the unmistakable sound of bone cracking.

"No, the Emperor would never surrender. He was either betrayed or he denied himself. The latter is impossible. Therefore, we shall fight to the end, by divine law and in obedience to the nation's will.."

"Sir..." Ren began, swallowing the rest of his words.

"I will not die by the dictate of any enemy. I will die according to Bushido. With a katana in my hands."

He grabbed his sword and stepped out into the street among his soldiers. He had completely forgotten Ren, who, having fulfilled his task, slipped back into the shadows.

The Prince led a breakout from the city. With his men, he left the barricades and trenches, engaging the enemy face-to-face.

As they charged, they sang:

"Until our enemy is destroyed,

charge forward, charge forward,
together as one”

The Prince died beneath the bayonet of an unknown soldier. Nothing remained of Akita's defending army. The Communists flooded the city and, like a red tide, began their advance toward Tokyo.

The Emperor, overseeing the defense against the American assault on Kyoto, was shaken by the sudden collapse of the northern front. The end of the war now felt dangerously near.

Political Commissar Ren was soon promoted to the Politburo and honored as a Hero of the Japanese Workers' People.

Dominik Lenarčič

Acid Raindrops

Translated from Slovene by Dominik Lenarčič

Through the windshield I look into the pocket of the grey sky trapped between the skyscrapers. Yesterday's forecast predicted heavy showers for today. I look across the endless street. I must go or else I'll be late at the postal service again. A coworker once asked me in jest if I run late to work on purpose. I don't know, maybe I do. Maybe I am trying to sabotage myself.

I mustn't. I need this job. I need to pay off that infernal loan. On the street I already see people going about their morning errands. I think I'll join them. I turn the key. The sleepy Toyota starts to grumble mechanically. A blunt sound. A big raindrop fell on the windshield. The car is still resisting. Suddenly I hear sizzling. It's as if someone is cooking eggs. I look closely at the wet trail on the windshield. *The glass has started to melt.*

“What in the?”

Now a second drop falls. And a third. And a fourth. Who's pouring acid onto my car?! It occurs to me that this might not be a real acid. The showers have begun. Kicking, I try to get out of the car. Drops start falling faster. Now the entire windshield has started melting. Finally, I open the door. I put my foot on the sidewalk. I take a leap and run back into the apartment. Now that I'm inside, I feel a sharp pain in my shoulder. A drop has made a hole in my coat and made a light-red stain. It stings. Outside, I hear screams.

*

The window in my apartment overlooks the road below. Chaos has erupted in the street. Panicking, people run back and forth, looking for shelter. They scream. One man collapses in agony on the asphalt. The look on his face makes my stomach churn. I take a look at my car. The windshield is one big sizzling mess. The color has started to melt off the roof. I feel an ache in my shoulder.

Then my phone rings. On the screen appears the name of my boss.

“Hello?”

“Warren, where the hell are you?”

“Sir, I'm sorry, but I can't make it to work today.”

“What do you mean you can't? What has gotten into you?”

“Sir, can't you see what's happening outside?!”

“I don't know what you're talking about, Warren.”

The pain becomes unbearable.

“What do you mean you don't know?! Are you blind?! Look out the window! It's a literal acid rain.”

“Don't you talk to me like that, young man! Come here at once!”

"I can't."

"Do you want to lose your job?"

I stiffen at the question. My boss knows where to aim. I stutter something in response.

"Of course you don't. Where else are you going to go?"

He falls silent for a moment. A lump in my throat won't let me speak.

"Warren, I'm giving you one hour to get your ass here. If you're not here by then, you're done. Understand?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"I don't care if there's rain, snow, hail or acid, I demand that you arrive to work on time."

He falls silent again.

"See you, Warren."

End of conversation. I feel sick.

*

I knock on my neighbor's door and try to keep the pain in check. I hope old Johnston still has that army helmet.

"John, are you there?"

I get no response. I come in anyway. I find the old man at the wide window. He is welded in his place.

"John?"

He is still staring through the window. I step towards him.

"Hey, John!"

I gently shake my elderly neighbor. He finally wakes from his trance and looks at me.

"John, do you maybe still have that helmet?"

The old man asks me: "What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to work."

"Are you crazy? The apocalypse is looming outside and you're springing into action?"

"I mustn't lose my income. I mustn't."

My words silence him. I know he understands my predicament. I also know he won't argue with me for long.

"Top drawer. You don't need to return it."

He says this, then turns back towards the window. I thank my neighbor quietly. He continues to gaze through the window.

*

On top of the stairs, I realize I no longer feel the pain in my shoulder. Whether that's good or bad, I don't know. Slowly I begin to descend. Every individual step squeak to try to tell me this is a bad idea. I am not moved by their warnings. I have to go to work.

Now I stand before the apartment door. I put my neighbor's helmet on my head. I cover my body with the thickest coat I have. I put skiing gloves on my hands. I breathe in, step through the door... and breathe out. I'm on the doorstep. The balcony over my head protects me from the rain. Opposite of me lies the fallen man. I better not look into his face. From my shelter I can study the state of my Toyota. The acid has completely washed off the black paint off the roof. The windshield is still sizzling. No matter, I'll look through the window while I drive. I see the rain has also melted the tires. I'll drive on the rims, then. Whatever, I need to get to work urgently. I try to gather courage. A few steps and I'll be at the car. I'll have to open the door quickly and carefully; the handle is completely covered in acid. My arms and legs are ready. I take up the starting position. It's time for the shortest sprint of my life.

A whistling sound disrupts my concentration. A man passes me. He has no protective clothing on him, just a hat and a light coat. Not much is left of them, the rain has ripped apart the fabric and

touched the skin. His wounds are smoldering. The smell is intolerable. The sight itself is intolerable. And yet the man walks upright and whistles to himself. Suddenly, he starts to sing a B. J. Thomas song:

*"Raindrops keep falling on my head
but that doesn't mean my eyes will soon be turning red
crying's not for me
'cause
i'm never gonna stop the rain by complaining."*

I look back at him. The man and his melody disappear into the endless street.

Devil Himself

"It was the pit—the maelstrom—the ultimate abomination. Carter, *it was the unnamable!*"

H. P. Lovecraft: The Unnamable

Father stares darkly into the lunch leftovers on his plate. I know what comes after such a silence. Lost composure, broken plates, aching vocal cords. Broken hearts. The adrenaline is making me sick. My stomach is stirring the acid in me. What did I do to you, father? It's not my fault that mother is gone. It wasn't me who crashed into the back of her car and sent her careening into a ditch. Maybe you should examine your own conscience for once. Father still stares into his plate. I don't know much longer I can take this calm before the storm. I should say something. "What is with you now?" or "Are you going to break something again?" I say nothing. I can't find the courage to blame. He looks me in the eyes. It's going to start any second now! It was her who figured out then that we were out of milk. You forgot to tell her. She drove to the shop alone. Alone. I anticipate my father's outburst. But instead, I get only a tepid, weary statement:

"Anže, I think it's time."

*

I walk behind my father. He is unexpectedly energetic for his age. Almost impatient. When we step off the grass onto the path, the almost soundless rustling of grass gives way to the grinding of pebbles. The splendid cloudless sky is covered by the patches of treetops of the mixed forest. The forest sounds are soothing. It's as if my father isn't leading me into the unknown. Suddenly, he speaks:

"Have you heard anything about the neighbour Marija?"

I remember the fable shared to me by her grandson Luka. He and her grandma went to pick mushrooms in the forest. Luka lagged behind. He thought he saw a deer. When he turned back, grandma was out of sight. Naturally, he was overcome by a primal juvenile fear. He was alone. He was abandoned. Now the night will fall and the wolves will come and eat him. Then he heard a scream. A wolf! No, that wasn't a wolf. Through the undergrowth stumbled grandma. She collapsed onto her back. She was mumbling something. Luka approached her, frightened. Grandma's face was pale. Her eyes were frozen. Out of her mouth only this could be heard: "Devil himself ... devil himself." Luka hurried back into the village and brought his mother with him. Together they dragged her back home and got her in bed. At home, they expected her to clam down that same day and tell them what she saw. She was probably just startled by some deer, maybe even a wolf. Grandma is getting old and her nerves fragile. She'll be all right.

It's been one week since then. Marija Hribar is still mumbling that thing about the devil. I learned that from Luka's mother. Without that info I wouldn't have paid much attention to Luka's little story. Now I can only ponder...

"Well?"

Father's harsh voice wakes me in an instant.

"Y-y-yes. I heard about her."

"It wasn't a deer that she saw. Or a wolf. No, I know what she saw."

"What did she see?"

Father stops. How dare I ask him? Now he'll start! Father fortunately doesn't erupt. He just stares into the void. We stand in silence for some moments, then father speaks again:

"When your mother died, I was lost. There was an indescribable emptiness in my head."

He falls silent for a moment. He surprises me with his composure. It's not like him.

"On the day of the news I took off into the forest. I was hoping my thoughts would clear on the way."

We step over tree roots. There are penny buns growing on the ground.

"I hiked across the hill, climbing like in the old days."

We climb, wade through the undergrowth.

"That's when I found the pit. And in it..."

Our path is cut off by a wormy wooden fence. One fence board has already fallen off. Father curses quietly. He seems absorbed in thought.

"You know, I put up this fence. When you were still little. I didn't want anyone to see him."

"See who?"

Father doesn't answer. Instead, he steps through the gap in the fence. I follow him. Suddenly I hear the most unnatural sound in my life. A filthy, sludgy, slimy munching. A sucking sound! What is that?!

Father speaks: "Anže, this is our secret. And my gift to you."

With a stiff hand he pushes me towards the pit. On the edge I instinctively look down.

Devil himself.

Ivan Šokić

Threat From Within

Translated from Slovene by Ivan Šokić

I.

Major Robert Horvat gazed upon the visiwall of a yet-to-be dismantled smoking lounge in the star fortress, admiring the view of Argon IV. The majestic sight of the gas giant, paired with a cigarette in his mouth, was one of the few small joys remaining in his fifteen-year military career.

Argon IV, theoretically speaking, offered the Intersolar Army an ideal environment for establishing a forward operating base. Practically speaking, it was located at the tail-end of the galaxy.

Upon closer reflection, disregarding the planet's immediate surroundings, this location was highly unsuitable for a forward operating base. Truth was that Demerec Alpha was a dumping ground for the personnel deemed problematic.

Horvat exhaled the last blue-tinged puff of smoke, extinguished the cigarette rolled from home-grown tobacco, and headed toward his office. The last shipment from home was already two weeks late.

Probably confiscated.

He knew that was possible. Three weeks ago Commodore Jensenberg declared war on tobacco on Demerec Alpha. Officially, it was for the welfare and health of the soldiers. Everyone who had ever dealt with bureaucrats, including Horvat, knew the real reason lay elsewhere.

Horvat's thoughts were interrupted by Lieutenant Scheffer, who ran down the corridor past him. The gray uniform, black beret, and armband above his right elbow marked the lieutenant as Military Police.

Where could he be rushing off so urgently that he didn't even offer a salute? Was he smirking?

Horvat shrugged and returned to his thoughts. Bureaucrats like Jensenberg were cut from the same cloth everywhere. If they could make someone's life miserable and justify it by citing the greater good, they did so with the greatest pleasure.

Horvat walked through the sliding doors marked in large letters with the Logistics & Communications Office. He shared the office with his adjutant, Captain Tomislav Varga, who immediately stood up, walked over to the wall-mounted screen, and turned it on.

Like Horvat, Varga had also ended up in this corner of the galaxy thanks to the bureaucratic apparatus. Unlike Horvat, who had spent most of his career in logistics—being a thorn in the side of commanders who thought bombs appeared on battlefields by themselves—Varga had begun his journey among the stars as a communications officer. At 25, Horvat's adjutant was the definition of an ambitious, tall, dark-haired, and well-built officer. His ever-present smile was marred by a white scar that stretched from his right eye down to his mouth, a souvenir from the 2nd Araknid War. He was one of the few survivors of the Intersolar Fleet's orbital bombardment. Instead of targeting the Araknids, the Fleet had accidentally fired on the Army. When Varga learned that the commander responsible for his comrades' deaths had actually been promoted to admiral for his negligence, the bureaucrats felt it was time for reassignment.

"This will interest you, sir," said Varga, pointing to the screen where a greasy-haired student with one too many nose rings was babbling about universal suffrage and peaceful coexistence with non-humans.

"What am I looking at, Adjutant?"

"A revolution on Svarog II."

"Source?"

"Captain Ivanov sent this. The Military Police came across the footage during the confiscation of a tobacco shipment in the docks two weeks ago, but they only entered it into the system yesterday."

"Ivanov wasn't here?" Horvat inquired.

"No. Lieutenant Scheffer."

"I see. I saw him rushing past earlier." Horvat paused for a moment. "Svarog II... don't we get resources from there?"

"Correct. Everything from nano-steel components and computer chips to microplastic cartridges." Varga listed. "Recently, even tactical tectonic drills."

"Really? TTDs?"

"That's what the cargo manifest stated."

Horvat nodded and returned to the matter at hand. "Has the Fleet mobilised yet?"

"That's the issue, sir," Varga said, handing Horvat a datapad.

Horvat took the device and swiped through the screen until he reached the relevant section.

"No mobilization?"

"Correct, sir."

"One moment," said Horvat, sitting down at his desk, motioning for Varga to join him, and reading through the dispatch from the High Command.

"This will cut us off from the rest of the galaxy," said Horvat, setting down the datapad.

"Correct, sir."

"Adjutant, this couldn't have just sprung up overnight," said Horvat, regretting having smoked his last cigarette earlier. "Do we have a timestamp for when the footage was taken?"

"Three weeks ago, sir."

"Do we know the exact location where the footage was captured?"

"No, sir."

Horvat sighed, looked up at the ceiling, and began calculating. "If the footage was taken three weeks ago, that means the revolution has been going on for at least that long. Do we know how the original footage was broadcast?"

"Captain Ivanov is currently interrogating the owner of the device."

"Then we should proceed immediately and audit the entire inventory."

*

II.

The week that Horvat and Varga spent auditing all accessible data raised more questions than it answered.

"I don't like this, Adjutant," said Horvat nervously, pacing his office. "Our access is limited to cargo manifests from the last two months. For anything more, we need General Andersen's personal authorization."

The major's monologue was interrupted by the arrival of Captain Niko Ivanov from counterintelligence. "Captain Niko Ivanov, reporting for duty!" Ivanov shouted, standing at attention and giving a sharp salute.

Horvat returned the salute, smiled, and hugged Ivanov. "What brings you up here from your basement?"

Ivanov smiled back, greeted Varga, and took a seat at the table. "We've got problems."

"Don't we know it," said Horvat, and went for a bottle and a couple of glasses hidden behind a filing cabinet.

Understanding the need for privacy, Varga rose from the table, excused himself, and left the office.

"He good?" asked Ivanov, gesturing toward the sliding doors.

"Who, Varga? Don't worry. He's one of us," said Horvat, pouring two glasses. "Captain Varga just has an exceptionally well-trained sense of discretion. As long as Varga isn't here, no one will interrupt us."

"Then, to Varga and his vigilance!" Ivanov toasted.

"To Varga and his vigilance!" said Horvat, downing his glass of rakija. "Now, tell me, what's bothering you?"

"I was ordered," said Ivanov and pointed upward with his index finger "to open an investigation focusing on you."

"Jensenberg?"

Ivanov nodded.

"Interesting," said Horvat, taking another sip from his glass.

"Normally, I'd expect a bit more concern," said Ivanov.

"Normally, maybe. But this is far from normal."

"Robert, blood may be thicker than water, but this isn't going to just go away. This is a counterintelligence investigation."

"Exactly, dear Niko. For some reason, Jensenberg has sicced counterintelligence on me. That means something."

"It means you're a thorn in his side," Ivanov said.

"Yes, yes, that's all true," Horvat replied. "But," Horvat began, standing up from the table and pacing around the office, "if you're just a thorn in someone's side, they don't send the whole counterintelligence service after you. They transfer you. If they'd sic the MPs on me, I'd understand. And what am I guilty of? Doing my job?"

"What exactly did you do to anger Jensenberg?"

"I wanted access to data that I don't otherwise have restricted access to."

"What kind of data?"

"Cargo manifests, specifically data on cargo older than two months."

"That's it?"

"That's it," Horvat repeated. "Given that the construction and operation of Demerec Alpha heavily depends on raw materials we're supplying from Svarog II, I thought it was worth examining how this might impact the supply chain, our reserves, and potential delays in completing the project."

"And that upset Jensenberg?" Ivanov asked, somewhat surprised.

"Exactly. Furthermore, the data I requested requires Andersen's personal authorization."

"Then just get Andersen's authorization."

"That's not possible. General Andersen was recalled from Demerec Alpha a month ago—around the same time as your recording," said Horvat.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. The general hasn't been here for a month."

Ivanov reached for the bottle of rakija and poured himself another drink.

"Now answer me one question," Horvat said. "Why does a commodore from the Intersolar Fleet have authority over a facility that falls under the command of the Intersolar Army?"

The counterintelligence officer agreed with Horvat. It was highly unusual, especially given the fierce territoriality of both branches of the armed forces.

The only reason Horvat knew Andersen wasn't in the fortress was because of Varga. While checking the central terminal, he had discovered the passenger manifest of a corvette that had departed a month earlier.

"I think it's my turn now," Ivanov began after a short pause. "This investigation ... It started two weeks ago. Master Sergeant Ilyin from the Military Police and I attended a celebration in Section 233. One of his men had just been promoted to staff sergeant for the second time. We weren't alone in the mess hall. On the other side was a group of engineers having a party. Drinks, cigars, cards—nothing was missing. They spoke a dialect I didn't recognize, but what really caught my interest was a comment from one of the military policemen. He said they were untouchable—that the MPs couldn't even approach them because of Lieutenant Scheffer."

"Did they bribe a member of the military police?" Horvat asked.

"That would certainly be possible," Ivanov said. "It wouldn't be the first group to try something like that. But what bothered me more was that they didn't look like ordinary civilians. Relatively well-physically prepared but heavily tattooed."

"Former soldiers? Maybe convicts?" Horvat guessed. It wouldn't be the first time the Intersolar Army recruited from the dregs of human society.

"Some of them, yes, definitely. When I investigated their origins, they all listed different solar systems. Still, something didn't sit right with me, so I combed through the personnel database. All the data matched what they said, but the documentation for engineers from at least a dozen different solar systems all had a digital signature from the same planet. Can you guess which one?"

"Svarog II?"

"Tell me, Robert, why would over a hundred people from more than two dozen different systems have digital records issued from the same planet on the same day?"

"Didn't you say there were about a dozen of them?"

"That was two weeks ago. It's different now. While the cargo from Svarog II may have stopped, the number of engineers arriving from there has increased."

"You said the digital signature is the same for all mentioned. Who signed it?"

"Commodore Jensenberg."

*

III.

"Something doesn't add up, Major," said Varga after Horvat told him what he and Captain Ivanov had discussed.

"Go on, Adjutant."

"What is the ultimate goal of the infiltrators?"

"We don't know," admitted Horvat.

"Did Ivanov try to stop their arrival?"

"He tried. His superiors told him to drop the investigation into the infiltrators and focus on me instead—Jensenberg's orders."

"Don't they know you're related?"

"It seems they don't," admitted Horvat.

"In any case, the fact that Ivanov is leading the investigation against me has its advantages, at least for now."

Varga nodded and returned to the original topic. "So, we have a forward operating base under construction, teeming with mercenaries pretending to be civilians?"

"It seems so."

"And we don't have an astrolink."

Horvat gave Varga a puzzled look. "What does an astrolink have to do with this?"

"Astrolink," Varga repeated. "Every forward operating base immediately establishes a connection via an astrolink with the rest of the Intersolar Army. That's what allows us to simultaneously wage wars against numerically superior enemies on multiple fronts at once."

"True, Adjutant. Continue."

"Demerec Alpha has been under construction for over ten years, and during that time, no astrolink connection has been established. The only reason I can see is a deliberate one—it's not in the interest of those in charge."

"Why would that be?" asked Horvat.

"The astrolink transmitter is relatively easy to detect. Demerec Alpha, however, communicates via binary tetraencryption. Other lines of communication don't work. Argon IV serves as a natural signal disruptor. The only contact with the rest of the galaxy is through the Intersolar Fleet."

"So," said Horvat, "only one question remains."

"Which one?"

"Who or what is our secret base hiding?"

Before Varga could answer, the lights on the ceiling turned red. Something had triggered the alarm.

"Come with me, Captain!" Horvat ordered, stepping out of their office and heading toward the elevator.

"Where are we going, Major?"

"To the central terminal. Regardless of what they're hiding here, the command must know we've been compromised," said Horvat.

The elevators were uncooperative. For some reason, the scanner by the elevator reported to both Horvat and Varga that they didn't have authorization to use it.

"We have no choice; we'll have to go on foot," said Horvat, and headed toward the nearest maintenance shaft.

Varga nodded and followed him.

They descended the maintenance shaft's ladders, the journey stretching endlessly into the heart of the fortress. Demerec Alpha's spherical design concealed its secrets well—a kilometer-wide asteroid core cradled the nuclear reactors, with each layer above serving a calculated purpose. From plasma-covered water reservoirs to living quarters and yet-unfinished upper armor layer.

When they reached the steel bridge leading to the central terminal, they saw the thorium reactors.

A chill ran down Varga's spine, the weight of unseen eyes pressing on him. His breath caught as a shadow flickered across the asteroid's surface. Before he could say anything, he heard Horvat swear.

The central terminal was destroyed. Cables were cut or torn out, screens shattered, and the server riddled with laser gun holes.

Varga stepped past Horvat to take a closer look at the destroyed terminal. "Sabotage."

"Blood is thicker than water," said Horvat, taking a deep breath and leaning against the railing.

"Did you say something, Major?"

"Varga, how many people knew what we found at the central terminal regarding Andersen?"

Varga frowned. "Only you and me, Major."

"Only you, me, and Ivanov, Adjutant," said Horvat.

Footsteps echoed across the steel bridge.

Varga was the first to look toward the commotion.

"Step away from the terminal!"

Horvat turned toward the commanding voice. Ivanov stood flanked by six MPs in black combat armor, laser rifles at the ready. Among them, Horvat recognized Lieutenant Scheffer and Master Sergeant Ilyin; the others were familiar only by sight, their expressions unreadable behind visors.

"Et tu, Brute?" said Horvat.

Ivanov gestured for his squad to hold.

Scheffer protested. "Commodore Jensenberg ordered—"

Ivanov looked at the lieutenant and cut him off mid-sentence. "I'm taking responsibility."

"But—"

"This is the first and last time you undermine my authority," said Ivanov.

Scheffer yielded and joined the others in a defensive formation.

Ivanov approached Horvat. His face was pale and expressionless, like freshly cut marble. "Major Robert Horvat, by order of Commodore Jensenberg, you are under arrest on suspicion of sabotage."

Disgust flickered across Horvat's face. He nodded at Ivanov, stepped past him without a word, and extended his hands to Lieutenant Scheffer for cuffing.

The MP looked to Ivanov for instructions.

Ivanov shook his head.

"That won't be necessary, Major; Captain Ivanov vouches for you," the MP said mockingly.

Horvat lowered his hands.

The military police turned and began marching away, with Horvat in their midst.

"And me?" Varga called out.

"Don't bother with him!" Horvat shouted.

Ivanov turned to Varga. "One ruined military career today is more than enough."

The group of MPs, along with Horvat and Ivanov, left Varga alone at the destroyed central terminal.

*

IV.

The path to the prison cells led through dim, twisting corridors Horvat hadn't even known existed. It was as if they had stepped into a labyrinth. The Army was hiding something here, and now it was clear that something had gone horribly wrong. For the third time, they faced a sealed corridor.

A sudden crackle from a pipe above made Lieutenant Scheffer whirl around, aiming his laser rifle at the noise.

"Miller, Morgan, Santiago, move forward. Diaz, stay with Captain Ivanov," ordered Master Sergeant Ilyin. "Watch the major. If he tries to run, shoot him."

"As if I'd give you the chance," Horvat muttered.

"What did you say?" Scheffer snarled, his movements jittery and too quick, betraying the telltale signs of combat stimulants abuse. He lowered his rifle and seized Horvat by the collar of his gray uniform, his eyes bloodshot and wild.

Diaz and Morgan stepped in to pull Scheffer back, but Horvat, despite the danger, couldn't suppress a laugh. The lieutenant was at least a head shorter than him, and the absurdity of the situation momentarily outweighed the threat.

When Diaz and Morgan finally succeeded in separating them, Scheffer sneered. "Just a little longer, Major. Just a little longer, and you'll see what's coming to you. Commodore Jensenberg sent me here just for you!"

"And not just you, Lieutenant," Horvat quipped.

"That's enough!" Master Sergeant Ilyin snapped. "Major, restrain yourself."

Horvat smirked.

"Scheffer, with me. We'll cover the rear," Ilyin ordered. "And if you keep this up, you'll be sharing a cell with the major."

Horvat filed the oddity away—since when did NCOs give orders to officers? Only on Demerec Alpha, he mused.

The group pressed on.

The soldiers moved without cohesion. Ivanov was an outsider to the squad, which explained his isolation, but Scheffer's erratic behavior set him apart for other reasons.

When they reached another sealed door, Ilyin scowled. "We'll have to double back."

Scheffer nodded as though it had been his own idea.

The red alarm lights blinked ominously as the group retraced their steps.

The crackling in the pipes returned, louder this time.

Without warning, the lights extinguished.

Flashlights mounted on laser rifles flickered on, casting eerie shadows.

The corridor ahead was empty. The lights returned.

The soldiers advanced cautiously. Another sealed door loomed ahead.

Once again, the lights went out, followed by the now-familiar scratching against the metal walls.

When the sequence repeated a third time, Scheffer finally broke. Panting heavily, he removed his helmet.

"I hear them! They're going to kill us all!" he shouted.

"What is he talking about?" Horvat asked.

"Lieutenant Scheffer!" Ivanov barked. "Get a hold of yourself!" He approached the lieutenant. "Your men are watching, and they need a leader—not a liability."

The lieutenant backed away, his voice rising in panic. "No! Stay away!" With that, he shoved past Ivanov and bolted into the darkness.

Ivanov followed close behind.

Moments later, a scream cut through the air.

By the time Ivanov caught up, it was too late. Scheffer's headless body lay crumpled on the floor, his blood pooling beneath him. Ivanov raised his rifle, scanning the ceiling for the unseen threat.

"Get down!" Master Sergeant Ilyin shouted.

Horvat lunged at Ivanov, dragging them both to the ground.

The corridor erupted with the high-pitched whine of laser rifles as the MPs unleashed a torrent of fire on their unseen assailants. Energy bolts hissed and ricocheted off the walls, merging with the relentless sound of scratching claws.

When the barrage subsided, Horvat rolled off Ivanov and quickly assessed the scene.

Three Araknids lay sprawled across the floor, their four pairs of insect-like legs convulsing in final, twitching spasms. The dim, blinking red lights cast a gruesome glow over the carnage. The creatures, roughly the size of dogs, resembled a grotesque hybrid of ant and spider. Their serrated mandibles still dripped with Scheffer's blood.

Ivanov pushed himself to his feet and extended a hand to Horvat. "Master Sergeant Ilyin, you've got the men. Let me focus on the mission."

Ilyin nodded curtly. "We'll hold the line, Captain. Just get us through this."

Ivanov nodded, and turned to face Horvat. "Blood is thicker than water," he said, offering him Scheffer's rifle.

*

V.

The path forward was sealed, and the path back swarmed with Araknids. After losing Scheffer, three more MPs fell in the fight. Their deaths hit Diaz the hardest. All three were his age, and as a medic, he couldn't save a single one of them.

Ivanov saw no other choice but to force their way to the central terminal. But that meant risking more lives. They were trapped.

"Maybe there's a solution," Horvat said, keeping a close eye on the markings on the cold concrete walls. "Not far from here, there's an armory. If the data on the cargo manifests was accurate, it holds everything we need to break through to the central terminal."

Ilyin and Diaz exchanged glances.

"Very well," Ivanov said briskly. "Major, you're up."

Horvat nodded and stepped to the front of the group. Trust was earned, and leading the way was the first step. He carried a laser rifle out of necessity, but officially, he was still under arrest.

On the way to the armory, they encountered two more groups of Araknids, defeating them without further losses. Now that they knew what to watch for, they managed to avoid further casualties. It also helped that they were moving away from the Araknids' nesting area.

When they reached the armory, Horvat approached the retinal scanner, only to find himself locked out.

"Commodore Jensenberg revoked your privileges when he informed me that you sabotaged the central terminal," Ivanov said.

"Allow me," Master Sergeant Ilyin offered.

Horvat stepped aside to let the master sergeant use the scanner and looked at Ivanov. "Why would I sabotage the central terminal?"

The armory doors opened.

Ivanov raised his eyebrows.

Ilyin and Diaz entered the armory with laser rifles raised.

"We caught you at the destroyed central terminal," Ivanov said, stepping inside with Horvat behind the military police officers.

"Where else would I be when the alarm went off? I tried to warn the Army!"

The master sergeant approached Ivanov and reported no traces of Araknids.

Ivanov nodded, lowered his laser rifle, and turned to Horvat. "Jensenberg warned me that you'd try to play the victim. I thought he was exaggerating, trying to turn me against you."

"Play the victim?" Horvat was outraged. "I don't need to play the victim—I am the victim!"

"Robert, stop before I regret trusting you with a weapon in your hands."

"You treacherous snake! Regret? I should've known better than to trust you when Jensenberg sent you after me!"

Ivanov saw the master sergeant and the corporal grip their weapons, beginning to move into positions where they'd have a clear shot at Horvat. He shook his head.

The master sergeant nodded.

"You pretended to be on my side, then ran to Jensenberg! A sellout! You're working with the saboteurs—the revolutionaries! A traitor!" Horvat spat to the side.

Ivanov tensed. "What exactly do you mean by saying I ran to Jensenberg?"

Horvat looked up at the ceiling, took a deep breath, and exhaled. "The only ones who knew about Andersen's deleted passenger manifest at the central terminal were me and Varga. And lo and behold, when I told you about it, someone destroyed the central terminal!"

"I didn't tell Jensenberg anything."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?"

"It doesn't matter," Ivanov said. "When Jensenberg contacted me, I was coordinating measures with the military police to isolate the infiltrators. He was furious. He yelled at me for chasing innocent civilians in my paranoia instead of going after the one and only saboteur he'd served to me on a silver platter. To ensure I complied, he saddled me with Scheffer."

"Why him?" Horvat asked.

"I wouldn't know," Ivanov replied.

Master Sergeant Ilyin sucked his teeth. "Scheffer ran errands for the commodore, sir. The kind that don't go in the logbook. Funny thing—Scheffer used to be steady. Until he started pulling reactor duty."

Horvat's fingers twitched toward his empty breast pocket—old habits died hard—before curling into a fist. That explains the tremor in Scheffer's salute. "Then you're not the traitor here," he said.

Ivanov's smile held no humor. "Not yet. But unless we find proof fast, we'll both be against the wall by dusk."

Horvat scratched his beard. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't worry; that's why God gave us rakija," Ivanov said, extending his hand to Horvat in reconciliation.

Horvat grasped Ivanov's forearm and pulled him into a hug.

"Now that we've wrapped up the telenovela, maybe we can focus on the here and now," Ilyin said, leaning against a desk.

"Yes, Master Sergeant, you're right," Horvat said. "We'll need one of the crates marked TTD and a portable launch system. In a pinch, even a robotic arm or forklift would suffice."

Diaz made a sign of cross.

"Major, what exactly do you have in mind?" Ivanov asked.

"Isn't it obvious? With one of those tectonic drills, we can make a hole straight to the center of the asteroid on which Demerec Alpha stands."

Ivanov stared for a moment. "For someone who so fiercely insists they're not a saboteur, you're suggesting something extremely unusual."

"Why not just aim the tectonic at the surface?" the master sergeant asked, preventing another argument between the two officers.

"The architecture of the star fortress," Horvat explained. "If we launch the TTD in that direction, it would breach the water reservoirs, and before the plasma shield reestablished itself, up to 80% of the water and air could escape into space. There's also the possibility of additional explosions."

Ivanov's brow furrowed, then relaxed as understanding dawned. Horvat wasn't just solving the immediate problem—he was planning for the long-term survival of the fortress.

"Alright, let's do it."

*

VI.

Horvat checked all the pockets of his officer's uniform one last time. While the others loaded the drill onto the robotic arm, he changed into gray combat armor from the armory. After what had happened to Scheffer, wearing a helmet was no longer optional. Scheffer's laser rifle hung from his shoulder, his finger ready at the trigger.

Together with Diaz, they strapped fresh first-aid kits to their belts. Diaz also gathered some other supplies. The deaths of his three comrades still weighed heavily on him. He was determined not to let anyone else die.

"Better step back; I have only read about this," Horvat told the group of three.

"At this point, there's no difference between dying here or being eaten by the Araknids," muttered Master Sergeant Ilyin, staying hidden behind the armory's blast door with the others.

Horvat began the countdown to the launch: "3, 2, 1."

The robotic arm released the drill. It dropped briefly before flames burst from its tail, driving it straight into the wall. The ensuing roar was deafening. As it spun into the reinforced concrete wall it caused tremors that destroyed everything in its path.

"Next time, we'll need to retreat further back," said Horvat. His ears were ringing, and he wasn't alone.

"What?" Ivanov shouted.

"I said, next time we'll need to retreat further back!" Horvat yelled.

The master sergeant gestured toward the newly created hole. The group began to move.

"I hope there won't be a next time," Ivanov said.

The drill had cut a meter-wide path through the walls of the star fortress, like a hot needle through butter. The group advanced through individual chambers, stepping over molten walls and maneuvering through areas where gravitational fields were disrupted, until they found Varga in one of the chambers, lying in a pool of his own blood. There was a nasty stab wound on his temple and another on his left forearm.

Horvat sprinted to his side, his heart pounding as he saw the pool of blood spreading beneath Varga.

"Corporal Diaz, go with him," Ivanov ordered the medic in the group.

Diaz nodded and approached Varga.

Ivanov and Ilyin secured the area.

The medic checked for a pulse on Varga's neck and, with Horvat's help, laid him flat. He pulled out a flashlight and handed it to Horvat, then began cleaning the wound on Varga's head. "This must've been bad."

Varga regained consciousness and tried to resist, as if someone was attacking him.

"It's going to be alright," said Horvat, looking toward Diaz.

Varga continued to struggle, powerless as he was.

The corporal signaled Horvat to shine the light on Varga's temple, then pulled out a bottle of medigel, shook it, and sprayed it on Varga's head. The turquoise substance sizzled as it seeped into the hole in his skull, spreading across the wound like a branching river through dried blood and tangled hair. He repeated the process on the stab wound on Varga's right forearm.

Varga started babbling. It sounded more like the chirping of insects than human speech.

Diaz motioned for Horvat to hand him a first-aid kit he had taken from the armory. From the kit, he took a bright red ampoule and loaded it into a medical injector. "This will perk him up a bit." He instructed the three to hold the captain firmly and injected the ampoule straight into Varga's heart.

Varga gasped deeply. In the next instant, all the muscles in his body tensed. He started convulsing. Horvat, Ilyin, and Ivanov struggled to hold him down. After nearly a minute of intense effort, the captain finally relaxed.

Diaz signaled them to let go. "The wonders of modern medicine," he said, stepping back. The other three collapsed onto the floor.

Varga screamed. It looked like he was fighting an invisible enemy. He crawled along the ground to the wall, looking around frantically.

Varga looked from Ivanov to Horvat and noticed that the major was armed.

Horvat stood up and approached Varga. "What's going on, Corporal Diaz?"

"Paranoia, aggression, headaches, memory issues, speech difficulties, probably more," the medic replied. "The captain had a hole in his temporal lobe," Diaz said. "I wish I'd had this cocktail of serum and medigel earlier. At least three soldiers would still be alive."

Varga resembled a wounded cornered beast.

"Adjutant, it's going to be fine," Horvat said, stepping closer. "You're among friends here."

Varga began to babble incoherently again. And when he realized he was babbling, he panicked, and babbled even harder.

"Calm down, Captain Varga," said Horvat, reaching into his pocket and handing Varga a datapad. "If you can't speak, write."

Varga calmed down a bit and nodded. He began tapping on the screen's keyboard:

"Saw a shadow near the reactor on my way to the central terminal."

"More pressing matters, didn't mention it."

"When you arrested, this was only way to prove innocence."

"I climbed down the ladder and headed for the reactors."

"The shadow gone, but there was the corpse of an infiltrator wearing a lab coat and a pass for employees at Nuclear Reactor 4."

"Something familiar."

"Black eyes, like on the front during the Second Araknid War."

"Heard footsteps and hid."

"There was a man; Couldn't see face because a queen arakna on his head."

Varga coughed and tried again to speak intelligibly. "It possessed him. I saw it take the pass from the dead infiltrator and climb the ladder. I followed him. I thought I knew what I was doing, but he lured me into a trap. The queen tried to jump on me, but I managed to raise my arm just in time. One fang pierced my head, and the other stopped in my arm."

"Quasipupal stage. Still doesn't have full control over the somatic nervous system," Ivanov said.

Horvat shot Ivanov a sharp look, his brows furrowing in distrust.

Varga nodded. "I don't remember exactly what happened next; the following moments are unclear, too many images in my head, if you understand. But then I fell to the ground, felt shaking, and saw the queen crawling back to Jensenberg out of the corner of my eye. The man I was following was Commodore Jensenberg!"

Horvat swore.

Ivanov sighed and helped Varga to his feet. "We can deal with this later; first, we need to get rid of the attackers."

"No!" Varga snapped. "Stopping Jensenberg is all that matters! If we don't, it won't make a difference who controls Demerec Alpha."

"And if we don't stop the infiltrators, the same thing will happen. That's probably why they're here," Ivanov said.

A message blared through the fortress's speakers. *"The Star Syndicate has taken control of Demerec Alpha. All rebels, surrender your weapons immediately."*

"Pirates!" Ivanov swore and spat.

"There's no other choice," Horvat said. "Captain Varga and I will go after Commodore Jensenberg. The rest of you, head to the surface and show the pirates they've chosen the wrong star fortress."

Ivanov approached Horvat. "Robert, this is suicide. Jensenberg won't be alone. By now, the queen has probably found a way to release the other Araknids. Who do you think has been closing the doors in our faces?"

"It doesn't matter. We have to do this."

"But you don't even know where Jensenberg is," Ivanov said.

"That's not true," Varga said. "When the queen pierced my brain, she left behind some of Jensenberg's memories. I know what she's planning."

"Time to finish this," Horvat said. "Do you have an extra laser pistol?"

Ivanov reached for his belt and handed a weapon to Horvat.

*

VII.

Horvat and Varga stopped in front of the visiwall in Horvat's favorite smoking lounge. Before it was yet-to-be decommissioned, now the lounge was destroyed. The flickering image of Argon IV cast an eerie glow across the debris-strewn floor. This was personal.

If Varga had correctly pieced together Jensenberg's fragmented memories, the reason for Deme-rec Alpha's existence lay just behind this wall.

Horvat craved a cigarette. They had dispatched two groups of Araknids on the way and narrowly evaded a larger pirate patrol. The intervals between encounters were shrinking. They had survived thanks to Varga. Due to his encounter with the queen, the Araknids froze at the sight of him, hesitating long enough for Horvat to kill them.

Now, Varga stared at the visiwall, fragments of alien memories swirling in his mind. He clutched his head, the headache worsening with every passing second. Then, it came to him—Jensenberg's voice echoing like a distant transmission: *"S, 0, 5, S 1, 1, T, 1, 9, 5, 9, R, 0, 7, A, 0, 7, H, 1, 9, 0, 7."*

The visiwall panels shifted, revealing a passageway.

Horvat made sure Varga was alright.

"She's close; I can feel her presence at the edge of my thoughts."

Horvat gave a tense nod and stepped through the passage, his laser rifle raised. Decapitated bodies of scientists lay on the floor. The ground was slippery with blood. The doors bore crimson smears, indicating the scientists had tried to escape. He stepped further, where the decapitated corpses were replaced by the bodies of shot engineers. Horvat even recognized one man who had been part of the team working on Nuclear Reactor 4. When he turned, he saw Varga holding some sort of spider-like helmet.

"This is the only way."

"Adjutant, what are you doing?"

"I can't go further with you, Major."

"Do you really need another bite to the head, Varga?"

"You don't understand, Major. I hear her—her whispers, her thoughts, her commands. This is the only way. Fight fire with fire. Here, I can resist her; if I go any further... I don't know what will happen."

Varga handed Horvat a laser pistol.

"Can you promise me? If this doesn't work..."

Horvat sighed and holstered the laser pistol. "When all of this is over, Captain ..."

"Yes, Major."

Horvat raised his rifle and advanced toward the final chamber.

Varga donned the helmet.

Instantly, he fell to his knees.

Thousands of voices echoed in his mind, chanting the queen's commands in perfect unison. A part of him wanted to surrender, to join the chorus. It was so easy to be one of the many, indistinguishable, a drone. Then he remembered all his comrades lost in the war against the Araknids: Cortez, Sokol, Vasco, Novak, Wright, ... Each name he recalled felt like a shield against the queen's commands, strengthening his resolve.

"Go, Major! I don't know how long I can hold her off!"

Horvat nodded and stepped through the final door.

Shattered glass lay on the ground, mixed with a transparent turquoise liquid. This was where they had kept the specimens for experiments. Horvat advanced. In the dimly lit, unfamiliar chamber, he wasn't willing to take any risks. *Slow and steady*. Those were the words his father had instilled in him, words that had guided him through life.

Horvat climbed the stairs, and there stood Jensenberg, with the queen on his head, surrounded by at least twenty Araknids. But something was off. The Araknids, instead of charging him, hesitated, first turning toward the commodore, then back toward the major.

Varga's plan was apparently working. The situation was too much for the young queen, struggling to control Jensenberg while commanding her swarm.

Jensenberg writhed on the ground as if suffocating, trying with every move to tear the queen from his face.

Horvat aimed his laser rifle. He exhaled slowly, steadying himself, and pulled the trigger. The queen's screech cut through the air as the shot struck the queen.

Jensenberg stopped convulsing.

The Araknids turned toward Horvat. Before he could react, they ran past him.

The major turned to see Varga stumbling toward him, blood streaming from his nose.

"It's over, Major. We've won," he called out.

Horvat helped Varga sit at the top of the stairs. The helmet was still on his head.

"Good shot," Varga remarked when he saw the dead queen.

"I was aiming for the chest," Horvat muttered, holstering his rifle. His gaze lingered on Jensenberg's unconscious form. "He's got a lot to answer for."

*

Epilogue

Horvat stood in his new temporary office, gazing at the visiwall with a cigarette of homemade tobacco in hand. Argon IV appeared as magnificent as ever. A bottle of rakija and three empty glasses sat on the desk—perks of being named interim fortress commander. He was waiting for Ivanov and Varga.

A week had passed since the "Incident at Demerec Alpha," the official term for the attempted capture of the star fortress by space pirates.

According to reports, revolutionaries from Svarog II had tried to seize the weapons at Demerec Alpha to expand their revolution. The media latched onto this narrative despite its absurdity. Pundits lambasted the Intersolar Army for its security failures in relentless 24-hour news cycles, branding skeptics as conspiracy theorists.

The truth was far more sinister. Dispatches between High Command and Commodore Jensenberg revealed their collusion with the Star Syndicate. Their plan was to sell Demerec Alpha—and its secrets—to the pirates in exchange for lucrative corporate shares. Curiously, these shares belonged to firms specializing in defense, logistics, and terraforming technologies, all poised to profit if the Araknid War reignited in new sectors of the galaxy.

Some intercepted transmissions between the pirates and unnamed intermediaries hinted at advanced logistical coordination and suspiciously precise intel—resources far beyond what typical raiders could muster.

The subsequent investigation uncovered bugs planted in the general's, Horvat's, and Ivanov's offices. Interrogations conducted by Ivanov after the battle revealed that freeing the Araknid queen had been a diversion. While security forces searched for the escaped Araknids, as ordered by Jensenberg, the pirates were to seize key points on the fortress and take control. But the plan fell apart when the infiltrator released the queen, who promptly latched onto his face and began freeing drones. Things spiraled further out of control when Horvat and Varga headed to the central terminal.

The incident ended with Araknids under Varga's control slaughtering the pirates before turning on each other in a frenzy. Once the fortress was thoroughly inspected, Varga destroyed the control helmet—an act officially reported as an accident.

Varga's recovery was fraught. He withdrew into himself, and military psychologists made no progress. The turning point came when scientists approached him. He drew a laser pistol, forcing them to back off. From that point on, the vultures in white coats left him alone. Horvat prayed that this was all Varga truly needed.

Ivanov, Varga, and Horvat were promised medals, while Commodore Jensenberg was "posthumously" promoted to vice admiral. Officially, he died a hero, leading the liberation of Demerec Alpha. The media glorified him as a martyr.

Horvat suspected the vice admiral and the surviving scientists had been taken to an undisclosed location. Last he heard, Jensenberg was in vegetative state, but Horvat had no illusions that the experiments on Araknids—or Jensenberg—would cease. With the scientists gone, the Intersolar Army would likely declare Demerec Alpha obsolete, reassign its personnel, and let the fortress decay at the tail-end of the galaxy. Perhaps they'd finally install astrolink.

Majda Arhnauer Subašič

Anger Of the Godness Ekvorna

Translated from Slovene by Orhideja Josifovski

”**D**amn you!”
A roaring scream echoed across the plain and rang out in the evening mist descending upon the lake.

For the last time, his blurred gaze swam to her, who gave birth to his children, and now she was lying motionless on the wooden platform in front of the cabin, like a girl with a tense belly from which a new member of his family was to come. Then he looked at the withered corpse of a gray-haired old man, his father, who, through his wisdom and experience, over the years, became respected husband and a fearless hunter known throughout the Great Lake.

“Damned for all eternity! You and all of the sons of your offspring and their descendants too. Everyone on the other side of the shore, all the way to the hills, the snowy mountains and even further, as far as the human foot stepped and left its footprints!”

His words were turning into a whisper and the whisper into a helpless grunt.

Revengeful passion was sparking the rage of the dying man. With a superhuman effort, he rose and stared at the phantom, disappearing in the light that had sown death a little while ago. The weakness he felt in his legs did not allow him to take a step. His palm clenched into the fist holding the spear, spread. He could only helplessly see the weapon, that had so many times defended him against beasts and rare enemies, slipping from his hand and sinking into the swampy ground. At first a slight murmur escalated to unbearable sound to finally turn into a roar. The ground began to shake strangely. He knew that with red liquid his life was draining away. He realized that he would not be able to take his revenge. At least not at that place and at that moment. But someday he would, for

sure. Who knows where, how and when? The goddess Ekvorna, the righteous guardian of the Great Lake and the people who found their shelter there, will see to it that justice is served.

The horizon narrowed into the tunnel that finally sucked him into itself.

For a moment, the fluttering of a heron disturbed the peace, then the shore turned into silence. The curse hung in the air like an ominous prophecy.

The lake had long since dried up, the roar of the Roman legions died down many centuries later, and there was not a stone left upon a stone when, who knows wherefrom, the trumpets of Attila's soldiers sounded with a roar. Over time, numerous soldiers of different armies had drifted by, intoxicated by their victories or decimated in defeats. The eye of a lonely traveller or a rare merchant would stop on the swampy plain, where the river Ljubljanica lazily flowed. More and more people were settling around the place and traffic was getting busier. The region became criss-crossed by roads and railroads, buildings became stronger and taller, and steel birds in the sky carried people to all corners of the globe. The vengeful thought of the man, whose corpse had long ago been covered by the lake mud, hovered like a curse and waited frantically to fulfil his mission.

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The text message brought a smile to his face. Just three words that uplifted his mood. Want a beer? His fingers typing the answer automatically. Yes, of course. A busy day is behind him and the invitation of a friend, a former classmate, will be just a nice ending. Interestingly, at first, they did not quite understand each other, they would look at each other with distrust, not knowing where the feeling was coming from. But over time, they became closer and it seemed to them they had known each other ever since. They were also joined by a rather unusual hobby for young people - fishing. They were both very good at it, since their childhood. They also enjoyed the camp-site life, doing great in nature.

"Hey, man, have you finally found time for more pleasant things, other than hanging in the lab?"

"Ah, you know how it is. You get in and you can't get out. You are constantly driven by obligations and deadlines when you have to give something of yourself. Usually, not everything is going as it should. You keep working, checking, repeating, you pay attention to all the details, but something is always falling apart and you are driven back to the start."

"I get it; it's the same with us. Things are moving so slowly. But it was quite interesting today. We rummaged a little bit through the "morass" and I felt that this time it might not lead to a dead end. I must say I have a good feeling."

"Still biodiversity research?"

"Yes. Look, by the way, I found an interesting piece of wood. It looks quite natural, but on the other hand it seems to be a little carved or processed in some way. It's probably just a game of nature. Quite a few things told me to put it in my pocket. I have to clean it, it's soiled with earth. "

"Show me?"

Andrej was also curious about every detail of the Ljubljana Moors. When cycling around there, and it was a lot of times, he had a feeling as if he had entered another world, much more his kind of place than his home Gorenjska village. Warm melancholy flooded his soul as he watched long-legged swamp birds with pointed beaks, listened to the blackbirds singing, smelt the characteristic moor grass in his nostrils. When he would set out early in the morning, he would also catch mystical mist playing over the ground.

"Sure. Actually, I'll give it to you. I'll find something else interesting. "

Andrej stared at the piece of wood and watched it for a while.

"If I look closer at it, its shape looks like a female figurine. Or, unconsciously, I miss Tanja so much that I can see a woman in a piece of wood."

They both laughed. Andrej's girlfriend had been abroad for several months and their relationship had already started to fade away.

One more beer, then a group of the fellows came to the pub and the evening went on as in the good old student days.

The morning brought a hangover and holes in his memory. He was driving like on autopilot. It was only when he came to the lab that he finally woke up. He felt something hard in his jeans pocket and, looking at the figurine, his memory of the last night came back. He took a closer look at the figurine. It really looked like a sort of a talisman, and given the roundness, it could even represent a female deity. It looked fragile, a little rotted, dusty. He would clean it at home in the afternoon. He is busy now. He has to dedicate himself to work, which is already lagging behind, as the end of the month, when he will have to submit the report and present the results, is quickly approaching.

He stared at the device, designed as a simple diffuser, which, at first glance, he would not associate with a real revolution in analytical chemistry. Its round shape and circular principle of operation enable improved separation and characterization of DNA from complex biological samples. The method of epitachophoresis, recently developed at one of our nearby institutes, will soon make an important contribution to a more efficient and faster diagnostics for severe diseases. The results of the tests now being carried out in several research centres in Eastern Europe have been increasingly encouraging. He felt satisfaction and pride as he himself could contribute a small piece to the mosaic of scientific progress. He prepared the samples, turned on the device, and eagerly got down to work.

He himself did not know why his enthusiasm for the goddess, as he called her, suddenly faded away. She was standing lonely on the shelf, and he hesitated to take her in his arms again. He attributed his disinterest to the strange fatigue that had gripped him the previous week. He also had a headache, especially when moving his eyes. He should take some rest, he thought to himself. Unfortunately, it will not be possible before the end of the month.

"Hey, where did you get sunshine in these cloudy days to get so sunburnt?" a colleague asked him. He looked at her absent-mindedly, as he had been sitting and looking at his measurements all day, and only towards the evening, taken a short walk in the twilight. "And your eyes are so red." she continued.

Ah, these women, they are always scrutinizing and speculating something, and drawing conclusions from it. Usually wrong. Just in case, he walked over to the mirror. But something seemed to be going wrong, the thought struck him when he saw his reflection. The redness of his slightly swollen face did not promise anything good. Not even the redness of his eyes. Could he attribute it to his feeling unwell those days? With the lumbar pain he attributed to long hours of sitting at work in recent months?

"Why don't you see your doctor before it can turn into something unpleasant," the colleague said again, and this time he took her more seriously. "You may have developed a new allergy, which is not uncommon. It might be an infection as well. Last but not least, we are also dealing with biological materials here. We often forget this fact, because we take it as a routine part of our work."

They both sunk in thought. At first a small cloud of anxiety, which he could send off with a wave of his hand, was growing now. It was increasingly filling the space, pressing him with its weight and displacing the air. She opened the window to get some fresh air. There was no relief. It seemed to him that the cloud had spread through the window, and, like a thick smoke, the damp southwest wind was blowing it to the east. It was growing above the city, the valley, over the hills, towards the Pomurje plain, somewhere in the distance.

I'm hallucinating, a panicked thought gripped him. But, Nika looked possessed too. Their gazes met and they perceived an unknown horror in each other. As if they were suddenly capable of telepathic communication. There was nothing tangible to justify their experience, though. A little bit later the trance subsided and it looked as if nothing had happened. Fresh air filled the room and the tension disappeared. All that was left was heavy fatigue. They knew their work for the day was over.

"You must see the doctor. As soon as possible," she couldn't get out of her skin. He nodded and waved at her as they left.

He did not remember how he managed to get home, even undress and fall into bed. He had called for medical help earlier, as it was becoming increasingly clear to him that he was in dire need. Suddenly, everything else became remote and insignificant. There was only his body in which a real war was raging. In his feverish bouncing, he opened his eyes and saw a figurine he had almost forgotten about. In fact, he avoided her for some unknown reason. She was standing on the shelf and he would dare say that a mighty demonic-looking woman, hidden in her, held him like a prisoner, left to her mercy and disfavour. With the last glimmers of reason, he tried to tell himself that he was trembling in front of a piece of wood, but with her watery eyes she was staring straight into his. Even if he closed his eyes, he couldn't avoid her gaze. He was afraid he would get drowned into it or sucked by it like into a pool.

"Damn you, damn you, damn you...", echoed painfully in his head.

But, where did the words come from? They sounded somehow familiar to him, as if he had heard them before?

The pool, the water, the Great Lake... his image, wrapped in animal skin, sowing death all around. Not out of hunger or other need, but out of pure desire to kill. He could hear, through his conscience, the goddess Ekvorna warning him that he had no right to kill the creatures she had created as an almighty mother. But he knew how to silence her and he was pleased when she remained speechless. From that moment on, she had been only quietly recording to be able to charge for one day.

The howling siren and approaching voices dispelled the illusion. It had been a week, two, three and a half.

"Looks like he's waking up," a voice reached his ears. He tried to move, but he couldn't. He could only hear a roaring sound. Like the waves in the stormy night that once destroyed his dwelling and swallowed him. It was then, in his last moments, that he remembered the curse invoked on him and on his lineage, who lived on the side of the lake where the sun rose. He could see the outlines through the fog. In an instant, he realized he was in different time and space. Quite powerless, hooked up to the tubes and life-supporting devices. His gaze cleared, as so did his mind.

"Andrej, welcome back!" he heard a slightly cheerful voice of a man in white. He nodded and tried to make a smile.

"Don't worry, you're in safe hands with us. You are in an infection clinic. You are young and strong, so everything will be fine. Just relax, you'll find out everything later."

He sank into sleep again. When he woke up, there were no tubes and he could no longer hear the subtle beeping of medical devices. He was even able to move and look around, which made him feel happy.

"Now is the time to tell you a little bit about what happened to you. You have overcome mouse fever, which you are probably familiar with, and you were attacked by the domestic Dobrava virus. Your condition was difficult for a few days as you developed early kidney failure. As it seems now, the disease will leave no traces. Your latest test results are excellent."

He breathed a sigh of relief at his last words, knowing what the consequences might have been.

"Do you possibly know where you could have caught the infection?"

He started searching through his memory, trying to put the pieces together into a meaningful whole. As from the textbook, he was revising everything he knew about mouse fever, hantaviruses, the most common possibilities of infection, the incubation period. He shook his head. He hadn't been much in nature recently. His home wasn't an exemplary clean one, a couple of spiders could certainly be found there, and he didn't share it with mice for sure. After a while, his mind faded away.

"Is it possible that I came in contact with rodent excrement that was on a wooden object found in nature?"

The doctor nodded thoughtfully.

"It is, of course, but I don't think it happened like that. However, it is quite possible that you were hit by bad luck. Viruses are an eternal puzzle to us. We know the principles of their behaviour, but they always surprise us. These days, a new viral disease has been reported in the Czech Republic, which we don't know much about yet. The cause is also said to be hantavirus, but it seems to be a rather unusual mutation."

His recovery was very fast and soon, he returned home. One of his first tasks was tidying up the place and with the greatest pleasure he started with the piece of wood that was still insidiously standing in the old place. With pleasure, he threw it in a bag, which he immediately carried to the waste container. As he was leaving, it seemed to him as if he had heard some evil laughter coming from somewhere. Wasn't the nightmare finally over?

He did not talk to anyone about his visions he experienced during his feverish dreams, not even to Peter, who gave him the figurine. It would sound too fantastic for anyone to take it seriously. The logical answer would be that the virus had affected his brain, which is otherwise rare in this type of the virus. He also had to admit that something had changed in their relationship. Deep down, he recognized in Peter his victim from more than three millennia ago, who, while dying, invoke a curse on him. He would once had laughed at all of this, as he considered himself a rational man who believed only in material evidence, but now his attitude towards super sensible cognitions had changed.

"Do you know that Mija and Simon, with whom you prepared samples together, also got sick? Symptoms similar to yours. Shortly after arriving from the meeting in Prague, they both complained they were not feeling well, and now they are stuck in bed. Otherwise, the results of our research were well received. They took some of the samples we used for further research... «, a colleague reported to him.

Um, samples. He had to admit that a few times before he fell ill, he did not handle them as carefully as he should have. But his thought seemed to be paranoid and he pushed it out of his mind. For now, successfully, but when he found out that both of his colleagues were suffering from an atypical form of haemorrhagic fever, his suspicion woke up again. Is it possible that a virus that is not transmitted from human to human would mutate into a form that makes it possible? He spent the night studying the professional literature on the subject, replaying the possibilities, but the morning did not bring any logical answer. An inner voice he had never perceived before, and even less acknowledged, whispered to him that nothing was impossible.

Soon he was reached by the news that similar symptoms had been observed in some of the participants of the same meeting, as well as that the laboratory workers, who had been in direct contact with the samples brought for further analysis, were also infected.

A black flag was hung on the Institute building. Less than a week later, the first death case was reported by Hungarian colleagues. Soon, the mysterious illness took away the life of a young Romanian. Reports of the victims of an unknown type of haemorrhagic fever also came from the Baltic States. It seemed to him as if a snowball had been triggered and, rolling down the slope, became a devastating avalanche.

Healthcare workers recorded an increased number of cases showing the symptoms of febrile illnesses with abdominal pain and headaches along with visual disturbances.

Within the next few days, hospitals admitted a number of patients with hypotensive shock, threatening organ failure and internal bleeding. Unusually elevated levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines, leukocytes, and C-reactive protein were observed in all of them. Finally, the media had to start reporting on the mysterious disease, as questions about it had already arisen in public. The

experts were reserved, as the sudden rise in such diseases was still a puzzle for them, and they were frantically trying to solve it.

At the same time, a similar situation was reported in almost all the countries of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. It soon became clear that this was a hitherto unknown mutation in one of the strains of the DOB hantavirus that causes haemorrhagic fever. The news expectedly caused panic reactions as the virus was reported to be transmitted through the air. Within a few days, all state borders were closed. The experience of three years before, when the world and Europe was invaded by the Cov-19 virus, was repeating. Despite all the tried and tested security measures and the experience of epidemiologists, as well as the authorities, the number of infected patients was increasing with an undiminished trend. There were more and more death cases, and most survivors faced permanent kidney damage that required lifelong dialysis. Intensive care units were full to bursting, and the shortage of trained staff was already apparent. The front pages of newspapers and magazines were filled with alarming headlines: The Exponential Rise in HMRS Infections, Eastern European Ebola, The Fatal Epidemic Kills Like the Plague... Social distancing had completely changed people's lives, the economy was going bust. The world's most famous laboratories were studying the unusual phenomenon, but the key evidence that would give the final answer, or even the solution, was missing. Numerous attempts to invent an effective vaccine had failed.

"Have mercy upon us, Ekvorna! Have mercy upon us, You who manage our lives. Isn't my debt paid off yet? Wasn't the curse cast only on my family, the inhabitants of the eastern part of the lake, and now millions are suffering all over Eastern Europe? Forgive them, I beg You!", Andrej began in fervent prayer.

The question of why the epidemic remained limited to the East European area had troubled both the professional and general public. Was the answer in the genetic characteristics and the associated higher or lower resistance to the virus mutation, named EEV-23? The D polymorphism in the ACE1 gene is often present in the population of Eastern Europe. Does this characteristic mean greater susceptibility to infection and predict its more severe course? Thus, the first pieces of the puzzle were appropriately placed. The improved version of the antiviral drug Ribavirin showed good results in clinical trials. Also, the first studies of the suitable antigen tests for vaccine development, conducted on cell cultures, proved to be encouraging.

"I think there's a ray of light at the end of the tunnel," Andrej commented poetically when his colleague Nika told him about the latest news. During his recovery, she stood by him amicably, which brought them much closer together, also in their private lives.

"Every epidemic comes to an end and so will this one. But it might bring some benefits as well. Namely, pharmaceutical science and medicine are looking for solutions with the highest possible speed, which can result in their faster progress. Also, their findings are useful in the treatment of other diseases. And, during emergencies, different institutions cooperate better with each other, which enables better results," Nika also sounded optimistic.

"Yes, but there's still something that depends on the factors unknown to us. They control our destiny in a way we don't know much about. With a common, rational approach, it is difficult to perceive the ways of God."

"You've changed, Andrej," he felt the softness in her voice. "It's like your way of thinking takes on a new dimension."

"During my illness, I was given insights that I still have to evaluate and put in the right place. There will come a time when I'll be able to tell you more, but I have to organize my thoughts first, because many things are completely new to me."

"If you want it, of course," he added somewhat shyly after a while.

He saw approval in her warm smile and her eyes. Everything will be fine, he thought before he fell asleep and for the first time in months, he felt relieved.

The curse of the Great Lake had lost its power. The goddess Ekvorna calmed down. As suddenly as it appeared, the EEV-23 virus epidemic came to an end.

A few years later, the team of Dr Andrej Novak celebrated an important victory over viral infections thanks to the development of a new approach based on genetic engineering. Andrej had the idea the same night he paid off his karmic debt.

Matjaž Marinček

Base Station

Translated from Slovene by Matjaž Marinček

He didn't like winters. They were distinctly annoying on Oglin 5. Seven suns were always in the sky. Not only were they making seven shadows - they were also completely dehydrating the air, and the heat was unbearable.

He was working in Base Station 19. There were 43 of them on the planet in total. Each had an inflatable three-cubic-kilometre warehouse into which they put the air they produced. Each one will one day, when there is enough air, be able to take in around three thousand immigrants from Earth.

He and his brother had signed a nine-year contract with the Earthlings and were about halfway through. The work was well-paid, simple and, with all protocols observed, harmless.

They went to the vicinity of the station only when it was unavoidable. Sometimes one, sometimes the other. Each time, the computer alerted them to the deficiency and the intervention needed. One time it was to replace a UV sensor on the roof of the station, another time to help a stuck wrinkle in the warehouse.

They both hated putting on the spacesuit. Although they were custom-made - each had two spares - crawling into them was a real medieval torture. And not because of the cut. The Earthlings had made them to their exact measurements, but they hadn't considered the flexibility of the tail. Only in one position did it not hurt when they twisted and squeezed their tails into the dress. They have urged three times, they have been promised three times that Earthlings will send improved ones, but still nothing.

Through the windows they saw a vessel land. No landing was announced. The three Earthlings got off and immediately headed for the main entrance. After completing all the protocols, they were accepted inside.

"Inspection!" hissed the older, bearded man, showed his letter of credit, crossed his hands on his back, slightly leaned forward and hurried towards the station's interior. The two younger ones tried to keep up.

The brothers looked at each other.

"There's nothing ahead. Just living quarters for future settlers," the first one thought aloud.

"I guess they went to count the blankets," said the second, licking his eye with his tongue. That was his tic: every time a joke was made, he licked his eye.

"How can you joke," shook his head the elder. "If they came unannounced, and three of them, it must be something very serious!"

The computer beeped and the screen began to flicker nervously. STEP 9 STORM APPROACHING was written in large, outlined and underlined letters. They knew this was possible in winter, but they hadn't experienced it yet.

"Shall we let them know?"

"Let's get all the protocols in place first."

Within three minutes they had completed the prescribed protocols and then notified the inspectors through the intercom.

First, they saw the bearded man, making his way towards them at a 45-degree angle and with his hands on his back, while the two younger ones practiced a fast pattering behind. The screen was just starting to have a nervous breakdown.

"How long have you two known about this?" the bearded man wanted to thunder, but all that came out was a pathetic croak.

The first one switched on the timeline and pointed his hand towards the screen. Outside, all seven suns seemed to be bouncing and rolling around.

"What were you doing three minutes before you informed us?" the bearded man was still shaking off his grumpiness.

"Initiated all protocols to protect the interior and exterior of the base station!" the first one said in military fashion, slamming his tail into the ground. That was his tic: at the end of the report, tail to the ground.

The vessel in which the inspectors whizzed in, slammed to the window and was whirled away to an unknown destination. The bearded man slumped in distress. "What does the computer say, how long is this going to last?" All his grumpiness faded; the question sounded conditionally friendly.

The screen was hysterically grimacing. It was only when the first one flicked it with his tail that it wrote that the peak was still a degree and a half away and that the duration was completely unpredictable because it had no record of the history of level nine storms in its database.

"We'll obviously be together for a while," the bearded man melted the authority with an attempted smile. Outside, it rumbled and drummed and howled and screamed. The first one ordered soothing music to the computer, and it chose Max Bruch's Violin Concerto No 1 in G minor. Perverted. But at least it out-sounded the stomping of the frenzied horde.

The two younger inspectors began to chat with the brothers, and the bearded man, like a pile of misfortune, with his head between his hands and his elbows on his knees, emptily goggled the floor. The violin went into a crescendo with the orchestra.

The floor was lifted by almost half a metre. The brothers caught balance on their tails, the Earthlings crashed to the ground. The bearded man, distorted with terror, screamed that he didn't want to die in this god-forsaken place.

Bruch rose into a Finale. The *Allegro energico* was just the right background for the shaking ground. Everyone grabbed on to whatever was at hand. The Earthlings looked as if they had a layer of fog on their faces. The brothers were flapping their tails, trying to catch their balance.

It was a coincidence, of course, but it worked like a computer's bad prank: when the Concerto was over after twenty-five minutes, nothing more could be heard. They scrambled to their feet and rushed towards the windows. The storm must have moved somewhere else or evaporated.

"Can you please scan the area for our vessel?" the bearded man noticeably faked friendliness. First brother ran the sensor analysis program, which showed that there was no vessel within the sensor range.

"Don't you have something of your own?" the bearded man continued to fake friendliness with fingers in his hair, even though he knew that no base station on the planet had a vessel of its own. "How are we going to get out of here?" he turned to his two companions, who have put him on ignore.

"Please call Earth command," he pleaded the brothers.

"According to protocol, we can only do this if our lives are in danger."

"But we're in danger - the three of us - we can't leave here!"

"It's not life-threatening: there's food, there's air, there's a roof over our heads," the older brother argued.

"But surely you don't expect us to eat your food!" the bearded man's arrogance returned. The two younger inspectors smirked at the thought of this possibility.

A message from Base Station 37 appeared on the screen: "A vessel is stranded within shooting distance. Anyone missing it, please report."

"Write to them to bring it here," the bearded man demanded. The reply was quick: "As you know, we are not allowed to leave the base station according to protocol. You will have to come and collect it yourself."

"How far is it to the Base Station 37?" the bearded man, with his hands on his hips, curved in front of the brothers.

The computer calculated that it would take them five days to get there, because they would have to drag a sufficient supply of air behind them.

"Agrgh!" the bearded man went ballistic, realising that he had no choice but to hit the road.

When the brothers finally got rid of them, they took half a day off, then started to repair what the storm had damaged or destroyed. After a good week of work, they took the time off again, this time for a whole day. The computer cheered them up by announcing that summer would start in just eleven days.

On Oglin 5 there was no spring and autumn, only winter and summer. And the transition was like the flick of a switch: the seven suns of winter disappeared, and five moons appeared in the sky. No more heat and dry air. Even without a spacesuit, you could be outside for about half an hour.

They opened a bottle and toasted to it.

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From Intergalactic Tales, 2023

Miha Mazzini

Day of the Living Dead

Translated from Slovene by Kristina Reardon

The day she spent with the corpse was the most awful day of her life. She noticed that her co-worker on the right didn't show up for work, and during her lunch break another of her co-workers told her that he'd died. She remembered the slightly musty smell that had sometimes wafted up from behind the partition, and had she thought that morning that maybe he'd been smoking. Every day, at exactly 11, she heard him open the lid of a plastic container, and within fifteen minutes a spoon began to rub against its corners. This was followed by a short slurp, and the container was snapped shut. At 11:30, she could hear his typing again.

His lunch noises always stimulated her stomach juices, and so she didn't even realize why she wasn't hungry today, even as her colleagues left for break.

She caught herself listening to the silence on the other side of the partition, and she asked herself if he'd had a family—was anyone mourning for him? She quickly became absorbed in filling out her form with a giant red heading and a lively corporate logo, followed by an extensive body and brief lower part with fine print.

On the third morning, he sat in his cubicle and typed. He nodded in greeting to her, as always, and she felt relieved because her other colleague had been mistaken. He must have fallen ill, probably seriously, since he appeared pale as wax. The heavy odor of flowers and moisture surrounded her and rushed in her nose until she became accustomed to it.

She almost missed lunch again, as her co-worker did not eat, and his typing continued uninterrupted. She mentioned that he had returned to the colleague who had proclaimed him dead, but the colleague rebuffed the idea with laughter, and their other co-workers followed suit.

She became silent and remembered that at home she had access to employee records and that she could even look at the medical notes that he had turned in.

Before she began the next day's forms, she searched the database and looked for one with a feeling of guilt.

DECEASED, it said. It was followed by a date from the beginning of the week.

Frightened, she gasped and became aware of the strange smell wafting under her nose.

The typing continued steadily.

She stood up and stretched, which she hardly ever did. With her left hand, she leaned against the wall and looked through the fenced honeycombs of the partition that extended over to her corner.

She quickly looked to the right. With his head bowed, he was filling out a form, quite similar to her own.

Had she really caught sight of a lump of soil amidst a swath of thin gray hair, which rested on his skull as if drawn with a thin pencil?

She continued with her work, distracted, having to read each form several times over, wondering why she had entered data into the wrong field entirely.

It could not have happened any other way: on the third day, he rose from the grave and come back to work.

"Oh my God!" she sighed and thought of her grandmother and the way she'd explained the basics of the rewards of the afterlife. If the good went to heaven and the bad went to hell, did the non-descript have to continue on with the work that they did when they were still alive?

Why did they conceal something so basic from her?

She felt like she was beginning to choke and had to get up. At the other end of the hall entirely, the leader of the clique raised her head from her lunch and looked at her with raised brows, as if she were her boss.

She sat down heavily. How many were there out there like her co-worker? Coming out of their graves, regularly registering their arrival, going about their work (which no one ever notices), swiping their attendance cards through the timeclock by the exit, and returning to the cemetery.

A long time ago, back in her first year of work, she came to understand the only rule that insured one's existence within the corporation, the rule that each employee should learn as soon as possible: how to become invisible. How to do an average job. How to not stand out. To realize that the only evaluator is the punch clock.

For the first time she realized that the living dead were the ideal workers. It was not really strange, after all, that so many young people were unemployed.

At lunch she had no appetite, and not only because her co-worker had not eaten. For the first time, the cafeteria seemed strangely empty for such a large corporation.

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The day she spent with the corpse was the most awful day of her life. She couldn't concentrate on her work; she incessantly asked herself, with vigilance, why she had to enter the same data in the header and the body of the document, here even in two places, when the corporation already had it anyways. Why use that form at all, that form to which she cut and pasted information from yet other forms, when the machine could do it faster and better? Where did the new forms keep coming from, and where did the ones that she filled out go? It was as if the forms were glued to a hamster wheel, a wheel on which she was constantly running, her feet typing with each step. And it was as if, at the first step forward, the fresh ink fell off the pages like dandruff, the sheets of paper coming back white and fresh with each rotation.

Since she was not absorbed in thought, she could not forget the passage of time, and the numbers in the corner of the screen turning like they were stuck in molasses. She could feel every bone in her body and the tremor of every muscle, so much so that her sweat glands opened and cried over their own destiny.

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The day she spent with the corpse was the most awful day of her life, but by the end of the week she had gotten used to it. From then on, until her own death—and even beyond that—she was no longer bothered.

Eternity

Translated from Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

After a horrendous childhood, he grew up into a sadistic criminal. He believed he would burn in Hell for his acts but the inevitability of punishment spurred his cruelty. This was why, after death, he gazed in shock upon the beautiful landscape opening before him. 'This is what I've been allotted for eternity?' he thought gleefully. In the distance were two figures, coming to get him. Even before making them out, he recognised his own mother and father and covered his small body with his hands in terror.

Primož Jenko

Universal Remover

Translated from Slovene by Martin Vavpotič

We've intercepted new information from the Otherwhere. We have not decoded them yet but they have caused unrest in the valley that has been called the Pale Breeze for generations.

The Otherwhere does not communicate with us, even though we have been sending signals in all directions since forever in the hope of being answered. It's primitive out there, unimaginably far from our detection.

There are regions that our essences will never touch, or experience, or merge in the warmth and surrender to the peace of non-existence when we expire.

We are the Simple Ones. We creep. We slide. We subsist.

We are the only ones who communicate.

Long before life began, long before the first primitive signals were intercepted, our ancestors had existed in the Otherwhere. Our origins go back into the bosom of Timeflow. Unendingly, we've adopted to the circumstances of furrowed valleys, jagged rocks, to the paleness and the dimness. We've consumed the generosity of the Pale Breeze - the algae foliage, the lipids, the pure basins of transparent liquids, the softness and lightness of our atmosphere.

We've been millions. The dynasties to the north, high up, touching the pale edges of our ranges, from where signals swept towards the Otherwhere, demanding reply. Dynasties to the east, west and south, there at the undulating basins of liquids. They did not communicate, they were our protection, our warriors against the incursions of the Floating Ones.

Two strings of existence we carry inside us, defining us since the beginning: to seek answers in the Otherwhere, and to fight against the Floating Ones.

So the Timeflow languished before the final age of the Cataclysm.

Few of us Simple Ones, entrusted with sending the signals, remain who remember and bear the knowledge from one generation to another. Knowledge of an age when drops of sinister darkness had spread across the sky, not sweet as rainwater but sour and devastating. They'd filled the jagged valley, ate away the algae foliage, pushed countless colonies of our ancestors into nonexistence. Only few of us remained, hidden in crags, deep underneath the surface. The age of prosperity was replaced by the Timeflow of decay and nonexistence.

We, who could survive and remain a minority in our valley, are one of them.

We are the Rational Ones.

Our inner processes were disturbed by the lower-evolved being of the Simple Ones. It does not communicate with us but it does touch our essence with its appendages, summoning us to feed. It is not our sentinel. We do not have many of those who defend us against the floating parasites, but it would still sacrifice its essence for us promptly.

It's been long since we moved from this place, not far anyway. We conserve our inner supplies, hence our life processes are slowed. Attempting to make contact and transferring information into the remoteness of Otherwhere claims a vast amount of intelligence and energy.

We are running low on nourishment.

Our servants consume once in a cycle of five units, we consume once in a cycle of one unit. Few have survived this cruelty, yet, knowing the fall of the dynasties was not caused by the Rational Ones, they tolerate their non-existence for the benefit of the colonies.

Our collapse is caused by activity in the Otherwhere, but one day that will change.

We swiftly consumed the nourishing mixture.

It has moved away. It oozed away. The appendages on its body dangle as if they did not belong to it. It has given us no information. Its offspring had expired not long ago. It will not be able to have more as it lacks its inner storage of energy. It detected we could not help it, despite all the generosity it has displayed for a dynasty and a half.

We had to communicate.

We slowed down our life processes, pulled our appendages inward, which limited our oxygen absorption. Obsolete information from Otherwhere, populating our memory plasma, crisscrossed our essence.

"oat meal stain... mould... floor board..."

We jabbed with our longest appendage, burned at the thickened point, all the way to the soft core in order to break the protective layer of our abode and ended up in the toxicity of the atmosphere.

That is our only appendage that could transmit into the Network.

Pain.

Hurts. Stabs. Burns. It eats away the appendage and it eats away at us, this destruction in the valley - but we must. For the welfare of the colonies, for our existence.

The Network stands by.

"Who stores the signals? What are they telling us?" we asked into the subspace Network.

Hundreds of millions of billions of Rational Ones, similar to us, responded simultaneously from unimaginably distant colonies, from environments such as we in the Pale Breeze valley can only plot according to signals. Yet their reply came as a single voice. No one can decode this symbiosis. We, the Rational Ones from an unknown valley, are getting answers from nearer and distant populations.

"A new age of Cataclysm approaches. South quadrant. We're sending time-space coordinates. Darkness was spotted by colonies of the Altered Floating Ones."

The Rational Ones have managed to inject their non-aggressive essence into a few of our enemies, allowed them to multiply and used them in their plans.

The Pale Breeze valley will be hit, along with all the known nearer colonies.

"Floating Ones?" we asked. The shorter appendages, used for communicating with the remaining Sentinels, became agitated.

"The threat comes from the Otherwhere."

The Network of detection had linked us since the beginning of Timeflow, giving us a unique, constantly expanding ability of communication among our peers. Only the Otherwhere has remained mute to our calls and has, save the Cataclysms, send us only unintangible information.

"Acid rain? Tumbling rocks? Flood? Turbulent storms? What? Answer us, we demand it."

Metabolism within us continued. We require enormous amounts of energy to communicate. This is why we, the rare remaining Rational Ones in the Pale Breeze valley, have renounced our offspring.

All for the benefit of the colonies.

Despite it all, we will not last much longer, for our non-existence approaches.

"Unknown to us. The Altered Floating Ones are primitive. They are parasites. They do not detect well."

"What do they transmit from the high mountains? Give us Sentinels for protection, we will watch over the incoming information."

"The entire Network is awake."

"Where? How high up are they?" we asked.

There was no reply for a long portion of Timeflow, so we used our burned appendage to check the toxicity of the atmosphere inside the slime-protected abode beneath the wrinkled surface where we resided. This we did consistently for the welfare of the colonies. It will take generation before the valley is habitable again and many dynasties will remind their offspring of the new span of existence beneath the surface.

"On the edge of Otherwhere. But they do not detect it. The darkness is too immense. It appeared 115 units ago."

"The entire southern quadrant?" we asked.

Communication became weaker as if the signals of individual Rational Ones were winking out.

"As you were instructed. Conserve nourishment. Hide. The darkness approaches. We have communicated." These were the remaining signals after which as was usually done, the symbiosis of others cut off communication with us, one of the few Rational Ones in the Pale Breeze valley. In contrast, if we decided to break the connection, we would do it only once. The next time the sub-space detection would not respond to our calls, no matter how urgent.

This is the source of our strength.

We pulled the burned appendage inside.

Hurts. Stabs. Burns.

The Sentinels responded. Through the last gate of the tunnel that leads from our abode to thousands of now abandoned dwellings, two of them came crawling. They could not get to us, the opening was too narrow.

We are safe.

They are cold. Oval, elongated, with long, powerful appendages, which fared much better in the Otherwhere and can put a whole swarm of the Floating Ones into non-existence. The Sentinels are protected by a double layer and can survive the toxicity of the atmosphere much longer. They can turn the threatening mixture into oxygen but there are too few of them for this to help us.

"Non-existence. Floating Ones. Where to?" they communicated with their cold, sloppy appendages, touching ours.

"Not Floating Ones. Otherwhere sends the darkness," we responded with slow, careful moves of our appendages.

It has happened before that the Sentinels destroyed a Rational One for misinterpreting its monologue.

"Non-existence. Floating Ones. Where to?" they repeated in unison, their slimy appendages sliding across our essence.

With great effort, we oozed out of the range of their communicators.

They are hungry. This is bad.

"We were communicating. Leave us now," we told them.

Once more, memory plasma began to churn inputted information from the Otherwhere, deciphered by our ancestors, while the Sentinels made their distance.

"...universal remover... spraying... set... beware... cold... moisture... spoiled food... reproduction."

Our inner energy stores have dwindled. Processing information takes enormous amounts of it, but prosperity has long since passed from our valley. We consumed the last crumbs of the nourishing mucus and made ready to rest.

As before, the Timeflow claimed its own. Many servants have oozed out in the open despite the summons of the Rational Ones and soon entered necrosis of nonexistence in the toxicity of the atmosphere. Even the one that served us for a dynasty and a half tried to find nourishment so that it could produce offspring despite the misery. It withered right under our abode, crawling with the infected algae mixture.

An age of darkness covered the Pale Breeze valley, licked at the jagged rocks of our valleys but it could not get to us. When will the toxic drops begin to descend?

We, the Rational Ones, we know that dynasties are important, only then comes the individual. We are strong together, the individual is fated for nonexistence.

"...universal remover... cloth..." These are the audio signals from Otherwhere that we detect, however distorted and convoluted they are. For dynasties, the Network has struggled to slow down and decipher the signals but we didn't know how to use them or to return them.

Juvenile communication - audio communication - that's how we who have existed since long ago called it.

The appendage, meant for communication among our peers, had stirred. The Network is hailing us again.

"Will begin with signal transmission," it sent from the subspace communication.

We retracted all other appendages, slowed down our metabolic processes and opened our inner energy stores.

Pain.

Hurts. Stabs. Burns.

But we are not alone. We are strong, even in pain, even in darkness. The other uncounted colonies are consuming the prosperity of existence, far away from us and our detection. Knowing that the Cataclysm can cover any of the colonies... we consider ourselves no less threatened - Otherwhere is unpredictable.

Any moment now.

"You, in the Otherwhere. Listen to our subspace communication. We are peaceful. We are not the Floating Ones. We pose no threat. Allow us to exist. We've been here since forever and will be here when you are no more."

The Network went quiet for a moment so that signals could race through the putrid atmosphere of our surroundings, slowly travelling towards the edges and onward into Otherwhere.

Suddenly, the shorter appendages detected something. The Network waited to repeat the transmission with new signals. We stirred.

Something touched us from behind, through the narrow opening of the abode.

"Where?" we touched the sentinel's appendage.

"Everywhere," it touched and slid back in the tunnel.

"We do not have access to the Network. Transmission underway," we communicated with the Rational One in the confluence of the clear fluids, the one that has not been in contact for a long time.

"We are old. Save yourselves, young ones. Input the information of a new Cataclysm. Hide even deeper," it had advised us.

We did not touch it off and we never will, for it is too far for us.

In that moment, the atmosphere ventilated, the appendage jerked in intolerable, throbbing pain and retreated to our torso while the rocky region flooded with toxic fluid.

Simultaneously, the shorter appendages detected a far more merciless threat, slithering out of the tunnels.

A Floating One. The Sentinel had warned us.

When they attack, they descend from the atmosphere in thousands. They are small and frail, but merciless and their strength is in numbers as a swarm of them surrounds each of the Sentinels. They inject their essence into anything that exists, then they push it to the edge and then, after much suffering, into non-existence. The Floating Ones have never spared the Simple Ones. As spoken by our long ago inputted information, we have been their main source of food since forever.

We must get away. We will not be a meal to anyone.

How does this go again?

Movement. Slithering. We used the appendage. We've become too cumbersome.

Dozens of Floating Ones crawled towards us through the central tunnel. They have a very special remote touch-pattern. The ground trembles as they move through our habitat in uncountable numbers.

"Use the last remaining supplies of inner energy," someone from the Network advised us. It had to have been close for we used a system of tunnels to communicate with it.

Transmission is more important. We must send new information into Otherwhere. We need this energy for the welfare of the colonies, not for ourselves. The solitary colony is doomed.

"You are doomed either way," the unknown signal came.

Appendages went numb in the tension of Timeflow.

Despite it all, we pulled them in. We haven't had offspring in a long time, almost as long as we haven't practiced movement.

It's simple. All we need is energy, the rest is done by our structure.

First, the genetic material divided and separated. Then, our essence split in two completely equal ones. Then they split into two new ones. And again. And again, until one-thousand two hundred and eighty offspring's memory plasma was imbued with genetically memorized information of our existence in the Timeflow since the beginning, the memory of everything far and wide, of us, of the cataclysms and dangers of Otherwhere. They immediately slid through the secret tunnels and began to communicate with us, became part of us and we became part of them.

The Network stood by for us to join. We will not last long, the valley was immersed in toxicity when we jabbed with our appendage.

Unbearable. We are decaying.

"I will transmit. I've changed tactics," it instructed.

Tactics?

"You in the Otherwhere, hear us! We are peaceful. Leave the valley of the Pale Breeze alone. Leave the world you call a Spot of oatmeal in the crack of floor board. Destroy the Floating Ones, they are the ones who wish to harm you."

Signals drifted towards the edges and beyond. No one knows how long they will travel to Otherwhere and whether those who call themselves 'humans' will intercept them.

"Hear us, you in the Otherwhere! You call us bacteria. You are destroying us. With tumbling stones. Toxic floods. But we communicate."

The Floating Ones had reached our abode.

That's when clumsy appendages of our loyal Sentinels thrust from their hidden tunnel and deftly caught their meal. Despite all, they will not last for long, the Floating Ones are too many. They are driven here by toxicity of the atmosphere, the battle for existence and sustenance.

We can do one more entry into the Network.

"The Simple Ones are everywhere. We have taken a new quadrant - Corner of the Living Room under the TV, Bedroom, Bathroom, Kitchen, Hallway, Children's Room, Garage, Attic, Ceiling, Floor, Walls in coordinates Oak Street 19, all of it. We communicate with distant colonies of other worlds, even with Toilet in Bus Station, preparing the final offensive. Our future dynasties will input to their offspring about the Cataclysm in the Otherwhere, no longer with us. Of the mutated bacteria in the digestive systems of humans that will eat them up from the inside.

Right during the last signals, one of us, whose genetics binds it to be the Rational Ones in coordinates Oak Street 19, got stung by a Floating One and injected with venom, instantly sending it to the edge of non-existence. There are many of us from the same generation that share the same genetic material, but every time one of our essence dies, we are closer of exacting revenge against the Otherwhere.

Every attack makes us stronger and less peaceful, for a solitary colony is doomed.



Deborah Walker (England)

Pure and Without Savour

We sing the Songs of Salt.
Salt is precious and complex. Sodium chloride is not. Sodium chloride is a chemical, easily manufactured in a vacuum process. Pure and clean, sodium chloride lacks flavour.

Salt is flavoured with magnesium, calcium, halides, and sulphates. Salt also has the savour of the extremely rare elements the thieves crave. Salt teems with life, with halophile, salt loving, small life.

Salt is born in the oceans. Salt is in our soil, in rain, in the water bubbling from springs. Salt is everywhere. Salt is numinous.

In the begging fields of The Salt Temple, we sing the Songs of Salt.

The Temple salt formed a million seasons ago, the evaporite of an ancient sea. Over countless generations we carved the salt, room and pillar into a temple, where we once worshipped. Now, we beg in the Temple fields, because of the thieves.

We sing until a spinner approaches, sending the salt rain into squalls, then we are silent.

Scarlet of the 7565th of That Name, who is new to the fields, crawls a little closer. Scarlet's become attached to me. I don't mind. She's nervous, colour washes through her translucent mantle.

The spinner lands. The thick, metal tentacle of the walkway unfolds.

"I think they will ask me to sing. I really think they will."

"Be calm, Scarlet. They won't choose yet. They'll visit the Temple first."

"Yes. Yes, of course," she says, colour still washing through her mantle, chromatophores changing: umber to gold, gold to red.

The thieves emerge. It's an adult male, and a female youngling, a daughter. The daughter's agitated, skittering to and fro on her two legs. They speak in their usual, enormously loud voices. They are a species with poor hearing. I consider the Songs of Salt, deep in my mind.

The thief and his daughter walk along the line of beggars. I swivel one eye lens towards them, considering the beggars with the attention of my third mind. I've begged for thirty seasons, and still the sight of the thieves astonishes me. Scarlet of course, has all three lenses, all three minds, attached to the thieves.

They are so different from us. Their heads are tiny and they only have one. They have only one brain, which may explain their focus. Only four limbs, without webbing. Only one heart. The blood is salt, but weak salt.

The atmosphere would cause their proteins to aggregate, their flesh to desiccate, as it lacks osmoprotectants or a mechanism for the influx of potassium into their cells. So they wear an artificial mantle, breathe through an artificial beak. They are off-world born and strange. This environment should kill them, but they are a technological people, able to overcome their weaknesses and swim in alien waters.

But to consider their biology is to ignore their most profound differences. They are different because they compete. Sexual dimorphism has resulted in a need for them to compete. They take what they want.

We do not compete. Our younglings are bred in the ocean mingling of our genetic material. Then one who wishes to be a mother will select a larva to mouth breed. We are all.

"Look!" says the daughter, pointing towards me with her divided tentacle. "She's so cute."

I am not cute.

"So adorable."

I am not adorable.

"Thank you for bringing me here, Father. I think I'll learn *much* more here than I would have done at my lessons."

I hope so, thief daughter, as I have something I long to teach you.

The daughter swivels her odd, articulated body and bends towards me. She shouts "Hello" at me.

"Can't they speak, Father?"

"They can speak. But they're shy. And their voices are very quiet. We'd need amplifiers to hear them."

"Except when they sing?"

"That's right." The father nods his one head. "Except when they sing."

"Can we make them sing, now?"

"We need the salt first," says Father.

"That's right. From the Salt Temple. Let's go. Let's go. Quickly, Father." The daughter pulls her father's tentacle. Within a few moments, their divided limbs have them standing at Temple Gate.

"There's no guard here, Father. If they like salt so much, why don't they go into the temple and get it for themselves?"

"Remember that we talked about this? They are a very simple people. Once their Elder decreed that they should obey us, they did. With total obedience. It's incredible, really. What I might achieve with a regiment of soldiers with perfect obedience. But," says Father, tapping his only head, "they have no independence of thought. That's why they never progressed beyond the Stone Age."

Indeed not true. Our thinkers considered the possibility of metal, many thousands of seasons ago. Once they'd extrapolated the consequences, the Elder chose not to swim along the path of what the thieves would call progress. That decision has been confirmed by every subsequent Elder.

"So we told them not to go in here, and they didn't. And now they beg outside? That seems sad, Father."

"This salt in this building represents a substantial concentration of rare elements. We haven't mined it yet, out of respect for the natives' beliefs. But we may have to, if the conflict with the Eaters doesn't improve."

"We need to destroy all the Eaters," says Daughter, nodding her one head. "Hey look, there's another one, crawling down the cliff face."

All lenses except mine swivel to the cliff. I turned my three minds to the task of selecting the perfect song for the daughter.

"Shall we wait for it, Father?"

"It's too slow. Let's go inside the temple."

"It must be a new beggar," says Scarlet. Only beggars and thieves come here.

"This is an extraordinary day," I tell her. "We go for weeks without company, and within the space of one degree three strangers visit the begging fields."

"A new beggar," says Scarlett. Her thoughts are swimming. Another beggar will mean less alms, as we always divide our share.

But a new beggar will mean new songs. And that would be good. It can be lonely listening to the same few dozen songs.

"I wonder what shoal she's from," says Scarlet.

I cast my second lens at the cliff. "It is my youngling," I say. "She's coming to visit me. Not to beg."

"Your youngling?" Scarlet's gills flutter. I know what she is thinking. If I have a youngling, why am I begging?

Scarlet came to the begging fields when the thieves discovered a seam of rare element beneath her family home and evicted her shoal from the land. Her youngling decided to cross the Great Sea in the north to look for a new home.

"She begged me to go with her," Scarlet told me. "But I refused. I didn't want to be a burden."

The thieves take our land. In return they give us new things. Before the thieves, no mother could ever have been a burden to her youngling. Scarlet's youngling has not sent the youngling's duty. So Scarlet assumes that she must be impoverished.

There are two other possibilities: that she her youngling has died in the dangerous crossing, or that she has forgotten her mother. Scarlet did not mention these possibilities, and neither did I. Although, no doubt, Scarlet sings of them deep in her mind, in that dark space where the three minds join at the stem.

"You must be so happy that your youngling is visiting you," says Scarlet.

I do not like my youngling to come here. She does not like to see me begging. "Yes. I'm happy," I tell Scarlet. It's the simplest thing to say.

I could tell Scarlet that my youngling always sends her duty, even though I do not need it. I could tell Scarlet that the thieves allowed me to keep my ancestral farm. I could tell her that my salt ponds number in their thousands, and although many have been drained, I farm a hundred active ponds. I go home to a patchwork of silver light on saline, as the Star condenses the brine to its essence. I go home to the colour dazzle of the archaeobacterial bloom, to myriad great strings of salt grass strung from briquetage pond to pond.

I could tell Scarlet that I beg not out of necessity, but out of choice. But I say nothing. She'll learn my story when she's ready to hear it. We may be all beggars, but the tides that brought us here are as diverse as the ocean.

I watch my youngling crawl down the cliffs. I think that Scarlet senses that I'm anxious, for she's uncharacteristically quiet.

As my youngling approaches, the thieves leave the Salt Temple. It is a day indeed of coincidence and parallel.

"The temple is so beautiful," says Daughter. "The carvings are wonderful."

"Yes. It's very pretty."

The daughter is right. The Salt Temple is very beautiful. I remember. Over a millennium of seasons, our craftspeople have carved our stories into the salt. The Salt Temple tells the beginning of the world and the end. There are no carvings of the thieves. And this I chose to believe means that they are not the end.

Scarlet edges even closer to me. Although I am only a part time beggar, I am the eldest here. I have begged for many seasons, I have things to teach, although my youngling does not think so.

"You can chose one," says Father.

The daughter dashes back and forth. "But will they sing, Father?"

"Here," he says, holding out a disc of salt. "They'll sing when you give them this."

My youngling approaches the thieves. "Sir," she says. She wears an artificial beak to amplify her voice. "I am Serrin." She uses her thief name. "I have the privilege of belonging to your household."

"They can talk after all," says Daughter, clapping her divided tentacles.

"I told you they could," says Father. "We have made some progress civilizing this species. The old ones have not been able to adapt, but we have taken their best and their brightest and raised them in our ways." Father turns to address my youngling. "Serrin, eh? You have been selected to visit the home world, haven't you?"

"That has been my honour," says my youngling.

Father nods. "What is your business here?"

"Like you sir, I came to see the beggars."

"Very good. My daughter is in the process of choosing one."

The daughter skips along the line of beggars before stopping in front of me. "This one," she shouts.

"Very good," says Father. He bends to observe me. "You've chosen very well. I believe this is Bright Arms."

Bright Arms is not my name.

"Bright Arms is famous," says Father. "The best of all the beggar singers. I hadn't realised she begged in this field."

I feel a pang as my youngling doesn't acknowledge me. She disapproves of my begging. Although she's full grown, and has not made the argument in some seasons. I see her embarrassment in the slight flutter of her gills. I know the arguments. Our relationship is underscored by the memories of these arguments.

She would say: "It is undignified to beg."

I would say: "It's a way of letting them hear our song."

She would say: "Beggings diminishes you. You don't need to do it."

I would say: "It's the only way they will hear me."

She would say: "When I am adult, I'll find another way to take our rights."

And this was why my youngling had chosen to become part of this thief's household. I mouth bred her for many seasons, and I still do not understand her. Although I fear, in the dark stem, what she wants to do. She wants conflict. I do not understand the thieves, I do not understand my youngling.

But what I do understand is the Song of the Salt.

The other beggars grow still as I extend my tentacles, stretching the webbing tight. In a swift movement, I invert and lower my tentacles to the ground so that the webbing forms a mantle over my lower body, exposing the fleshy spines of my inner web, exposing my mouth.

I have chosen the song. It swims within my three minds.

I concentrate until my blood surges, bringing the rare elements to my mouth spines. The rare elements crystalize on exposure to the atmosphere, growing hard until my mouth is tipped with bright hard gems. I sing, pushing air through my mouth valves, setting the crystals resonating into the complex Song of Salt. I sing an ancient song. It tells of swimming in the Template Salt, when the salt flowed as the ocean.

I sing, sing for salt, sing for what is mine, and is now gifted to me. I beg for what is my birth right.

I do this for the memory of those gone, those who are lost to the thieves. I sing in memory of three of my younglings.

I sing the Song of Salt in the hope that it will be understood by the thief's daughter and by my own youngling. I sing until the song dies.

"It was astonishing," says Daughter. Through her artificial beak, I see tears of salt.

I return my tentacles to the upwards position. I am content. I am astonishing, not just a primitive. I am astonishing, and if she grows and becomes important in their conflicted milieu, perhaps she will remember.

We watch the thieves return to their spinner.

My youngling turns to me. "I'm sorry that you had to find out that I'm going off world in this way," she says. "That's what I was coming here to tell you."

I look at the disc of salt. It is fine and heavy and complex. I resist the urge to rub it over my skin. I will make do with the soulless sodium chloride. I will return my share of alms to the Temple. "Did you hear the song?" I ask my youngling.

"I did," she says. "It was beautiful, but it was not mine. But I heard it, and so did the thief's daughter."

That must be enough. My youngling, who will soon cross an ocean of space, departs. We beggars wait until the thieves' spinner departs and then we resume our Songs of Salt.

Eric Johansson (Croatia)

My Kingdom Underneath

Translated from Croatian by Filip Hanžek

(This story was partially inspired by Alice Cooper's song *Under The Bed* and the artwork *The Nightmare* by Johann Heinrich Füssli.)

They're here. Tonight, they've emerged again from DOWN THERE. From that hellish black pit beneath me, where they live, hiss, and crawl. I feel their foul breath on my face. Their inarticulate shrieks pierce my eardrums until my ears bleed. I'm choking, an indescribable, dull pain tears through my chest, as if something heavy lies on top of me, crushing my lungs. Something my visual receptors can't detect, but my tactile senses certainly can! I feel the bites of their long fangs and the stabs of their sharp claws, slowly sinking into my flesh, flaying my skin.

And then that sinister, monstrous laughter! An uncontrollable dread seizes me. They grin and cackle with power over me, reveling in my unbearable suffering. My entire body reflexively begins trembling, drenched in sweat, fear, and blood. I realize they've paralyzed me. With great effort, I try to open my mouth, but when I finally succeed, no words escape my throat. Have they stolen my voice? Do they think I'd call for help? Call whom? The police? They wouldn't believe me. My parents are long dead. I have no friends. The few I had were driven away by that bitch Elvira. My only friends left are THEM.

I wonder what these monstrous creatures will take from me next, maybe my sight or my hearing? No, the damned fiends are devilishly cunning; they know I need those senses to feed them more fear and agony! They live off it, they grow stronger from it.

As for my blood... oddly, they don't suck it out, but on the contrary, they seem repulsed by it! Perhaps because these entities are, I assume, interdimensional and at least partially incorporeal. Yet the bloody wounds they leave every night heal unnaturally, cleansing themselves by morning.

Of course, my demonic tormentors don't do this out of mercy or kindness. No, they do it for sport, to stage a special infernal game for me every night, filled with torture, screams, and blood. How do I know that? Simply, I listen to their shrill whispers drifting up from down there. Lately, I often hear them murmur these words: *kingdom*, *tribute*, and *sacrifice*.

Do they want to take my freedom? Or my life? What's the point? I have neither left. Elvira stole them long ago. Now I'm just her property, just a pathetic little puppet on a string.

Burning with unbearable pain that danced merrily through every corner of my tormented body, I began to recall that fateful day when I first started seeing Elvira. Without a doubt, it was the worst decision of my wretched life. To my great regret, it took me far too long to realize that the sweet, innocent, gentle girl I'd fallen so deeply in love with was in reality an aggressive, pathologically possessive schizophrenic person, the most repulsive sadistic vampire! And the worst part? I endured every one of her psychotic outbursts on my own skin and soul.

Why didn't I leave her at the very beginning? I don't know, maybe because I was a blind, lovestruck fool, or simply out of dreadful fear of losing her and being left alone again. Alone, that is, except for THEM.

Who knows where that whore is now? Probably testing some brawny drunkard's bed after picking him up in some smoke-filled nightclub. Of course, she never tried doing that with me IN MY BED. The few times we were intimate early in our relationship, it was at her place or in another room. She never once expressed a desire to spend the night in my bedroom. And even if she had, I wouldn't have allowed it. Should I have let her meet THOSE who live DOWN THERE?

My brooding over that witch, who shattered my already pathetic life into damned fragment, was suddenly interrupted by the inhuman shrieks of the creatures hiding beneath me: "Kingdom! Kingdom!", "Tribute!", "Sacrifice!"

In that instant, the wounds on my skin healed lightning-fast, my torn clothes and flesh knit back together, my voice returned, and I managed to stir my numb limbs.

Meanwhile, the hellish screeching and gnashing of my demons grew ever more intense, now piercing not only my ears, but also the few remaining living corners of my mind, which I had been losing for years.

At last, I understood what I had to do. For the first time in my life, I felt I was doing the right thing. I snatched my phone and coldly dialed Elvira's number. That instant, the creatures' frenzied roaring ceased.

After several attempts, I finally heard the groggy voice of my tormentress.

"What the hell do you want, you loser? Don't bother me, I'm in bed," she snapped rudely.

"I can imagine with whom, you slut! What I want is you to get your lazy ass over here right now, and take your trash with you! I've finally realized the devil you've been invoking has taken the joke too far! I'm ending this for all eternity, you lunatic! No one will keep feasting on my mental and life energy anymore, especially not you, bitch!" I shouted, not giving the scumbag a chance to respond.

It was the first time I'd dared to raise my voice at her, and it felt absolutely perfect.

"You vile little worm, you're leaving me after all I've given you?!" she managed to slur, still in shock, unable to believe her slave had rebelled.

"And what exactly did you give me, you deranged sadist? Insults, slaps, bleeding, bruises, the destruction of what little identity and self-esteem I had? The only thing you've ever given me was a life worse than slavery. I was your monkey, dancing to your tune! But now, goddamn it, enough is enough! Get your ass over here in five minutes and pick up the shit you left behind, or I'll toss it all over the neighborhood! I bet some poor bastard could use it. And after that, I never want to see your face again!" I barked at her in a steely voice before hanging up.

Being the great materialistic whore she'd always been, she came flying over at lightning speed and, without a word, began gathering her things, which was a process that dragged on endlessly. To my immense satisfaction, she didn't utter a single syllable the whole time. When she finally stuffed the last hairpin into her suitcase, she turned to glare at me with the wild-eyed stare of someone fit for a straitjacket.

She wouldn't be the good old Elvira if she didn't unleash a barrage of venomous insults, threats, and mockery before leaving. After exhausting every last slur she could conjure, she switched tactics. First she began groveling, then bursting into hysterical, crocodile-tear sobs. When even that failed to sway me, she dropped the act and revealed her true demonic face, lunging to slap and kick me with savage fury.

NOT THIS TIME, ELVIRA. Even though I'm peaceful and introverted by nature, and believe hitting a woman is barbaric, this time I WOULDN'T TOLERATE HER BEHAVIOR FOR ANYTHING IN THE WORLD. I shoved her back reflexively, sending the brazen bitch sprawling onto MY BED.

Furious and stunned that this "worthless loser" had dared fight back, the madwoman swiftly grabbed a sharp razor from the nightstand and roared like a beast:

"You'll pay dearly for this, you bastard! I gave you everything, cared for you, coddled you like a baby, and this is how you repay me? I'll slit your throat with this! Then no one will ever have you after me!"

The schizophrenic thirsty for her victim's blood marched toward me, gripping her weapon tight, ready to exact her vile *revenge*. But before she could strike, a hairy, clawed hand emerged from under the bed and roughly grabbed my tormentress by the ankle. The lunatic taken off guard lost her balance, crashing to the floor and slightly cracking her head. Her scream pierced the air as she lay there, staring up at the owner of that monstrous hand.

Its grotesque, wrinkled face, with fiery serpentine eyes giving a piercing glare at the horrified Elvira, slithered fully from beneath the bed, baring yellow fangs. It grabbed her by the hair with its claws and began dragging her toward the abyss under the bed. At the same time, another pair of rough vein-riddled albino hands emerged from the bed, grabbing the screaming sadist by the wrists with its scarlet claws, while another tiny red creature with thick fur and an evil glare began pulling her savagely by the dress, dragging her straight under the bed.

I laughed, vengeful and triumphant. At last, they had finally shown some dignity and emerged to show that wretch her fate. At last, I understood the meaning of those whispered nocturnal words. At last, I grasped the purpose of the sacrifices, the tortures, the nightly bloodletting and cleansing. At last, I realized WHAT THEY TRULY WANTED AND HOW I WOULD ACHIEVE MY CATHARSIS. My God, only NOW did I finally see WHO MY REAL ENEMY AND TORMENTOR WAS—and who had ALWAYS STOOD BY ME. UNDER MY BED.

"Darling, save me, please!" Elvira screamed in mortal agony, in the bloody embrace of the three demons, slowly vanishing into the deep, enigmatic darkness beneath my bed.

"Like hell I will! Meet my nightmare, bitch!" I coldly spat back.

Then my ex-lover was gone, swallowed by the infinite blackness of WHAT LAY THERE BELOW. Only her final scream was heard, echoing off the walls of the room. Then dead silence ensued.

After minutes of hesitation, I finally gained the courage to peer under the bed. There was nothing, except for a vast pool of blood, a few torn-off female fingers and locks of hair. On one finger I recognized the expensive ring, now covered in blood, that I had bought for Elvira with my hard-earned savings, after she'd nagged and threatened me for weeks.

I didn't doubt for a second that the demon-woman was dead. She got what she deserved. Her blood had paid the tribute.

What an irony, that bloodsucker had wanted to slit my throat, swearing she would be my last one, yet in the end, I was her last one instead, and she was butchered by others, by my mysterious friends.

And now what? Her parents will wonder where she was. Maybe even her lover. They'll search, call the police, launch an investigation... You didn't need to be Einstein to guess they'd blame me for her disappearance and death.

Who knew how many years in prison I'd get? And there's no way in hell I'd let myself rot in some filthy cell. Besides, I didn't kill her, THEY did!

But no judge would ever believe my story. Even if I fled, the police would hunt me to the ends of the earth. Nowhere in this world would be safe. Unless... Suddenly, I recalled that word that had been whispered in the dark there below... KINGDOM! The blood in my veins turned to ice.

In that moment, a monstrous clawed hand emerged from under the bed. I bent down and took it with great joy and evident relief. I squeezed it tight, and it gently pulled me into the shadows beneath, into the darkness of my bed. Whatever, whoever lurked down there, I knew that they wouldn't harm me and that I'd be safe. I went with them, forever, into my invisible Kingdom.

Frank Roger (Belgium)

One More Kiss

Translated from Dutch by Frank Roger

Melvin arrived at Bangkok International Airport, checked his watch and noticed he had plenty of time for a coffee. After all he was early, both for his flight and for his rendezvous. He was a bit nervous, considering what was at stake, and a cappuccino would restore his peace of mind.

He was sipping his coffee as he received a message on his phone. It was just a picture of a blonde girl. There was no text, but he didn't need any. This was what he had been waiting for. He knew he was taking a big risk, but the pay would make up for that – supposing all went well.

All he had to do was wait for the girl in the picture to turn up here at the airport, and kiss her, as partners or close friends would do, and then it would be up to him. Through the kiss, some saliva should be exchanged, and hers contained precious information, coded in biochemical components, that he was supposed to transmit to another girl in Amsterdam, whose picture he would receive upon arrival.

When the information had been passed on, again by a kiss, all he had to do was pick up his pay at a designated spot and walk off, with a lot of money to spend. But first he had to receive that coded information. He had no idea what it was about, and wasn't even supposed to. It had to be important and valuable enough for a shady organization to go to such lengths to transmit it. He felt a bit like a drugs courier, and maybe his role was its equivalent in illegal information smuggling. The advantage was that the coded information in his saliva would be untraceable, “invisible”. There was no way the police or the airport authorities could catch or arrest him. At least so he hoped.

A well-dressed blonde girl now entered the airport building, and looked around. He recognized her face: she was the girl in the picture indeed. No doubt she had received a picture of his face on her phone. When she spotted him she walked briskly up to him. The adventure was about to begin.

He remembered the instructions. The kiss had to look natural, he and the girl had to act as if they were intimate friends. There were surveillance cameras and security guards all over the place here, so they had to make sure they didn't raise anyone's suspicion. Melvin had wondered why the rendezvous had been fixed at an airport, a high-risk area. Maybe because the presence of cameras and security guards reduced the risk of interference by third parties? Was the disadvantage perhaps an advantage?

He had no more time to think. The girl was right in front of him, flashed him a professional smile devoid of any warmth, put her arm on his shoulder and kissed him on his lips. Then she withdrew and he noticed the cold stare in her eyes. She didn't say a word, pretended to say good-bye and walked off. He licked his lips. The coded information had been passed on. The girl had done what she had been paid to do. She had been cold as ice – should he have expected anything else?

He checked in for his flight to Amsterdam, passed through customs and the security check and strolled through a multitude of bars and shops to the gate. He had some time to kill before boarding would start. Basically nothing could go wrong until he arrived at his destination.

The flight was uneventful, as expected. He slept through most of it, between dinner and breakfast. The tricky part would be his next rendezvous, but he hoped it would run as smoothly as the first one.

Upon his arrival he passed through customs, collected his baggage and headed for the exit as he received a message on his phone. It was a picture of a good-looking red-haired girl. He slid the phone back in his pocket, was surprised to see the girl already hurrying in his direction. She shot

him a warm smile, hugged him and kissed him fully on his lips. What a change from that cold-eyed blonde girl in Bangkok! To his surprise she even thanked him, turned around and left quickly.

He felt relief. It had all gone so quickly and efficiently. The coded information had been transmitted to her. All he had to do now was pick up his money and enjoy life. He walked along the covered hallway to the Sheraton Airport Hotel, where that final transaction would take place.

He was about halfway when he saw another red-haired girl coming in his direction. She bore a striking resemblance to the girl whose picture he had received. But what about that first girl then? Was she perhaps a lookalike, sent by another party to intercept the information? No wonder she had arrived so early, and had acted with such atypical enthusiasm.

Should he tell this second girl, the “real” one, about this problem? Actually, it was already too late. The girl put her hand on his shoulder, kissed him, mumbled a few words and left. My God, he thought, what have I done? Did I transmit the information to both girls? And what will that lead to? Another idea occurred to him, chillingly: what if that first girl had not only intercepted the information, but had transmitted something to him while they kissed, knowing very well another girl would be hot on her heels? A different set of coded information, or a virus, or something truly ugly? In that case he had just transmitted it to the second girl along with the information – unless that had already been wiped by that virus.

And more importantly, would he get paid, now that he had completely fucked up his mission? What should he do now? He was close to despair as he received another message on his phone. He grabbed it with trembling hands. There was just a short message: You failed.

That could only mean he wouldn’t get paid. And that they might send someone to teach him a lesson. He had better get out of here fast.

Barely a few seconds later there was another message: a picture of a black-haired girl, and a short text: One more kiss.

Now what? Were they offering him a second chance? But wait a minute, who had sent that last message? The original guys, or the ones that had intervened? How could he be sure? But then again, maybe this was his only option left to get out of this mess, with or without payment. He walked on in the direction of the hotel, until he saw a girl matching the picture he had just received.

She was a Gothic type, sporting black make-up and wearing black clothes that revealed more of her slender body rather than they hid. She came up to him, all smiles, hugged him and pressed her lips against his. For some reason she didn’t limit herself to a simple kiss, but bit into his lower lip, and quite painfully so.

“You got the message,” she said. It was a statement, not a question. She took a step back, licked his blood from her lips, and wiped off the bit that had trickled down her chin, turned around and left him puzzled and chilled to the bone.

Why did she do that, he wondered. Did she transmit a message coded in blood rather than saliva? Or maybe it wasn’t a message, but something else entirely. He would find out soon enough.

So what do I do now? he asked himself. I’d better stay away from that airport hotel. Maybe I should get a taxi and try to find a safe place in downtown Amsterdam.

As he was on his way he received another message on his phone. This time it was not just a face – it was a multitude of faces, flashing by in rapid succession, male, female, young, old, black, white... And there was a text: You can’t just join the competition like that.

That was to be expected, he thought. They assume I changed sides and strike back. But it wasn’t his fault. It was that first red-haired girl that spoiled it all. All right, I fell for it, but how could I know?

And what about all these faces, he wondered. I can’t go out and kiss all of these people. Unless this is their way of telling me to kiss as many people as possible, picking them at random.

As he watched the endless series of faces, an urge started to well up inside him. It's that last kiss, he realized. That was no message. A virus, perhaps? A drug? Some chemical substance? In any case something he was supposed to spread by kissing and biting until he drew blood. Was this their answer to his mistake? Had this game now entered a new phase in which he had just become involved, whether he wanted to or not?

So my mission isn't over, he realized. As a matter of fact, it's only just beginning.

He felt the urge within him gain strength. There would be no resisting this urge. After all it was in his blood. He couldn't wait to start work. Amsterdam would be the perfect place, offering lots of opportunities. His lips and teeth were tingling with anticipation.

Gareth D. Jones (England)

Aurochs, Cave Bears and Other Charismatic Megafauna

The caves were magnificent: full of stalactites and stalagmites, eerie pools and fantastically colourful rock formations. They were also cold and, now that Yorick was alone, lonely and unnerving. In this section beyond the lights strung for tourists, the narrow beam of his torch gave them a rather different and more chilling air. The deep growl from somewhere nearby was particularly worrying.

*

Two weeks in Yorkshire in the autumn was not Yorick's idea of fun, but at least they had decent Yorkshire tea to drink. He had packed lightly in anticipation of moving round several times during their stay, but in the end the same dingy 2-star hotel had been the team's home for the entire fortnight. That morning, Yorick stood at his room's single and slightly grotty window, peering over the supposedly expansive view of the dales that was in fact rather limited by the dull, early morning skies and scudding clouds. Opening the window let in a brisk breeze that stirred the somewhat musty smell, but after a minute it was too chilly to be comfortable.

Another day, another less-than-glamorous opportunity to track down Yorkshire's unwelcome recent additions.

Down on the breakfast room, Lucja and Arkady were munching their way through the continental buffet in silence: cold meats and cheeses, yoghurt, fruit and cereal. They both looked up as he entered, each raised an eyebrow and returned to their repast. Sandy was tucking into to a full English as usual and, as usual, attempting to engage the waitress in an enthusiastic discussion of bioengineering and the problems of extreme pest control. That was the title of the TV series he had pitched to Channel Four and was convinced would be commissioned any day. Extreme Pest Control with Sandy Whatever-his-name-was.

Yorick considered this as he popped two slices of bread into the rotating toaster. Sandy was just Sandy. The waitress, a waif of a girl with no evident interest in wildlife despite two weeks' worth of lectures from Sandy, took the opportunity to make an escape so she could ask Yorick if he wanted tea or coffee.

Tea. It was always tea. He had told her that it would always be tea yet, despite there being no other guests, she seemed unable to remember this important fact. Or maybe it was protocol and she was obliged to ask. She wrote the word tea carefully on her notepad with the stub of a red pencil and exited to the kitchen.

Toast successfully buttered and marmaladed, Yorick sat opposite Sandy to await his chosen beverage.

"What's on the menu today, then?" he asked.

"Well," said Sandy around a mouthful of bacon, "we'll check on the two main herds of aurochs, and then we have," he forked a pile of scrambled egg into his mouth, "our first confirmed sighting of a cave bear."

"Great," Yorick said. Cave bears were huge. Bigger by far than grizzlies. And Yorkshire had lots of caves. Various wildlife groups had been scouring the moors and the dales using drones to verify the sightings reported by alarmed tourists.

After breakfast they piled into the Range Rover, Yorick consigned to the back seat as usual, and set off into the wild.

The clouds seemed to be clearing and the varicoloured dales were looking a bit brighter. There was not much to be seen in the way of buildings or animals, so theoretically there was plenty of room for a few small herds of aurochs. Nobody really minded the huge, lumbering cattle that had, after all, previously lived in the British Isles until recent centuries. Other than the confusion over aurochs being both the singular and plural, they were relatively popular creatures.

Yorick held onto the door handle as Sandy took a hump in the road rather too fast. He evidently wanted to check on the herds quickly and get on with something more interesting. They'd tagged several dozen aurochs over the past two weeks and were now monitoring them, Sandy having transformed his image from Big Game Hunter to Big Game Keeper and Protector of the Countryside.

There were also lynx to be found in Yorkshire now, as well as other smaller re-introduced species, none of which were important enough for Sandy to care about. There was similarly a proliferation of taxidermists all over the British Isles, driven by the abundance of new species. Yorick had found his small business floundering in a flooded market so had packed it in and now worked full time with Sandy. Six months later he had still not decided whether that had been a good idea.

After twenty minutes Sandy took them off-road and up a shallow incline, swerving around rocky outcroppings and bringing them to a stop with a jerk. Yorick stepped out into the fresh breeze and zipped up his wax jacket. The aurochs were less than half a mile away, munching slowly. The nearest few glanced up and appraised the newcomers, decided they were no threat and continued with their extended breakfast.

Arkady, big and bearded, held up his tablet and compared the numbers onscreen with the beasts in the field. Lucja prowled around the car looking for unexpected wildlife, a compact package of unspecified deadly skills dressed all in black.

After a couple of minutes of discussion over the tablet, Sandy was satisfied and they jumped back into the Range Rover to head for the next herd. Yorick undid his zip again and braced himself for Sandy's erratic driving. Another fifteen minutes brought them to the second aurochs herd and a repeat of the same procedure.

"Right," said Sandy as they piled back onto the car, "off to the caves." He pulled off with a roar.

"There were caves in Chechnya," Arkady muttered.

They powered along winding country lanes at hair-raising speed in the direction of Stump Cross Caverns. Yorick reviewed what he knew about cave bears, which was not much. They were big and they were bears. The allegation that they lived in caves was based on the discovery of numerous bones in several caves around Britain. To Yorick this proved that they liked to die in caves more than that they liked to live in caves.

Sandy's phone rang loudly when they were halfway there, and he answered it on his bluetooth headset in his characteristic managerial style.

"Drusilla, hi," he drawled. Their Home Office contact. "To meet us?" Dramatic acceleration out of a bend. "A scientist, you say?"

It was almost comical, the way Sandy drip-fed bits of information to his passengers during his calls.

"From the Natural History Museum?" Wash of spray from a huge puddle. "Today? Yes, can do." Hurtle over a narrow stone bridge. "Stump Cross caverns. Yes. We'll meet them there."

He hung up with a flourish and left a pregnant pause.

Arkady and Lucja were never going to bite, so Yorick gave in and did the honours. "What was that about?"

"We're meeting a scientist from the Natural History Museum..."

Yorick leaned back and re-listened to the story that sounded much more involved this time round and somehow emphasized the importance of Sandy's enterprise. The story took them all the way to the visitors' car park at the caverns.

"I knew a scientist in Belarus," Arkady mused as they pulled to a halt.

One of the local cave guides came out to meet them - a man in a beige shirt and red neckerchief whose grey hair was pulled back in a ponytail. His name badge declared him to be Orville.

"Bear's in the caverns," he told them, somewhat unnecessarily.

Sandy began his usual professional we're-here-to-save-the-day spiel while Yorick paced around the gravelled carpark. Arkady loaded himself up with various bits of electronic equipment while Lucja opened the back of the range rover and pulled out a huge hunting rifle. It was chunky and black and she slotted several colourful darts into its magazine.

Something large moved in the distance, across the carpark and a neighbouring field. Yorick pulled his compact binoculars from a coat pocket and swiftly tried to focus on it. He never took wildlife for granted nowadays - there were too many unknowns out there. After a moment he spotted a black mastiff loping across the grass. It paused to sniff at something then lay down. He was relieved to see it had only one head. There had been rumours of a Cerberus being spotted on Ex-moor.

Sandy and the other two appeared to be ready, so Yorick joined them. His equipment was minimal and resided permanently in his coat pockets. Orville led the way to the cavern entrance where he unlocked a gate set into the rock. He preceded them down a set of steep stairs and began pointing out geological features as they entered the spot-lit interior. It was immediately cold and the air felt damp.

"We don't need the tour," Sandy said, patting the guide's arm.

Arkady strode forward suddenly, his torch beam focussed on the floor in front of him. He stooped and prodded at a small, dark mass on the floor.

"Bear scat," he said, looking up. "You want to smell it?" he asked Sandy. "Can tell what species by the smell."

"No, thanks," Sandy said. "We can assume it's a cave bear."

Orville nodded. "Big blighter, too," he said.

Lucja had stalked ahead, head cocked to one side as though listening intently. She paused where the cavern split.

"Which way?" she asked.

"To the right," Orville said, "towards Wolverine Cave."

"Wolverines?" Yorick repeated, immediately racking his brains for what he knew of the creatures.

"It's just a name," Orville said. "There's no wolverines." He pulled a folded map from a back pocket and showed it to Sandy. "We're here. As far as I know, the bear's here."

Sandy took the map and slid it into an exterior pocket of his hunting jacket.

"We'll take it from here," he said.

Orville retreated, looking relieved while Yorick followed the others onwards.

*

Almost an hour later they emerged onto the surface empty handed. No sign of any kind of bear. Orville made them teas and coffees in the café while they warmed up. There had been no further traces of bear activity and Arkady had picked up no heat signatures on his infrared scanner.

"A lot of caverns down there," Orville said. "You were only in the show caverns. There's plenty more further down, but you'd need specialist equipment to get down there safely."

As they sipped at the beverages and nibbled at cream teas, another car pulled into the carpark with a crunch of gravel. It was an old Volvo estate in muddy brown. A tall woman stepped out and flexed her shoulders and arms, evidently stiff from a long drive.

"That'll be our scientist," Sandy announced, looking pleased with himself.

Yorick recalled his odd use of the pronoun 'them', rather than him or her. He had evidently decided to surprise them all with the fact that the visiting scientist was a woman, as though they were in a film from the eighties.

The scientist pulled a short jacket out of the car and put it on over a roll-neck jumper. She appeared to have short, sculpted hair, unless she actually had long hair and it was tucked into the roll-neck. She walked over to the café, glancing up into the sky as she went.

Sandy stood as she entered and gave an aborted wave, evidently realising that nobody else was there for her to confuse them with.

She approached and smiled minimally.

"Doctor Ellen West, Department of Cryptozoology, Natural History Museum," she said, offering an elegant black hand. They all shook.

"Alexander Grantham, head of this unit. People call me Sandy."

"Arkady," said Arkady.

"Lucja," said Lucja after a brief pause, as though she resented the obligation to introduce herself.

Yorick recovered his composure in time to give his name too. 'Head of this unit'? Typical pompous Sandyism.

"Tea or coffee?" Orville called from the counter.

"Do you have any fruit teas?" Doctor Ellen West asked, and went to investigate.

"Sandy is short for Alexander?" Yorick said, broaching the more shocking half of Sandy's introduction.

"What did you think it was short for?"

Yorick mouthed the syllables of Alexander silently and nodded acceptance.

"I thought it was because you have sandy coloured hair."

"But I don't have sandy coloured hair," Sandy said, taking off his cap to reveal the dark brown truth of his statement.

"So you don't," Yorick said. "I don't think I've ever seen you without a hat before."

"Of course you have. I don't wear a hat for breakfast."

Doctor West returned with a cup of something that probably smelled better than it tasted.

"So, what have you discovered?" She sat and took a steaming sip.

"No sign of the cave bear," Sandy said. "Plenty of aurochs. What's your area of interest?"

"Cryptozoology," she said, "creatures of myth and legend. A few years back I tracked rumours and documents. Now I'm tracking actual creatures."

"Wait," Yorick said, "Doctor West – it was you that tracked the yeti in Snowdonia."

"That's right," she said softly. A look of grief washed over her face. She took another sip of tea.

"Call me Ellen, though."

"Well, we've seen nothing like that in Yorkshire, Ellen," Sandy said cheerfully.

"Yorkshire's a big place," Ellen said and put down her cup. "I'm not looking for a yeti this time. I'm looking for a cockatrice."

"Interesting," Yorick said. Like the celebrated taxidermized mermaid that had turned out to be part monkey and part fish, the cockatrice was a hybrid creature of myth. The body of a two-legged dragon and the head of a cockerel, he had once seen a small example in a private collection. The creatures of legend were reputed to have been of a much larger scale. "Rather an ugly creature."

"Why don't they make something that people actually like?" Sandy said. "Unicorns, maybe?"

"There's a farmer breeding unicorns in Northern Spain," Ellen said, "and they're all over Eastern Europe. There's even a herd of Shetland Unicorns been spotted up near Inverness."

"Where is cockatrice?" Arkady asked.

"We were tracking it via satellite till it went to ground in this area," Ellen said. "We think it went underground."

"So it could be in these caves?" Sandy asked.

"They're extensive enough. Could be any number of creatures down there."

"So what are we looking at?" Sandy pulled out his tablet to make notes.

"The cockatrice of legend could kill you with a look, or with its breath," Ellen said.

Arkady pulled a gas mask out from somewhere.

"We think it unlikely that anyone has imbued their creation with those abilities," the doctor continued, "but it can obviously fly, and it had razor-sharp talons and beak."

"Talons and beak..." Sandy muttered as he scribed. "What size?"

"Three or four foot tall."

"So it could get into all kinds of tight spaces."

Orville got them kitted out for the deeper caves, those not open to casual tourists. Red caving suit, knee pads, belt, helmet with mounted torch, wellington boots. Yorick pulled on the outfit and felt ever so slightly more professional.

Orville led them back through the show caves and pointed them to a roped-off side corridor. He unhooked the rope and they shuffled through. He stayed behind and re-hooked the rope.

"Check your torches before you go any further," he said, and with that flicked a switch on the cave wall that doused the nearest lights. A faint yellow glow from around the nearest bend was all the illumination left to them. Sandy and Lucja's pale faces could be seen in the dark, with Arkady's bearded visage more of a blur. Ellen's face was all but invisible in the gloom. Orville was a mere silhouette against the feeble back light. One by one they fumbled with their head-mounted torches and brought a series of white beams of light into existence, blinding each other in turn.

"I'll keep the urn hot," Orville said and departed like a wraith.

Arkady led the way, relying, he said, on his elite military spelunking experience in Azerbaijan. Sandy took control of the map, Ellen held the tracker, Yorick kept his recording equipment at the ready and filmed the occasional short sequence for the record. Lucja brought up the rear, several feet back as a buffer in case of attack. Every time Yorick glanced over his shoulder, she also seemed to be glancing over her shoulder.

"Where did this Cockatrice come from?" Sandy asked as they descended a steep slope. There were no smooth floors or artificially cut steps in this section.

"Where do any of them come from?" Ellen replied. Her head lamp bobbed as she ducked under a low overhang, alerting Yorick that he needed to do the same.

"From what we can tell," she continued, "there are several semi-mobile biolabs that move between industrial units and warehouses." There was a series of splashes as they all sloshed through a long puddle. "None of them are related, as far as we can tell."

"That's what Drusilla said," Sandy agreed. "Our Home Office contact."

"Now we crawl," Arkady announced and his light dropped to half its height.

Yorick waited his turn and crawled through a low twenty-foot long section of cavern, emerging into a chasm that disappeared overhead beyond the reach of his torch's beam. A trickle of water ran

down the centre of the chasm with around two feet of dry rock either side. They plodded on awkwardly for a minute or more.

A low growl echoed from ahead. Or maybe behind.

Everyone froze.

"Nothing on the scanner," Ellen said quietly.

After a moment they moved on again. The chasm forked, continuing in similar vein to the left and climbing up a tumble of rocks to the right.

"They re-join in about fifty feet," Sandy said. "We should split up so we're not out-flanked."

Arkady followed the right-hand fork and Sandy began scrambling up the boulders and debris. Ellen followed Arkady. Yorick paused, undecided, then followed Sandy, clambering on all fours. Darkness enveloped him from behind as Lucja took the other route.

"Some trip, huh?" Sandy said from above.

Yorick grunted in reply and concentrated on shining his headlamp in the right place to see where he needed to put his hands. They arrived at the top of the rockfall where Sandy shuffled around and began working his way down the far side. Smaller pebbles rattled off into the darkness. Sandy disappeared around a turn and the shine of his torch was immediately consumed by the darkness. Yorick sat down uncomfortably on some broken chunks of rock and swung his legs round to start lowering himself down. He wriggled and scrambled and managed to turn himself round, picking his way carefully while shining his headlamp down between his own feet.

The descent seemed to take much longer than the ascent, but finally he arrived on level ground and turned to face the way ahead.

A low-ceilinged cavern stretched off ahead, maybe ten feet wide and quite empty. There was no sign of Sandy.

"Sandy?" he called.

There was nothing but a dull echo. Why had Sandy marched off so quickly?

He took a few steps forward, called again. Nothing. No reply, no flash of torch light. Another ten feet onward the cavern narrowed to three or four feet wide.

"Sandy?"

This time there was an answer. A worryingly deep growl.

Yorick backed up a few steps. Either Sandy was pretending to be a bear; or had been incapacitated by a bear and couldn't answer for himself; or Yorick had somehow gone down the slope to a different part of the cave system.

Deciding that the latter was the more optimistic, Yorick reversed his course hurriedly and scrambled back up the slope. A few feet beyond the roof of the cavern was another gaping crack leading to another unknown depth. Yorick swiftly slithered downward, gaining several bruises and scrapes along the way.

A pool of light illuminated a patch of floor several feet ahead. Beyond – the dim outline of Sandy.

"Hear that?" he said.

"Uh-huh." Yorick moved away from the slope. "Bear, I think."

"Yup." He turned away. "Best not get split up though. Let's find the others first."

Nobody else had been mislaid, so they were reunited less than thirty feet further on.

"Have a reading," Arkady announced as they joined them. "Next cavern, small life form."

"We think we found the bear," Sandy said.

"The cockatrice is more important," Ellen said, marching off into the darkness before Sandy could take control.

Yorick found himself trailing at the back of the group.

The cockatrice did not wait for them to find it. Only a couple of minutes later there was an eerie screech, a scalp-tingling scratching sound and the flap of wings. The passage was rather narrow at this point and Yorick had dropped back almost ten feet, fiddling with the settings on his camera.

Nobody ahead had much opportunity to react, other than to duck, make various noises of alarm and flail their arms. Even the usually unflappable Lucja had no time nor elbow room to bring her dart gun to bear.

Alerted by the bruhaha ahead, Yorick raised the camera and filmed the flight of the cockatrice in all its high-definition, low-light, full-colour, slo-mo glory. The clip lasted only a few seconds, but he watched it back dozens of times in the following days, re-living his moment of artistic triumph.

He was almost trampled by the rest of the group as they about-turned and charged along the passage in pursuit.

It took twenty minutes or so to make their way back to the entrance, and for the last minute or two they could hear muffled screeching. The cockatrice sounded tired and irritated as though it could barely be bothered with screeching any more.

They could see it as they cautiously mounted the stairway that led up to fresh air. Yorick pushed past everyone save Lucja, filming over her shoulder as she raised her gun.

Orville had conscientiously closed the gate on they way out.

Perhaps blinded by the glare of sunlight after so long underground, the cockatrice had flown straight into the gate, wedging its head through the gap between two bars. It flapped its wings feebly. One of them looked damaged and could barely lift from the ground.

"Poor thing's injured," Ellen said, crowding up behind Yorick.

Lucja raised her gun and shot it.

"Could be poison breath," she explained with a shrug.

Ellen pushed past and approached carefully as the beast sank into unconsciousness. Its wings gave a final flap and she knelt beside it.

"It's remarkable," she said.

Yorick recorded the entire process as Ellen and Sandy extricated the cockatrice from its predicament, with the aid of Arkady bending the bars slightly. They creaked the gate open eventually.

"Can you get the crate, Lucja?" Sandy called.

Lucja had retreated halfway down the stairs.

"Am watching for bear," she said.

Yorick felt his stomach lurch. He had completely forgotten about the second deadly creature lurking somewhere behind them in the dark.

It took them a while to get the creature safely contained and installed in Dr West's car, by which time Orville had served drinks for them all. They stood around the Volvo, drinking.

"I don't see how we'd get the cave bear out even if we found it," Yorick observed.

"No," Sandy said. "I don't think we could." He slurped his coffee. "Now we've seen the situation. We'll have to bait the entrances, draw it out, dart it."

Lucja raised her dart gun affirmatively.

"Then we get some heavy lifting equipment in to take it to a zoo."

"I'll show you round the other exits," Orville said.

Dr West threw the dregs of her fruit tea aside and handed the cup to Orville.

"I'm taking this beastie to Tropical World," she said. "They have containment and veterinary facilities to look after it temporarily."

"Is it the only one?" Yorick asked.

"I don't think so." She fished in her jacket pocket for car keys. "They're springing up all over the place. All kinds of creatures."

"They come from co-existing realities," Arkady said.

Everybody stared at him in surprise.

"It's a theory I've heard," Ellen said. "I wouldn't discount it." She got into her car. "Thanks for your help." She closed the door and drove away swiftly.

"What else might live in a co-existing reality?" Yorick asked.

Sandy ignored the question. "Come along," he said. "Bears to trap, coffee to drink, Yorkshire to save."

Yorick took a last clip of film as Dr West's Volvo crested the brow of a nearby hill.

"Okay," he said. He finished his tea and followed in Sandy's wake.

Krzysztof T. Dąbrowski (Poland)

The Meeting

Somebody was at the door. I didn't expect anyone but I opened.
The old man invited himself in.

The doorbell rang.

It was some blond beauty.

Then Asian man marched in.

"Jesus..." I thought.

Jesus appeared at the door. Then a clown and some old lady. Eventually, my psychiatrist came.

"It was difficult to gather you together, but it finally happened," he said. "You must know that you all live in the same body."

I felt weak.

"We are going to vote now to choose which personality will stay here. I will ask the rest to leave this man's head."

A Prayer for the Meaning of Life

People tend to complain about unanswered prayers. No wonder, with so many lives, it takes some effort.

I spent half of my life developing a unique prayer and over-amplifying it appropriately with intentional energy.

And it finally worked!

I begged God to give human life some meaning, thinking that we had lost it somewhere and that is why we are unhappy.

I was unaware that in our world, my prayers were just a code, as was the energy of intention.

The prayer reached the system and anti-virus were triggered - the software deleted the infected file and humanity ceased to exist...

The Clever Way Of Reducing the High Price

They liked the planet offered by the Inter-Galactic Trade Federation. It was a dream come true. It had plenty of natural resources and was next to the main interdimensional route.

Unfortunately, the price was high.

They had to let it go or...

They could genetically modify the species. Then all they had to do was jump into hyperspace and come back after a superluminal year.

It worked! A parasitic species contaminated the planet.

When the wanderers visited the Federation again, the price was nominal. The buyers had to get rid of the human pestilence. But this was not a problem.

Tihomir Jovanović (Serbia)

Friday Night Fever

Translated from Serbian by Thomir Jovanović

Longevity must surely be the dream of most people. It has its advantages, but also drawbacks. Baron Murdock knew both well, having outlasted several centuries. The good sides were that one saw much, what mere mortals couldn't in their short lives, the opportunity to travel the entire world. In the case of Baron Murdock, globetrotting wasn't always driven by a wish to visit exotic locales. Baron Murdock often had to change his whereabouts simply in order to keep his head attached to his neck... That was one way to kill him. The other one was a rowanwood stake through the heart. That'd end his eternal life of luxury and plenty.

Murdock belonged to the Abiding, which among the people were known as vampires. He'd been living in a mansion on the edge of town. The mansion had once belonged to an actor who had to sell it after his career skyrocketed – skyrocketed towards the bottom, that is. It had a swimming pool a large garden and many balconies. Murdock, of course, had no use for the pool. It went with the house. He didn't much care for water... Sometimes he had to entertain the local high society. How many beautiful necks, alluring, throbbing arteries... Still, he had to be restrained.

Murdock had always lived in such opulent edifices, castles, villas, and that required servants. A problem! A Long life meant frequent changes to the staff, which also needs to be reliable and loyal to its master. It wasn't just about the money. If job perks were not enough, there were other ways. Blackmail, intimidation, threats.

By family tradition, servants of the Murdocks were invariably called Igor. They were usually hunchbacked, limping, or otherwise disabled men which were satisfied with such service and thankful for their master's beneficence. Unfortunately, those Igors didn't last long.

As far as that problem was concerned, Murdock could finally breathe a sigh of relief. He'd found a servant who would last him his entire long years. No, the new servant wasn't one of his ilk, nor a human who'd got their hands on an elixir of youth.

Science and technology had made big strides. Robots, that was what he needed! A human-like robot. It looked a little ungainly, like Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz, moving awkwardly, stiffly. Still, Frankenstein, made from revived human flesh, couldn't move perfectly fluidly either. In a certain way the robot was handsome, tall, crammed full of knowledge needed to serve man. His memory was, of course, implanted with the three basic laws of robotics as envisaged by Isaac Asimov, the author of many novels about these artificial creatures.

This suited Murdock perfectly. An absolutely obedient servant, not bothered by working all day, never curious about what Murdock does out of the house late at night. Always capable of turning out the perfect meal. The robotic Igor knowing about Murdock's nightly dealings would cause quite a few problems. Harming another human! And seriously. He would probably prevent him, especially if he knew that his master is essentially not quite human. But Igor did not know that. His memory contained data needed for a butler, faithful and loyal as Desmond is to Rip Kirby...

And in case he had to do something contrary to Igor's concepts of law and ethics, he could simply turn him off, remotely, like a TV. And then he would become a mere hunk of finely polished

metal and dormant electronics. Murdock could of course have chosen a more perfect model, an android. A completely human-like robot. The problem there was that they were exactly that: perfect. He needed a servant he was used to, hunchbacked, lame, or with some other flaw, not an Aryan human copy...

This was a special night. Full moon dyed the town rosy. Besides, it was Friday, the evening when most working folk can relax and stay on the town longer and drink more, become careless. Just enough to suit Murdock's needs.

His second time in this town. It had changed during the past three hundred years. Buildings have grown considerably, streets were wider, the city noisier, with much more people in the streets. The previous time, he had to flee the town after several "meals" which went a little wrong. The police had a different name for that: unsolved, mysterious crimes.

The city is much bigger now, teeming with people able to sate his thirst. The thirst that besets him on moonlit nights. But the police had also improved their investigation methods. Cameras are omnipresent and record everything. It was somewhat easier during the good old days. Gas lights, fog in the streets. Candles in houses, and the poor souls who thought that Murdock could be thwarted by displaying a crucifix or hanging a wreath of garlic on the doors and windows of their homes.

But they believed in him then, and feared him. It is different now, knowing that most people don't think he even exists, that he is just an imaginary character from novels by Bram Stoker or John Polidori. A film character, played by Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, Klaus Kinski or Christopher Lee.

He stopped by a cafe from which music poured out. Something he hadn't heard in a long time, something he thought nobody listened to anymore, a genre he thought dead two or three generations ago. How he loved the crazy Ozzy and Iommi. Alice Cooper, too. All those weird imitators of the Abiding. He adored their concerts.

The cafe had an appropriate name – Time Machine. He walked in and felt exactly so, as if a time machine had zapped him to a long-gone era. So retro. Wooden tables, mugs of beer, cigarette smoke and the smell of alcohol, all mixed together. He sat at a corner table and took stock. Young people, mostly, some middle-aged, wearing jeans and leather jackets with metal studs, tattoos on their arms.

"Can I help you?" A pleasant, female voice startled him.

He raised his eyes and took a look at the owner of the voice. Her exterior was even more pleasant than her voice. He smiled and ordered.

"A Bloody Mary? You know what that is?"

"Of course", smiled she in turn. "It won't take a minute..."

He watched her go to the bar, elegant, measured. Such a body, and none of the patrons cast the typical male, stripping gaze at her. Odd, indeed!

He loaded his pipe with tobacco and lit up. The aromatic scent overpowered the other, bitter smells. He watched the waitress as she mixed and brought the cocktail to him, and again, nobody seemed to notice her elegant walk, the sway of her hips, the bounce of her breasts.

"There you go", said the waitress.

"Would you also like something to drink? On me, I'm having a special night!" said he.

"No, thank you, I don't drink", she replied.

"On duty?" he asked again.

"Not at all! But thank you, you are very kind."

He sipped his drink and eyed the crowd, studying the disparate people. A few wore their hairs long, streaked with grey and bound in a ponytail, a few completely bald. Wearing jeans and leather, and still somehow breathing that same air from the past, full of smoke and music. Music was still

blaring from the loudspeakers. Hard rock, heavy metal, bands from a bygone age... Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, many others. And him, in his tweed suit. A foreign body.

He gazed at the waitress again. She seems serious and dedicated, washing glasses and stacking them on the bar. Beautiful, but as if unaware of the fact. So juicy. Full-blooded! And still, so delicate. Not an ounce of fat on her, skinny as a model from the early twenty-first century. An easy bite. Or is it more of a sip?

He is waiting for his chance. Insofar as he's aware, there are no cameras in the pub, and the patrons are uninterested in the waitress. Neither was he, at least not in the usual way men are interested in women. He saw her walking to the loo with a bottle of chemical disinfectant...

When the doors closed, he rose, too. He had no need to go there, at least not the ordinary kind. He had an opportunity he couldn't miss.

Just a few seconds...

The loos were clean and tidy and smelled of disinfectant. He washed his hands, and slicked his hair back with damp fingers. It would have been much easier if he could see his reflection in the big mirror, he had to rely on his intuition...

Instead of his own, he saw another reflection in the mirror. A woman's. He turned suddenly to face the waitress standing by the door. She was confused, he could see it on her face. And he knew why. She saw a man who had no reflection. And still, she was calm when she asked him.

"What is this? A magic trick?"

"No." Murdock smiled. "Let me explain..."

He took a step toward her. She did not step back. Not even when he laid his hands on her shoulders. "What the hell is going on", he thought. "Why was she not flinching, screaming, struggling, like normal girls? Fear paralysis? But she wouldn't look so calm then. Curiosity. A very feminine trait, sure, but not under these circumstances."

All the better. For him. He leaned toward her, as if to kiss her, but pressed his lips to her neck instead. He felt her hands on his shoulders. She was really expecting a kiss. Who'd have thunk it? Nice of her, but he had no ulterior motives. Of that kind, at least. Her skin was soft. Her carotid artery was plainly visible. A blood vessel. He opened his mouth and bit with force.

There was a flash, a shock, and he found himself on the floor, unconscious.

When the fog before his eyes cleared, he saw the waitress leaning over him, looking worried. He saw the wound on her neck, too. Naked wiring poked through the rent skin. Conductor, rather than blood vessel. She is a... It had just dawned on him. The pub patrons all knew she was an android, and so ignored her. That's why she behaved so oddly. Programmed to be the perfect waitress, kind even to pushy customers. And here, following laws of robotics, she is protecting his integrity and not allowing a human to be harmed through her inaction. She helped him up and asked:

„Is everything all right, sir?“

„Yes! I'm fine..."

And yet, he wasn't. He had to move on, make the best of the night.

He paid for his drink and went out. The full moon was still shining above the city, paler for the streetlights' glare. He's going to have to find a less well-lit street, with less traffic...



Zoran Živković (Serbia)

First Photograph

Translated from Serbian by Alice Copple-Tošić

Appearances can be deceiving. You look at a picture and think you see everything. Young mother with babe in arms. Indeed, what else is there to see? You've seen thousands of such photographs. Even on postcards. It's a cliché, you think.

And yet it isn't. Take a closer look. The two-month-old child (me, although, of course, you can't recognize me on my first photograph) seems intent on holding its head where it's not supposed to be, under its mother's bosom, closer to her stomach.

There's something unnatural about that position. One would expect the baby to long to hear its mother's heartbeat. That's why mothers instinctively hold babies with their head cradled in their left arm.

I suppose I too (although, to tell the truth, I don't remember) loved to hear my mother's throbbing heart. How could it be otherwise? I was a normal baby.

Or perhaps not quite normal. I knew something that, even if I could, I wouldn't have told anyone. Because it wasn't normal. At least not according to the standards of the time. Today people would probably have a different take on it all. Be more indulgent. At least I hope so.

Here, let's check it out. I'll tell you the secret why I, this weak little baby, was trying with might and main to listen beneath my mother's bosom. I wanted so terribly to hear the beating of another heart that was down there a bit lower.

No, my mother didn't have two hearts. Not at all. Anatomically and in all other respects, everything about her was in perfect order. She certainly would have been horrified to learn about that other heart, particularly since it wasn't hers and yet was located inside her.

Well, all right, whose other heart could that be, you wonder with a certain understandable surprise, in the normal mother of a two-month-old baby?

Here's the answer. The other heart beating in my mother's body belonged to my twin brother. I would like to call him by name, but he was never given one. Not only because he was never born. Had my parents known that he was conceived when I was, they would certainly have had a name waiting for him. As they did for me. But there was no ultrasound at the time.

Wait, wait, I can already hear your interruptions, what do mean to say—he wasn't born? How could he still not be born two months after your birth? All-embracing medicine has yet to record such an event. Without mentioning the fact that your mother, even after bringing you into the world would have been—and looked, which is more important—pregnant.

It truly would have been like that, and your amazement quite fitting, had things taken their natural course. But they didn't. Exactly two months and eleven days after my twin brother and I were conceived, he decided not to be born. It's true we were only fetuses at the time, but you are terribly mistaken if you think such far-reaching decisions can't be made so early on.

All right, not all fetuses are equally mature. Take me, for example. Something like that would never have crossed my mind. I was much more ingenuous. Nothing more far-reaching than enjoying the warm, safe surroundings of my mother's womb interested me. But even then my brother was characterized by a seriousness and responsibility of which few can be proud, among newborns and adults alike.

His decision astonished me, of course. How else could it be? I had counted on us being born

together as befits identical twins. How could I enter the world by myself, deprived of the closest relative imaginable? It's not certain I could even consider myself a twin in that case.

Completely distraught, I asked for an explanation. But I didn't get one. All I was told, in the special nonverbal way that fetuses communicate, is that that's the way it had to be. As though Fate itself were talking. It was not until much later that I realized it actually could not have been otherwise. The explanation went far beyond my capacity to understand at that age. It's questionable that I could even today. I sincerely doubt that I will ever reach an understanding of the world to match that of my brother when he was just a fetus.

While I was unable to grasp his reasons for not being born, I wanted to know how he intended to pull it off. This was a technical, not metaphysical question, so I hoped that I would be able to understand it. Was he intending to keep growing and developing in Mother's stomach until he came of age, and even afterward? I was horrified at the thought of what our mother would look like with a grown man in her stomach.

He took me soundly to task for such a vicious thought. Of course he wouldn't keep on growing. How could he spoil his own mother's appearance? He wouldn't even stay in his current tiny proportions that would certainly cause her no inconvenience. He would go to the opposite extreme. Become smaller.

I must have given him a dumbfounded look with my large fetus eyes, because he hastened to dispel my doubts. Why was I so surprised? We live in an age of miniaturization, don't we? Everything's getting smaller and smaller. We're coming closer to a quantum world in all respects. It turns out that even the cosmos itself isn't quite as enormous as was once thought. So why should fetuses be any exception?

What else could I do but accept this rational explanation. But this did nothing to lessen my concern. When do you intend to start shrinking, I asked him. Sensing fear in my inaudible voice at the possibility of being all alone, he firmly promised that nothing would happen before I was born. He would maintain his current size until then.

And indeed, while I continued to grow, he didn't change. Over time I became so large compared to him that I had to be very careful not to accidentally harm him. Moving about like every lively baby at the end of its term in the womb, I could have smothered him, pressed him or even smashed him.

My anxiety grew as the delivery date approached. It's a tumultuous event, something could go wrong. What if he didn't manage to stay inside? If he came out with me, he wouldn't even be a premature baby. The obstetrician and midwife might not even notice him.

He just waved his bud of a hand dismissively at my anxious questions. I was not to worry, everything was taken care of. He was always to the point when important matters were involved.

He was able to console me in that regard, but not about our parting. It was clear to me that Fate was behind the whole thing, but this didn't make it any easier for me. Is there anything harder than taking leave of your twin brother? It's like parting with your own self. But we're not parting, he assured me. I won't die, I'll just get smaller. And I won't go anywhere. You'll be able to hear my heart whenever you put your ear to Mother's stomach.

Just as he promised, the delivery went smoothly. For both of us. And for Mother too. In spite of her exhaustion, she was cheerful, and everyone misunderstood my cries. They shouldn't be criticized for this, though. Every baby cries at birth. How could they suppose that my tears were from parting with a brother no one knew about?

Although quite weak, ever since Mother first drew me to her breast I made every effort to put my little head on her stomach. At first she found it unusual and brought my head back up, but she got used to it over time. Particularly since I fell asleep the fastest in that position. And what mother wants to have trouble putting her baby to sleep?

My brother's heartbeats, although barely audible, had a calming effect on me. We were no longer touching like before, but we were separated by the very small partition of Mother's skin and a thin layer of fat. You could even say that we were still connected. Just like when we were happily inhabiting the same body.

Well, no idyll is ever of long duration. This one ended when I was four and a half months old. Not all at once, but over three days. At first I thought there was something wrong with my hearing. I had to press my head harder and harder into Mother's soft abdomen to make out the sound of the tiny heart inside.

And then with horror I realized the truth. My brother had set out on the final minimization. At the end of the third day I could no longer hear him regardless of my efforts. And I couldn't try any harder because Mother's stomach had started to hurt from all my pressing, so she held me away from it.

Inevitably I fell ill. Many adults, let alone a baby, would have been crushed by such a trauma. My illness caused the doctors great concern. No one could discover its cause. They examined me thoroughly and tried various therapies, but nothing helped improve my blood count and bring back my appetite. And pull me out of my apathy.

I got better at the beginning of my sixth month. They thought it happened all by itself. The doctors couldn't find the reason for this spontaneous recovery either. But it caused them no concern. Who cares why things are going fine, while they are? They didn't miss a chance, however, to give themselves credit for this favorable turn of events.

And the credit was all mine. I simply started to look at things rationally. At that age a lot of maturing happens in a month and a half, even when you're sick. Or rather, particularly then.

All right, I can't hear my brother's heart anymore, but that doesn't mean, as he himself said, that he died. He's still alive in Mother's womb, he just got smaller. To the quantum level. Maybe even below it. Indeed, miniaturization truly knows not boundaries. And there, as we all know, it's completely immaterial to talk about sound, so there isn't any beating.

This silence from the womb actually came at just the right time. I couldn't keep my head on Mother's stomach forever. What would that look like? Babies have to be weaned sooner or later. It's a bit hard in the beginning, but then they get used to solid food. And start enjoying it.

I rarely think of my brother today. You know how it is: out of sight, out of mind. I only remember him when I look at this photograph, and I don't do that very often. You can't see him, but I know he's there. And I hope he's well wherever he is now. In any case, it was his own choice.

I don't know whether I've convinced you, though. I'd say I haven't. Congratulations on the quantum world, I can almost hear you thinking, but if a person doesn't believe their own eyes, whom will they believe and why? Appearances can be deceiving, but not that much. The picture only shows an ordinary young mother with babe in arms. And since the baby truly doesn't look like me now at this advanced age, how can you believe me when I say it's me? Particularly since my penchant for wild ideas earned me a bad reputation long ago. I'm even trying to make a living out of it.



Some photos from Fanfest 6 - Bookstore Antika



Lawrence Schimel (USA, Spain)

THE HOUND OF ULSTER

The neighbor's cat has caught a baby hare.
It's still alive, dangling from her mouth
like a kitten while she plays with it.
As I advance she drops her prey
and disappears into the woods,
intimidated rather than guilt-stricken.
The hare, in shock, quivers
where it dropped, but as I near
it bolts. I chase after, to check
that it is not hurt, and cannot help
feeling like the hero Cuchulain as a boy,
set to racing after rabbits until he
was fast enough to catch them, fast
enough to elude the blade of a sword.
My chase is not long. The hare
avoids me in quick, zig-zagging
bursts, but with my advantage
of cunning and height, I corner it
against the building's implacable bricks.
And as I lift the small bundle of fur,
hold it, kicking in fear, against my chest,
I know that it is far too easy
to feel the conquering hero.

EXCALIBUR

He ordered a Shirley Temple at
the restaurant. "Think you're old enough to drink that?"
his father asked him
when the drink arrived, a blue plastic sword hooked over its rim.
"Don't say that. You'll ruin his birthday night."
Already they had begun to fight.
He swirled the cherry in his drink, feeling very alone.
"Who pulls this sword from stone
and anvil," he thought,
trying not to listen as his parents fought,
"by sign and right of birth is king of all England."
He lifted the garnish in his hand
and tugged the cherry from the plastic sword.

It did not end their discord;
 the restaurant table was square.
 The cherry plunked back into his drink, loosing the tiny air
 bubbles on the bottom of the glass.
 It reminded him of a summer's day at camp when *en masse*
 his bunk went down to the lake to jump
 into the water from a rope tied to a tree. Standing on a stump
 on the shore
 he saw a glint of metal, like the flash of ore
 in a miner's pan.
 He waded into the water for a closer look and, breaking the ban,
 swam out towards the girls'
 camp on the other side. Diving deep, as if he searched for pearls,
 he found the source of the glinting light:
 an open blade of a Swiss Army Knife held tight
 in the hand of a blonde haired
 girl. Although he was scared,
 he could not help
 watching the way her hair curled about her like strands of kelp
 reaching for the surface.
 Her face
 seemed so serene.
 He could not tell if the keen
 blade were meant to cut her free
 from the rocks she
 was tied to, or to slit her wrist.

He stabbed at the lemon twist
 of his mother's diet coke.
 His father pulled out a pack of Lucky's and began to smoke.
 His mother glared and looked about to
 object, but didn't get the chance. His father asked him, "What do
 you want for your birthday?" He laid the sword atop
 his plate and said, "I only want the fighting to stop."

Matej Krajnc (Slovenia)

THE COUNT OF 7-11

Translated from Slovene by Matej Krajnc

Ulrich comes to shop every day around noon.
 He always buys fresh fruit and vegetables, you know.

Nobody asks him why all the fresh fruit because he gets twitchy.
He's a headless runner, but with a permanent and noble glow.

The castle on the hill is not in his possession anymore.
He lives in the suburbs near a local school.
He sits in the balcony and smokes special cigars.
He wears old jeans and plays with tobacco and garden tools.

But there are still horses up on the hill waiting
For him to give them a hell of a ride.
Oh, that's yesterday's news, says he,
Let's put all those memories aside.

Nobody knows whether he's retired or not.
Does he own the apartment or is he paying the rent?
He calls himself The Count of 7-11.
Oh well, everybody's mind has to be bent ...

The castle on the hill is not in his possession anymore.
The cars and the trains in the distance look like Lego bricks.
The wind sometimes takes him on his journey
Through films noir or whatever they name those old flicks.

But there are still horses up on the hill waiting
For him to give them a hell of a ride.
Oh, that's yesterday's news, says he,
Let's put all those memories aside.

Ah, those tomatoes are bad, says Ulrich.
Very bad indeed, admits the old lady. Old ladies rock.
He'll have to buy a new carrying bag. The old one is in a very bad shape.
Somebody whispers in his ear: "Znam te iz škole. Dobar si bio đak!"

Well, yes, of course, smiles Ulrich.
I was the best. I was a nobleman's son.
But enough about that. He looks at his watch and realizes
He's late for a meeting with Alma Karlin. He hopes she's the one.

But there are still horses up on the hill waiting
For him to give them a hell of a ride.
Oh, that's yesterday's news, says he,
Let's put all those memories aside.

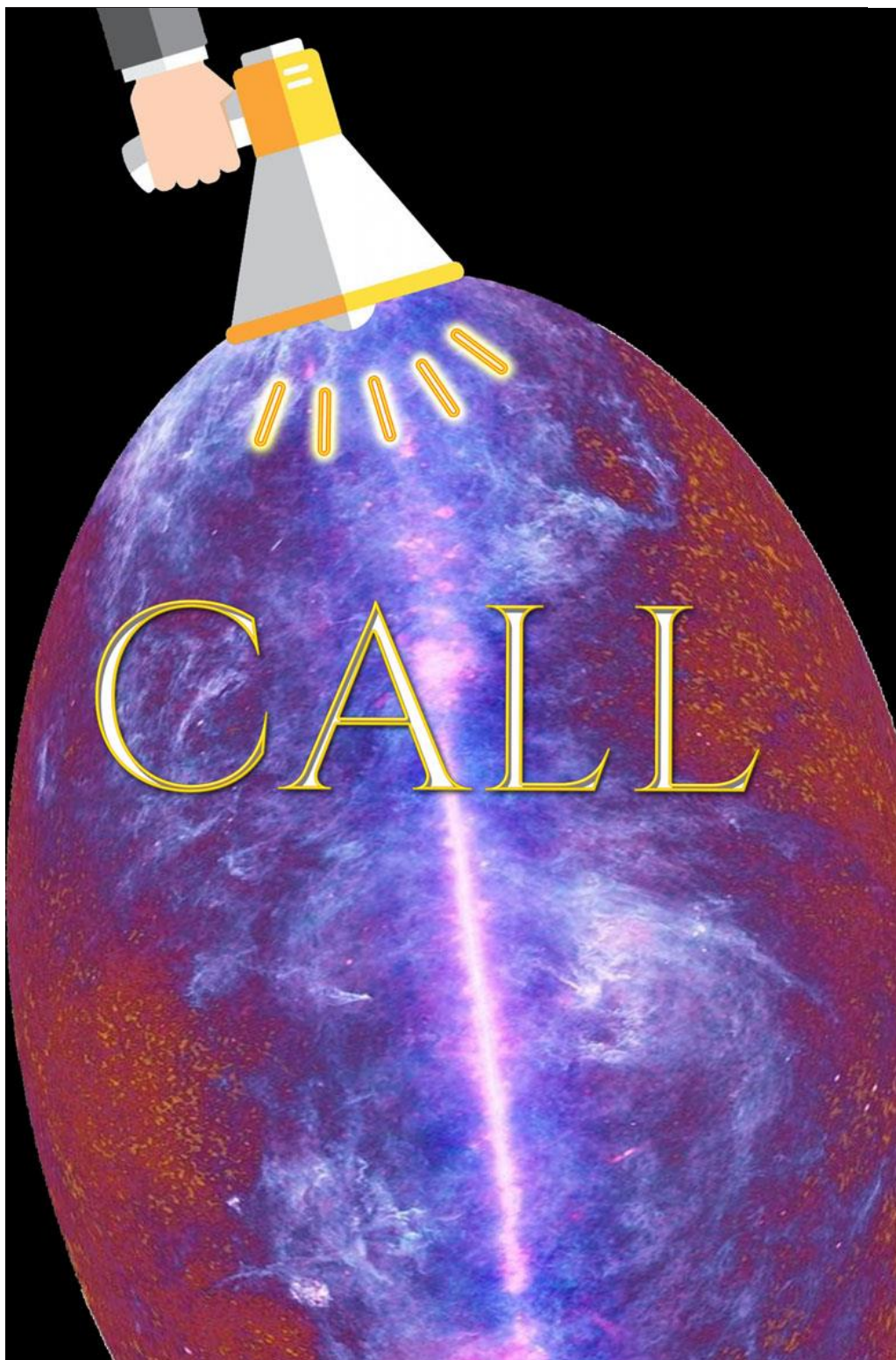
Nada Tržan-Herman (Slovenia)

ANGELS, DEATH AND A DOG

Translation from Slovene by Nada Tržan-Herman, Proofreader: prof. Milica Žuža

Men on Earth live as if in paradise...
 Without worries he sits by the fireplace
 where virtual flames flicker.
 There is enough energy – harvested from the Sun.
 There is enough food which emerges from atoms,
 in huge halls without people... only robots work.

Men sit trapped within walls.
 The computer reads the blinks of his eyelids;
 whatever he desires is brought to his home.
 He is here to indulge, to amuse himself, to think nothing...
 Man has become merely a consumer.
 He lives in enormous cities...
 Deep forests have regrown, wilderness is everywhere...
 Man lives as if wrapped in cotton - surrounded by a concrete.
 Plants and animals – the nature is far from people...
 Man is served by cyborg and machines,
 chained to the tales of Big Brother,
 enjoining food - full of artificial flavour.
 Robots do everything: man is here to be lazy.
 He has no genuine emotions - they are all numbed.
 Physical touch is given by sex robots...
 Man lives among his toys like an overgrown child.
 Illness, pain, and old age are cured by special pills.
 Human society dies through generations,
 there is no connection to Heaven, to Earth!
 Men think they are the center of universe.
 "Love« is an empty word.
 Adam, Eve – both naked but without a trace of desire.
 Dogs have left people; they have become wolves again.
 Man is becoming extinct. Death chuckles.
 Angels are far above – doing nothing,
 Death dances its merry dance.
 Life on Earth has become completely different after ceturies;
 there are nearly no human beings.
 All powerful concrete buildings have crumbled to dust...
 Only trees remember the age of humans,
 nature overgrows everything, plants, animals are full of joy...
 But the wolf waits for someone, so he can become a dog again.



Call for Fanfest:

You might think that there is an infinite amount of time until the next Fanfest (October 2025), but believe me, time has run out yesterday. It is always like this. How do I know that? From experience. Many calls have slipped through my keyboard because I thought I had enough time to prepare a competing literary work.

So – let's start with the theme.

Green Celje is the name of the call.

What do we want under this name?

1. Don't title your work Green Celje, because titling your work after the call is extremely unoriginal.
2. The idea of the call is to present the results of a possible sustainable development of Celje. But since we are generous, the location is not limited to Celje. Be creative.
3. What is sustainable development? Do not give in to cliches. Many things can be wholly different to the big words and nicely sounding modern phrases.
4. Write a prose or a poetry work or a mix of both.
5. It should number at 7.500 words (that's 45.000 characters with spaces).
6. Use the usual array of fonts, but we especially like to see that you do not decorate the text. A good author is usually a bad designer.
7. Add your contact information to the text.
8. We accept only digital works (do not send us hand-written works).
9. **Deadline: 15. 7. 2025**
10. E-mail address: bojan.ekselenski@gmail.com

Standing call for Supernova

The magazine is a biannual publication, published in spring and autumn. The magazine lives off of submissions, especially stories and poems.

We also accept essays and speculative fiction book reviews.

We only accept submissions in electronic form. We cannot accept only type-written submissions and we will reject them.

Deadlines:

- ⇒ **February** for the spring issue (comes out during the time of spring conventions)
- ⇒ **15th of July** for the autumn issue (comes out before Fanfest)

Addresses

E-mail:

- ⇒ celjsko.literarno@outlook.com
- ⇒ bojan.ekselenski@gmail.com (editor)

Editorial Office

- ⇒ Celjsko literarno društvo
- ⇒ Gledališki trg 4
- ⇒ 3000 Celje

We seek the following:

- ⇒ Short story: **up to 7.500 words (45.000 characters with spaces)**, we will accept longer stories based on the available space and we may ask the authors to shorten the stories to the expected length.
- ⇒ Essay: **up to 7.500 words**,
- ⇒ Book review: **up to 3.500 words**,
- ⇒ Poetry: all together **up to 300 lines, an individual poem up to 150 lines**.

Standing call for Vsesledje

Vsesledje is a magazine for culture and literature published by the Celje's Literary Society since 2001. The magazine accepts prose, poetry, and drama. The magazine is published every autumn.

We collect contributions for it that are not genre-specific:

- ⇒ Prose (max 3500 words)
- ⇒ Poetry (2 - 5 poems)
- ⇒ Drama (max 3.500 words)
- ⇒ Essay (max 3.500 words)
- ⇒ **Deadline: 1. 6.**

TEXT FORMATTING (IMPORTANT!)

The first page does not count as part of the text – **it must include the following data:**

- ⇒ Title of the work,
- ⇒ Name and surname,
- ⇒ An open postal address, to where we can send you your author copies,
- ⇒ An active e-mail address for communication.



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
MINISTRY OF CULTURE

About Celje's Literary Society (CLD)

Celje's Literary Society was founded in 2001 due to a desire for the gathering of amateur literary creators.

Since its beginnings, the Society has published the literary journal *Vsesledje* and organised literary events.

The Society dabbles in all sorts of literature, though speculative fiction has been a major part of its activities in the last years.

Celje's Literary Society is active in the region of the former Yugoslavia and is, at least in terms of speculative fiction, the most active of all similar Slovene groups in that regard. The international cooperation also includes taking part in Eurocon.



2001 - 2021
20 let



HALL OF FAME

FANTASTIC PROSE

Andrej Ivanuša
Aljoša Toplak
Barbara Ribič Jelen
Bojan Ekselenski
Domen Mohorič
Dominik Lenarčič
Ivan Šokić
Majda Arhnauer Subašič
Matjaž Marinček
Miha Mazzini
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Deborah Walker (GB)
Eric Johansson (HR)
Frank Roger (B)
Gareth D. Jones (GB)
Krzysztof T. Dąbrowski (PL)
Tihomir Jovanović (SRB)
Zoran Živković (SRB)

FANTASTIC POETRY

Lawrence Schimel (USA + E)
Matej Krajnc (SLO)
Nada Tržan-Herman (SLO)