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A NEW HOPE

FOR

SLOVENIAN FANTASY



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DISCLAMER:

Supernova is an apolitical and unbiased magazine, whose purpose is to publish and promote speculative fiction in Slovenian. The opinions and stances of the authors, expressed in this issue, do not represent the stance of the Supernova editorial board.

Issue

Eurocon Special

2



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JAVNI SKLAD REPUBLIKE SLOVENIJE
ZA KULTURNE DEJAVNOSTI



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Bojan Ekselenski

Confession of a Certain Bojan

Translated from Slovene by ChatGPT with some alien support

Supernova has puffed its way to the magical number 20, while the English edition stands at issue number 2. On this occasion, Bacchus himself invited us to a celebration in a tavern at the beginning of the universe.

This issue has almost everything the biggest ones have—and then some extra for good measure. The indulgence begins right at the start, as the saying goes, the fish smells from the head.

The prose is a mix of domestic and foreign fare, with guests from Belgium, Serbia, and Croatia adding to the feast.

An important part of the magazine belongs to the rich “potica” of the report section, with its largest slice dedicated to Fanfest 9.

This year, the Celje Literary Society organized the nominations for the ESFS Awards, as key members of the Supernova team (and members of the Celje Literary Society) also serve as Slovenia’s delegates to ESFS.

The Slovenian book market remains peculiar, and the literary scene is full of oddities that people outside Slovenia find hard to understand.

The Slovenian fan community, too, is in some areas still self-contained, confined within its own bubble.

Is this the result of specific conditions that arose from certain peculiarities in the cultural and literary landscape?

Well, that's how things are—and we move forward.

As I write this, Artemis has already orbited the Moon and landed. The astronauts were a bit “off the Moon”—quite literally.

Yours devotedly,
Bojan Ekselenski

Prattling of a Particular Dominik

Bojan bemoans how insular the Slovenian fan community is. On some level, he is right, but this is slowly changing. Bojan and I have already done our part to popularise Slovenian SF&F in the former Yugoslavia and I'm glad to report that individual authors, publishing houses and actors are now slowly doing their part. *Edgar Kaos*, the YA dark fantasy book series from domestic superstar Julija Lukovnjak will soon be available in English for the wider public to discover and enjoy (and published by the same publisher as the original, no less!). The Ljubljana-centric convention Na meji nevidnega, the Slovenian Comic-Con, is attracting high profile guests from abroad. Last year, it was Brian Muir. This year, it's Samantha Shannon and Jonathan Stroud. Our nominations for the ESFS awards also prove that there exists a desire for recognition outside the domestic fandom circles. Have a gander at our selection, dear reader, you might find someone or something from our land that might interest you!

Of course, don't limit yourself to the nominated authors and works – gaze also into the Supernova! The old guard represents the Slovenian tricolour, while our guests represent the Croatian, Serbian and Belgian tricolours, joined by Oleh representing the Ukrainian bicolour. We also have a helping of fantastical poetry and a report from Fanfest. A little something to show you what we do back home. ;) Now, without further ado...

Dominik Lenarčič

About Celje's Literary Society (CLD)

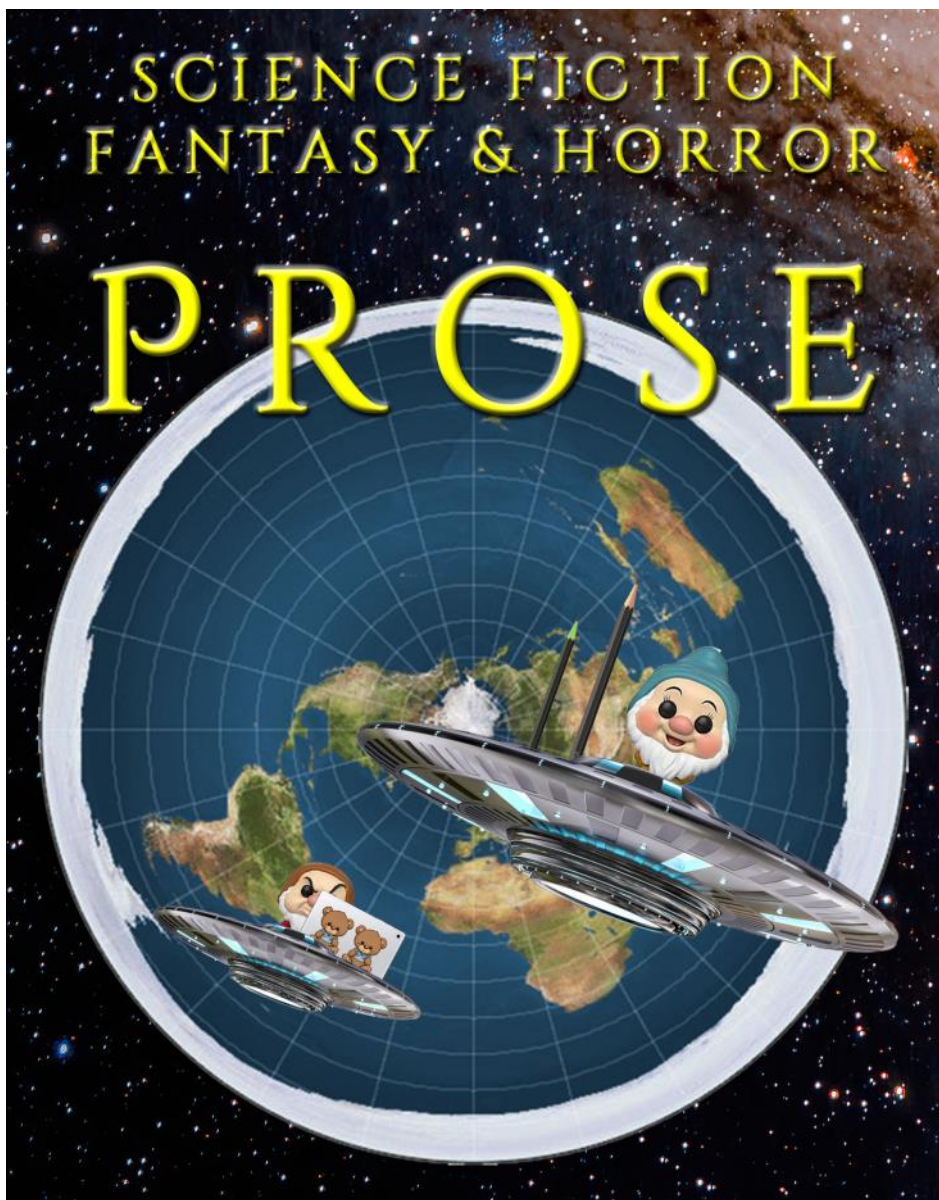
Celje's Literary Society was founded in 2001 due to a desire for the gathering of amateur literary creators.

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.





Andrej Ivanuša

Creating Life

Translated from Slovene by himself

I wanted to take a short rest and therefore carefully checked the energy consumption. A time machine is an incredibly energy-wasting device. It constantly pumps out huge kilowatts of energy through time and space. The time-space wormhole must be open at all times for communication, data transfer, for maintaining the spatial bubble and for the operation of measuring instruments.

"Nikolina, as far as I'm concerned, everything is in its place. I'm going to take a nap now," I told my partner on this important mission for all of humanity.

Nikolina nodded and laughed:

"Okay! You have three hours, and then I'll replace you."

"Well, that's fine!" I said. "But if you finally discover where life began on Earth, wake me up right away. I don't want to miss such a discovery."

She laughed again:

"I won't wake you up. If I find something, I'll just let you sleep. You know - it'll all be mine, mine alone!"

"If you do this, I'll slap you!" I said, feigning anger.

"Yeah, you try it if you dare!" she said back mischievously, gesturing with her fist as she was about to punch me in the nose.

"So!" I shrugged, "I'm going to bed! Good night!"

"You have three hours!" she called after me as the command module's sliding door closed.

Traveling through time and space was only possible a few years ago. But for now, we only know about traveling backwards in time. Apparently, it is not possible to travel to the future as we know it, because events have not yet been created. First, missions were carried out for a few days or months into the past. But now humanity has begun to undertake travel over greater distances and for longer periods of time. Let me explain that the past cannot be changed. Our time machines are surrounded by a space-time bubble and nothing can be sent from it into the environment or into a specific time period. But we can receive waves into the bubble, which allow us to study space and time. We can only be observers of events.

I was proud that Nikolina, a colleague at the technical institute, and I came up with a brilliant idea. And even more so that we received all the financial and technical support for it from the entire human community. We became the messengers of humanity at the creation of the Earth. Namely, our idea is to go back through a time-space wormhole to the time when life on Earth is supposed to have begun. We set ourselves the task of finding the place and determining the time period when the first living cell was formed in a watery soup. In other words, to investigate once and for all how and when life on Earth began.

But so far we have not been successful. The first time jump took us 4.5 billion years into the past. When we stabilized the time machine in orbit above the Earth, we quickly realized that life did not exist at that time. We did not even expect this. Then we slowly went back in intervals of a million years. Now we are at 4.2 billion years in the past. According to the currently known fossils, this should be the time when it all began. True, our observations show that the Earth calmed down during this time and the number of meteorites falling to the surface has also decreased significantly.

*

"Andrej, wake up! You have to see this!" Nikolina's excited voice, coming over the loudspeaker, jolted me upright. "Sorry to wake you! But, really, you can't miss this!"

I immediately rushed to the command module.

“What have you discovered? What do you have? You found life!”

She waved her hand away.

“No, no. It’s not life... Maybe! I don’t know!”

“What don’t you know?”

“Look, a space probe!” she pointed excitedly at the screen.

“What? A space probe!”

“Yes, look!”

I stared at the screen. From behind the Moon, a strange object was traveling towards Earth. It was falling towards the surface at the speed of a meteor. Nikolina had adjusted the devices so that they tracked the journey and measured all the data. I followed the numbers that were rushing across the screen with excitement.

A few moments later, the probe entered the original Earth atmosphere, began to glow, and a few seconds later it crashed into the ground. A crater was created.

“Did you see that! An alien spacecraft,” Nikolina called out excitedly.

“Impossible!” I blurted out. “Maybe it’s ours. Something from the future that they sent back. But without a time-space protective bubble. Someone might have been playing...”

“No! It’s not ours! Look...” Nikolina said, her quick fingers dancing over the switches and keyboards. The probe appeared on the screen as it flew in from behind the Moon. Then she enlarged the image.

Now I took a closer look myself and soon realized that the spacecraft was truly unlike anything a human could make.

“Hey, you’re right. I’ll check where it came from!” I said, and started the pro-computer with my thoughts. The numbers spun in my head and within seconds I knew the result.

“Hmm, this is really interesting. The Frčoplan flew in from the planet Sagale, which orbits the star Sirius B, 8.6 light years from here,” I said.

“I know how far away Sirius is,” Nikolina said, slightly hurt.

*

“Sorry, I got carried away!” I replied.

But then my attention was caught by the flickering of a tiny bio-indicator at the edge of the screen. I pointed at it with my finger:

“Hey! What does that mean!”

Nikolina turned her head. She just stared silently.

Then we looked at each other.

We frantically started measuring and calculating.

A few seconds later, we both said almost simultaneously:

“This is crazy!”

“There were microbes on the ship!” Nikolina said.

“I agree! Their genetic code is practically identical to ours!” I blurted out.

“I saw it! But that’s not possible! How can it be identical? It arrived from another planet and 4.2 billion years ago!” Nikolina added.

“Well ... But, maybe ...!” I whispered. Then I suggested:

“Let’s jump forward a hundred thousand years. I have an idea that I need to test!”

The jump was a simple procedure for me after everything I had done so far. Nothing special happened, and in thirty minutes we were back in the same orbit around the Earth and a hundred thousand years ahead of the present.

“The systems are stable!” I said. “Point the bio-meters at the same place where the probe fell.”

“Right, I did,” Nikolina replied. “What do you have in mind?”

“You just measure and report the results,” I stammered.

She looked at me sharply:

“So you don’t think those microbes from the probe survived the collision with the Earth?”

I repeated: “You just measure and report the results!”

She laughed:

“Oh, how tiring you are! When a meteor hits the Earth, it kills everything around it. Even microbes and bacteria. And they’re supposed to survive here? Please!”

“I don’t know! Maybe! So, please check!” I replied.

A few seconds later, the bio-indicators began to flash. Warm, slightly sulphurous water had accumulated in the crater made by the extraterrestrial probe. The microbes that had survived the probe’s journey through the harsh conditions of space had happily and abundantly multiplied over a period of hundreds of thousands of years. But they didn’t just stay there. When the basin was reshaped by earthquakes and the movement of the earth’s crust, the first soup of life spilled out around it.

Nicolina stared wordlessly, checking the results again. I saw her reset all the bio-indicators three times, each time to eliminate the slightest possible error. Finally, she sat down and just nodded.

“Andrei, you were right!” she whispered, still not taking her eyes off the measuring pointers. “A probe from the planet Sagale - Sirius B brought biological material and this is the beginning of the creation of life on Earth.”

“That’s right!” I confirmed. “Ten thousand years ago, before the probe crashed into Earth, the Sagales apparently began exploring space. First with probes. They certainly tried to make them completely sterile. But the question is whether they had good technology for completely sterilizing devices. We Earthlings have been doing this for the last five hundred years. Surely there is some Earth microbe on the Voyager probe, traveling towards a similar fate. After all, the probe was sterilized. But I am now increasingly convinced that they were not able to ensure perfect sterilization at that time.”

After a while, Nikolina said quietly:

“I suggest we check that too. Let’s jump through time and space to the edge of our Solar System, where the Voyager I probe is just leaving it.”

“Not a bad idea,” I nodded. “I’m really interested if that’s the case! We can also check what the development of civilization was like on the planet Sagale when the probe was launched. It will be interesting to see how similar we Sagalians and Earthlings are.”

“I hope you get permission for something like that. Such a trip is not cheap,” said Nikolina.

“No, it’s not! But a basic human trait is curiosity,” I replied.

That’s right! Curiosity was decisive. But we weren’t alone on either expedition. We are still observing the development of the Sagalians. I have no doubt that they too have found a way to travel through time and space. Perhaps we will even find the possibility of some direct contact in the present universe. After all, we are biologically very close.

Make no mistake, there are microbes on Voyager I, too, happily traveling through space. Maybe the craft will crash onto some suitable planet at the other end of our Galaxy. Then we Earthlings will be blamed for creating life on that planet.

Barbara Ribič Jelen

Chronovisor

Translated from Slovene by David Lemon

April 2135.

The centre of Ljubljana. An obscure street with only a few occupied middle class houses. Most of them are in a pretty sorry state. A shy, modest sign saying BOOKSHOP is attached to the wall next to the entrance. He presses down hesitantly on the shaky handle and with all his strength pushes open the heavy oak door. For a moment, a loud creaking noise drowns out the gentle tinkling of a bell.

“Ah-ha,” he mutters, “the owner must be in the back somewhere.”

“Hello,” he almost shouts.

He takes a deep breath. His eyes need some moments to adjust to the dark interior. Books wherever he looks. Crammed onto bookshelves, piled up all over the counter, in piles on the wooden floor, scattered willy-nilly on two armchairs that have seen better days. In the far corner, a small table lamp stands on a pile of books.

He swings round. The sill of the small window that barely merits the name is also heaped with books. A creepy feeling, as if he has broken into a space from the distant past, gives him goose bumps. The dust tickles the hair in his nostrils and he sneezes loudly.

Still silence.

“Jan, Jan, pick me up! Jan, Jan,” his ears are gently caressed by a barely audible voice. He would have sworn that the whisper touched his ear. Something strange draws him towards the only glassed-in bookshelves. He slides back the glass. His eye falls on an unimpressive little book. He pulls it out cautiously, so as not to damage it.

Title: **HOW?** Author: **Dr. Jaka Weissman**

For a moment he is struck dumb with amazement. He hasn't heard of this one before. Then his mind is flooded with questions: How? Why? From where? And above all: Where to? Weissman – his role model, thanks to whom he studied and got doctorates in both microbiology and genetics, and became interested in a thousand other things.

“You've finally come,” he is disturbed by a hoarse voice.

The old man stands between the tattered curtains of indeterminate colour that divide the bookshop from the private space behind. A scrawny body with slender limbs, deep lines on his face, tousled white hair that hasn't seen a comb for some time. Round glasses with metal frames perched on a Roman nose. Behind them, sharp, piercing eyes. Nothing senile about them. Jan stares at him thoughtfully.

“Where have I seen that look before?” the troublesome question drills into his brain.

“I see that you've found the book you were intended to. It contains instructions.”

“My task is complete,” he adds and disappears behind the curtain, his feet sliding across the floor.

For some time, Jan just breathes deeply and wonders what on earth has just happened. He hadn't intended to go down this god-forsaken street where among the decaying buildings the dusty bookshop was hidden. If he thought about it, he wasn't sure how he had ended up in this strange place. And even less why he had looked for this book.

He can feel the blood flowing lazily through his veins. He feels tired, as if it is lead that is flowing. What he really wants to do is to sit down and get up again only after a month, but he has nowhere to sit.

When he opens the book his hands are shaking slightly. His mouth hangs open. On every page of the book he is greeted scornfully by a simple question: IMMORTALITY?

A slip of paper falls from the book onto the floor, as if in slow motion. He picks it up. On it in a crooked hand is written:

GEORGE THE GREAT

THE OLD MAN IN BLUE GUARDS A SECRET

THE WATERS OF THE VENICE LAGOON

*

Maj 2135.

Venice. Once a famous tourist destination, swarming with people. Today a city of ghosts. A stone bench on St. Mark's Square. Jan is once again staring at the riddle on the piece of paper. He long ago stopped counting how many times he has tried to unravel it in his mind. It is clear to him that the waters of the Venice Lagoon are hiding something. Živa and Matiček, friends from student days to whom he showed the book and the riddle, immediately agreed with him. In doing so he aroused their curiosity, as well as a little explorer's zeal. At first Jan hesitated, but Matiček's simple argument about the search for the secret convinced him.

He leans back against the warm stone and sinks into reflection on his role model. Weissman was a leading scientist, a geneticist whose research, a hundred years ago, had saved the life of people with rare genetic disorders. He had uncovered most of the human genome and successfully manipulated genes.

It hadn't lasted long. He soon vanished from sight, along with his research results. His disappearance coincided with an unusually widespread occurrence of aggressive forms of cancer and severe dementia. People were dropping like flies. Various conspiracy theories soon emerged. The most frequent one was that terrorists had poisoned water and food supplies in order to reduce the number of Earth's inhabitants. As the only one who could save mankind, Weissman had supposedly been kidnapped.

In one way, the arguments of the desperate people made sense. In the time since his disappearance the world's population had fallen to a fifth of its former size, and then in recent years had slowly stabilised. Also, the idea of Weissman as some kind of saviour was a logical one. He was a lone wolf and refused to let anyone collaborate in his research, and so no one else was near a solution. Every possible institution, the police and the army, detective and spies, and even ordinary people had searched for him right across the globe. In vain.

Researchers from different medical fields and geneticists tried to accelerate their research in the hope that they would find a cure. But their hope was in vain. The research ground to a halt, as if they were driving across volcanic ash. They simply couldn't find a way past the dead end. Over half a century, the knowledge already acquired became lost remarkably quickly. And not only in the field of genetics. There were only a handful of students; most people were simply struggling to survive. Right across the world there were post-apocalyptic scenes. The only things still functioning were the police and the army.

He starts. Matiček and Živa are splashing him as they remove their diving gear. The few pigeons on the deserted square are scared away.

"Again nothing. And we've searched all the Venice canals," Matiček mutters angrily.

As if unaware of their annoyance and irritation, Jan exclaims: "Oh god, what an idiot I am!"

He is looking at the island opposite St. Mark's Square and pointing: "Of course, St. George, the great dragon slayer. Fighter against evil. The island of San Giorgio Maggiore. The old man in blue must be there. A painting, maybe a statue?" he speculates. "Let's go straight there."

The gondola that they borrowed three weeks ago, which seemed not to have an owner, bumps against the embankment. They get out and moor it to the nearest stone bollard. They

dare not leave their equipment in the gondola so they hide it in some bushes and erase all traces of it. You never know who might be skulking around. The island doesn't seem to be inhabited, the church and monastery are also silent. Here and there window panes are broken, and the plants next to the buildings are neglected and growing wild. They enter the church. Long spiders' webs criss-cross the space. Avoiding them, they examine the empty walls, broken pews, damaged statues. Disappointed that they haven't found the old man in blue, they leave the church and head for the monastery. This looks pretty much the same.

"So, we've had it then," grumbles Matiček.

"All is not lost," says Jan, refusing to give in. He walks along, turned towards the other two as he speaks. Živa wants to tell him something and is eagerly pointing in front of them, but he doesn't let her get a word in edgeways: "Monasteries sometimes had gardens and parks. Let's have a look around!"

Seconds later he crashes into an unrecognisable stone mass that is thickly covered with climbing plants and falls into a bush. From among the greenery, obscenities can be heard. Matiček takes a knife and tries to remove the twisted woody limbs

"You need an axe for this," he says grumpily. He can't understand how Jan managed to fall through the thick green tangle. He is sweating heavily before he manages to free him from the embrace of the branches. He has the sudden absurd thought that the plant is alive.

Jan finally rolls out of the green trap. He's got a lump on his head. "So, let's see what attacked me."

He gently pulls back the tendrils from the stone object as if they were fragile spider's webs. From beneath them a shape emerges. Crumbling stonework with a hint of blue. The image of an old man wielding a spear. It is thrust into the back of a snarling dragon. And the dragon's tail points towards the water.

"Well, that was worth a bump on the head," says Jan in amazement. "We'd never have found it. Let's go back and bring the equipment here on the gondola."

Jan impatiently walks up and down the embankment. Now he regrets never having done a scuba diving course. He's worried that they'll find nothing.

It doesn't take long for Matiček and Živa to appear from the water.

"Throw us a rope if you want to find out what this secret is," they call, gesticulating.

They go under once again with the rope.

Soon, all three of them are trying to pull something from the water.

"But it's not all that heavy," gasps Živa, "it can't weigh more than thirty kilos. Are we such weaklings or what?"

The bundle is already in the gondola when Jan remembers: "Go and get a sample of water and algae! You know why: if we get stopped somewhere, we have to have something to show them. Just the permit from the institute without samples won't be enough."

They arouse no suspicion and no one stops them. Not in Venice, where they first load everything into the van belonging to the institute and then push the gondola into the first canal, nor on the roads to the border. The Italian side of the border crossing is almost empty.

Some metres before the border they are brought to earth by whistling and waving.

"Hey, what's the big hurry, I didn't give you permission to drive on," says the police officer aggressively.

"Open up the back," he continues sternly.

They glance at each other. Živa takes the documents, gets out of the van and opens the back doors.

"Here, officer," she pushes the documents into his hand and gives him a charming smile.

"The Institute of Microbiology in Rome asked us to cooperate with them. We took some

samples of water and algae from the Venetian lagoon,” she tells him confidently.

“Hm, what about the package tied up with string?” he asks mistrustfully.

Matiček freezes. “Now we’ve had it,” he murmurs to Jan.

But Živa takes this in her stride: “You’d better not touch that! It contains samples kept in special conditions. It’s hermetically sealed. We suspect that they are highly toxic materials. We need to get them as quickly as possible to a strictly guarded laboratory and analyse them.”

“So what are you waiting for, you can go,” the nervous police officer exclaims, handing back the documents and stepping quickly aside.

Živa gave him a friendly smile and slowly returns to the van: “Okay, Jan, step on it!”

*

August 2135.

The Slovene Institute for Microbiology and Genetics. The attic. The space used exclusively by doctor Jan Vitovc. For some weeks Živa and Matiček have also been here the whole time. On a large worktop in the centre of the room lies the cleaned-up device. They still haven’t managed to assemble it satisfactorily. They have assembled and disassembled it at least a hundred times. There are of course no assembly instructions. They haven’t a clue what kind of device it might be or what its purpose was. All three of them are staring at it in exasperation.

Jan addresses it out loud: “What the hell are you? Are you connected with immortality in some way? Come on, give up at least one of your secrets! Surely we’re not going to waste our lives on an insoluble puzzle!”

“So, Mr. Physicist,” he looks at Matiček, “any ideas? And you, Ms. Musician, is there any part of it that looks like a speaker?”

Matiček is moving about restlessly, stroking his chin: “What if... What if...”

“What?” snaps Živa impatiently.

“I could be that. Yes, I think that it might just be that,” Matiček nods and smiles in a satisfied way.

Then he explains: “Towards the end of the last century there lived in Italy this guy Father Ernetti. He was an exorcist, otherwise a scientist. He worked with a group of experts and people said that they invented some kind of chronovisor, a device that showed people the past. Then everything went quiet. Some said that the device was being kept in the Vatican, others that Ernetti himself had destroyed it. He was supposedly living for some time in the monastery on San Giorgio Maggiore. Near the end of his life he insisted that they had discovered nothing and that the whole thing had been a hoax. The event gradually faded away. I was a student when I read an article about it, and then I also forgot. Now I remember, it suddenly sprang into my mind.”

“But in any case, that doesn’t help us much if we don’t know how to put it together,” said Živa.

“But imagine if we could assemble it and get it working – we could use it to see Weissman’s research,” replied Jan. “We might even be able to work out how and why the mass dying came about,” he continued.

“But what purpose would it serve?” said Živa sceptically. “We can’t return to the past to put anything right!”

But Jan wouldn’t be put off: “Maybe you’re right, but we could use the knowledge to try and save the future.”

*

December 2135.

The Slovene Institute for Microbiology and Genetics. Still in the attic.

The device is standing on the worktop. This time Jan, Matiček and Živa are convinced that

they have got it right. Every component of it seems to be in the right place.

“Look at all these antennae,” says Matiček enthusiastically. “Every one of them is made from an alloy of three metals. I had one analysed, but no one seems able to work out which metals they are. I tested them to see what purpose they might serve. They are evidently designed to catch waves of some kind. If it really is a chronovisor, they might be looking for sound and light waves. I read in some old book that over time light and sound waves somehow break down into different forms of energy and that antennae can revive the remnants of the electromagnetic radiation that is a side effect of the different processes.”

“It all sounds very complicated,” sighs Jan, “unless you’re a physicist.”

Matiček continues eagerly: “Now we need some kind of sensor that we can direct at the place, date or person, and of course receivers that would enable us to record sound and vision from any time or place. To put it simply, it would be a television that brought events and sounds from the past.”

“Well, that is a lot more understandable,” commented Živa.

Matiček gestured towards the row of apparatus, which looked very complicated: “I would never be able to put a device like this together on my own. I still don’t even completely understand exactly how it works. These guys in the past were real geniuses.”

“I wonder what happened to reduce the capacity of our brains like that?” he says thoughtfully.

“I’d give anything to have a mind like that Father Ernetti,” he mutters.

Jan interrupts his ruminations: “What do you say, shall we try and get it running? This mystery is really bugging me.”

“We’ve nothing to lose,” says Živa in agreement. “The worst thing that can happen is that it explodes.”

“It’s a good job we have the cable, otherwise we wouldn’t know how to start it.” says Matiček, plugging it in. Then he turns the on switch.

A humming noise can be heard.

“Ah-ha. It sounds like a radio that’s tuned to the right frequency,” says Živa with a laugh.

“Look, the screen has also come on. It really is like a television. There’s just snow on the screen,” he says in surprise.

“Let’s search for the right station,” says Matiček, touching one of the sensors.

An image appears of a medieval castle under siege.

“But that’s Predjama Castle,” exclaims Jan.

In that moment the picture changes and shows the three of them on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

Matiček is startled: “This bloody machine can read your mind. When I touched the sensor, I was thinking how long it was since I had visited Predjama Castle. And then I recalled our adventure in Venice and it responded straight away.”

The picture disappears and there is once again snow on the screen.

“This damn thing is dangerous,” he says, alarmed.

“How simple,” says Jan with satisfaction. “I’ll touch the sensors and think about Weissman and his research.”

A picture appears on the screen of a young Weissman in a laboratory. The images keep changing with incredible rapidity, like watching a speeded-up film. Jan recognises displays of DNA and genes. The images are changing as if an invisible observer was going deeper and deeper. Chromosomes, sequences of base pairs, endless variants of individual polymorphous nucleotides, an opaque chain of signs that mean nothing to them. Cell nuclei, loosely twisted threads, the division of cells, the formation of chromosomes, telomere – a specific ordering of

nucleotides at the end of chromosomes, which with each division of the cell becomes shorter and shorter. Jan doesn't touch the sensors any more, but the scenes keep appearing uninterruptedly.

"Turn it off," he shouts. "Turn the damn thing off," and he sinks to the floor.

He comes round in bed with an unbearable headache. He feels something nice and cool on his forehead.

"It almost fried your brain," says Živa.

"Do you have any idea what those images meant?" she asks with a concerned look in her eyes.

"I recognised some of it. Our current research is light years behind his."

His voice is a mixture of admiration, regret and bitterness.

"I know that you're not going to do anything stupid now, but what about later when you recover?" says Živa, concerned.

"Promise me you'll never turn on the chronovisor on your own. In the name of our friendship, I'm asking you – no, I'm insisting!" said Matiček decisively.

Jan doesn't hear these last words – his body needs sleep.

"We daren't leave him alone even for a moment," says Živa.

A week later they once again turn on the chronovisor. Weissman's picture appears on the screen. But it is still. Jan cautiously draws nearer. He is thinking about his role model's last research and events appear on the screen without him touching the sensor. This time, Weissman is sitting at a workbench. He is supporting his head and muttering: "I know that three genes are included in very early developing embryos and then turned off. Somewhere in the body a spare copy must be kept – information from the earliest days. Cells age because they forget how to work properly, they forget what kind of cells they are."

His eyes are shining feverishly, he is swaying backwards and forwards. Through his lips a single word keeps emerging: "Immortality, immortality, immortality..."

Matiček turns off the main switch. "That's enough for now. Rest a bit, we'll turn it back on in an hour or two."

They once more turn on the chronovisor. The last image of Weissman is frozen on the screen. There is a continuation. Weissman looks as if he hasn't slept for a week. His lips are trembling: "I must find it, I must find it," he mutters wearily.

Suddenly his eyes are ablaze and his words clear: "Damn fool – proteins... proteins are the building blocks of life. A grown cell They must be able to change a developed cell into a stem cell. That's what could change the course of ageing."

Again he rocks backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards: "I'll activate the protein in the hippocampus. I'll be the first guinea pig. How many more discoveries lie ahead of me..." His eyes glow like those of a madman.

The picture jumps. Beside Weissman stand uniformed officers with icy eyes and stony faces.

The one who has a slightly different uniform speaks: "I advise you to hand over your latest findings voluntarily. For the good of all mankind."

Once more there is snow on the screen.

Jan turns it off.

"Let's go to the shelter!" Matiček says. He takes the cable of the chronovisor with him.

"And why did we have to come down here?" Jan grumbles.

"What don't you understand?" replies Matiček. "We're safe here, no one can hear us or monitor us. This is a nuclear fallout shelter, no waves of any kind can permeate it."

He sighs: "This damn invention is dangerous. Haven't you thought that there may be another

er somewhere? Maybe a better one? That someone is using it? How do you think the guys in uniform knew about Weissman's research? He was like a hermit, wasn't he? I've never seen such uniforms."

"And why do you think that the secret was protected by St. George and the old man in blue who fought with a dragon? Has the possibility of easily acquiring some knowledge ruined your morals?" he said aggressively.

Živa and Jan are shocked.

"Have you even thought of the possibility that someone is also watching us and can easily find us?"

"And if so, then God help us," he adds in a scared voice.

"Let's disassemble it, store the parts in the boiler room like old scrap. Destroy it. I don't care about all the things we might see, or the knowledge we might get, or helping mankind, or all the good that might come from it," says Živa decisively.

*

A cold, sunny January day, 2136.

The centre of Ljubljana. A bookshop in an out of the way street. The familiar sound of a door creaking open. The bell above it tinkling. Jan enters. The space is silent and freezing cold. He shudders.

"Weissman," he calls out.

Silence.

Then he hears slow, sliding steps. The old man appears between the curtains, looking even thinner and more wrinkled than he did months ago.

"Come," he gestures. "I can't be on my feet for long."

Jan follows him. They walk slowly down the dark corridor. Here, too, the walls are lined with books. They enter the kitchen, which is a tiny bit lighter, but no less crowded with books. The old man sits on the only available chair.

"Move some books and sit down," he says.

For some time, they say nothing, but stare at each other. In their embarrassment they are thinking how to begin the conversation.

"For some time I hoped that you would continue my research. That you would work out what went wrong," says Weissmann thoughtfully.

"My friends and I solved the puzzle that you wrote on a scrap of paper. We watched some events from the past," Jan replies.

"Now it's no longer working." He avoids mentioning the device directly.

"It's too dangerous, it even responds to thoughts. We're not sure whether there's another one that's still working."

"Do you think those people are no longer around? Did they never look for you, demanded that you carry on your research?" Jan wants to know.

"They looked for me, but they didn't find me. I swapped identities with my only relative. We looked alike and were a similar age. He died in my arms from an aggressive form of cancer. I registered the body as that of Jaka Weissman, and since then I have been going under the name of Franc," he tells him.

"I was doing pretty well. My body responded positively to the proteins I drank. And then I ran out of them. Ageing continued and I could no longer reverse the process. I had nothing with which to do it," he says regretfully.

He is silent for some time. Then he murmurs thoughtfully, nodding as he does so.

"You know about those people, I thought long and hard about what happened. They had been sent by the elite, who wanted immortality. And because of them, tests had to be carried

out on people before it could be used. I assume that they genetically manipulated the seeds of cultivars widely used in food.”

Once again he is silent for a while and then he continues: “I also thought about the mass production of proteins that would, to put it simply, reverse the ageing process. We can only achieve that through everyday diet.”

“If we change the appropriate genes...” he becomes lost in thought.

“But if we change the genes of seeds that have already been genetically manipulated, how can we be sure that the plants won’t degenerate and that the genes won’t mutate?” Jan asks impatiently.

“Yes, that simple. That’s exactly what must have happened,” Weissman was as agitated as a child.

“You’re the one who could...” he doesn’t get a chance to complete his thought.

Jan interrupts him: “Absolutely not. I never want to embark on a solitary journey of research. To what end? So that my findings will be stolen and exploited to the detriment of mankind. But in any case, I told you that it’s no longer working,” a slight hesitation can be discerned in his voice.

Weissman gives an almost indiscernible grin: “A shame, among many generations of students you were the best. But never say never! There are challenges to face at every step.”

Jan shakes his head and shifts nervously on his chair: “Now I really must go, I have urgent matters to attend to.”

The old man cannot conceal his satisfied smile: “Right, goodbye for the present.”

March 2136.

The Slovene Institute for Microbiology and Genetics. The attic space. Determined knocking disturbs doctor Jan Vitovec during a demanding experiment.

“Damn it!” he swears. “What the hell is it now? I said that no one was to disturb me.”

“I’m not no one.” he hears a confident voice. “I am the solicitor and notary Jožko Janež. Are you Jan Vitovec, doctor of microbiology and genetics?”

“I am,” he confirms with surprise.

“I’ve brought documents about your inheritance. You just have to sign and I’ll do all the necessary to transfer the property to your name.”

Jan’s brain freezes and without asking any questions he signs the large sheaf of documents. But when the lawyer is already leaving, he comes to and calls out: “Wait a minute, what inheritance?”

“The solicitor replies impatiently; “Franc Weissmann, of course. You’ll find there a list of all the movable property, while there’s only one item of immovable property, which is recorded at the top of the list. With your signature you acquired ownership and user rights. I wish you good day.”

Jan grabs the thick sheaf of papers. The list of movable property includes a large number of valuable scientific books and a long list of lab equipment that even the best laboratories in the world would not be ashamed of. Weissman had known him better than anyone else. Even better than he knew himself.

And in his head echoes the words: “I wish you good day, I wish you good day, I wish you good day.”



Bojan Ekselenski

Legends of Kurt and I

Translated from Slovenian by David Lemon

Warmth

I don't remember such summer heat. Even the Savinja, where I'm dabbling my feet, is like a hot spring. The Savinja bathing areas are full of people. Then... Where is my Jožica? I quickly look all around. I am alone. I shiver. I turn my face towards the sun, close my eyes and am caressed by a pleasant warmth.

I quickly open my eyes. For a moment, the hot breeze is replaced by an icy Russian wind. Kurt tugs at my torn sleeve.

"That was a close one."

I grab my rifle and cautiously look out of the shelter. The silhouette of Moscow is within reach, but so far away.

Dew

Lovers of a hot climate certainly don't understand my passion. Ellesmere Island is far to the north, as part of Queen Elizabeth Land. In July it is a fine destination, since you're not going to be caught by the darkness then. And it's not hot.

Kurt grinned:

"Today is really steamy, it's ten degrees."

"I'll sleep a little longer," I decided and closed my eyes.

I opened my eyes and breathed out noisily:

"Damn it, my mask has steamed up." In a helmet it's so awkward waddling across the dead desert of the murdered Earth.

Portal

My strength had already left me. I envied Kurt, how he cut a way out of the ring and made several seconds for himself to drink from the bladder.

Skeletons were partying like chronic alcoholics on free schnapps. "Kurt! There's no shortage of them!"

I grunted and swung my sword even more. Bones whizzed through the air. Finally, I broke through and jumped with Kurt into the portal.

I removed the VR headset and looked through the bars of the cell. The skeleton guard was conferring with the zombie chief.

Hippocrates

There's never a shortage of patients. It seems as if half of Africa has come to this run-down village made of mud and reeds. But the Hippocratic oath does not discriminate.

I cleaned and bound the infected ulcer of an old woman, who maybe wasn't all that old. The look of gratitude in her eyes made the effort worth it.

Between one poor soul and the next I go into the shade of a large tree. Suddenly it strikes me. What the hell am I doing here?

I shake my head. For a moment, I fall asleep. My SS cap falls on the floor. Kurt coughs. "Josef!" Ah yes, allow me to introduce myself: I'm Josef Mengele, your personal doctor.

Poetic Inspiration

The bar is my second home. It's true that Kurt the waiter is always giving me black looks, as I occupy a table in the corner all day and sip cheap swill. No one wants to sit with me. Probably everyone is deterred by my smell, which isn't exactly the scent of freshly picked roses. Cheap wine is my only luxury when I am following undoubted poetic inspiration.

I was immersed in the search for the poetic. My lyrical subject was tirelessly weaving a net from a cacophony of sensations. It would be now. Now.

Then it erupted. Not onto paper, but through my mouth onto the floor. I felt Kurt's angry look.

I stared at the ceiling, terrible. I'd fallen out of bed again.

The Penultimate Day of Sausage, Ham and Cheese

I look up, he sees me.

I am also looking out from a safe bed.

And me as well.

So there are three of us involved in this. Ham, sausage and cheese, the three-in-one god of this shop window. He is looking at us. He is looking at me. I am struck by my memory of our previous lives. I hear a voice:

"Kurt, shall I take this sausage and cheese for the picnic?"

Kurt nodded:

"And the ham as well," and points to me.

We are celebrating our picnic at the end of the universe...

The Final Station

Translated from Slovene by David Lemon

15:50 - Marjeta breathed a sigh of relief when she managed to jump on the train at the last minute. And that awful fog had appeared just as she was rushing through the underpass. She hoped that Polde was already on the train or that he would jump on just before it left.

Where is Polde?

At this time the train was usually a lot fuller, but not today. She pulled out her mobile to make sure, but what bad luck: the lifeless black screen dumbly indicated that the battery was empty.

How could it have emptied so quickly?

The train started moving.

Where is Polde?

As she looked round the carriage, her eyes stopped on an unusually dressed guy with his hood up. On the luggage rack he placed a scythe, a kind she hadn't seen for a long time.

Who today uses a scythe like that?

Ta dum, ta dum, the train rattled in the rhythm of a polka.

She stared at the impenetrable white curtain on the other side of the glass.

Among the few passengers she saw none of the schoolkids the train was usually full of. She actually missed a little their boisterous racket, although it usually got on her nerves. This silence was depressing. *You miss noise when it is not there,*

Where are the schoolkids and students?

Towards the end of the carriage she saw only one young woman who looked the right age to be a university student. No one was holding a game console, or a book or anything mind improving.

Ta dum, ta dum.

The only sound.

She thought that the train should already have reached the first station where they would hear the announcement:

“Next station, Ljubljana Polje.”

She knew the sequence of stations by heart, how could she not after all those years of making the journey?

But the speakers remained stubbornly silent.

She looked for the time on the information screen, but there was nothing there either. Did it run on batteries that someone had forgotten to change?

No, that couldn't be the case.

She rejected the idea of a conspiracy of batteries against her. *Marjeta vs. batteries.*

What if the information screen was simply not working? When she got on the train she hadn't paid it any attention. In this epidemic, even a malfunctioning clock could make her shudder with unease.

But ...

Sooner or later the train would reach the station. That was inevitable. *Why should she be worrying? The train was relatively steadily distancing itself from Ljubljana and getting nearer to Maribor.* Meanwhile, it would get dark and the white fog would become black. That was also an inevitable part of travelling in the late autumn.

Ta dum, ta dum.

She leaned her forehead against the window. She could see nothing except the dense, boring whiteness. When would they reach the first station? At least ten minutes must have passed. Her inner clock had not stopped working, it didn't run on batteries. Once again she looked at the figure in the hood and the scythe. Maybe he was going to take part in a scything competition. November seemed to be full of Black Fridays with reduced prices and he had bought it because of that.

“Hurry, Black Friday!”

In contrast to the Americans, who had only one Black Friday, Slovenes had a whole Black November, thirty black days. Soon they would be extending Black Friday across the whole year! But when you wanted to buy anything worth having, the discounts mysteriously vanished. Black Friday and all that was nothing but a con.

Buy! Buy! Consume! Consume!

She turned her head in the other direction and smiled politely at an elderly woman. She was gripping a handbag that had obviously been in service a great number of years. Her dress and shoes also had a strong retro look (and probably the smell of mothballs well past their sell by date).

Only the window separated the warm space from the unpleasant cloak of impenetrable fog. She felt like a fish in an endless, isolated aquarium. Inside, warmth and clarity; outside, a thick, dark, amorphous greyness.

Ta dum, ta dum.

Marjeta got up and walked towards the end of the train, where she saw an old gentleman, who was clutching a briefcase that had seen better days. She decided to try her luck with regard to the time:

“Excuse me,” she said, “have you got the time, please? My phone's not working. We should have stopped at the next station ages ago.”

For some moments he made not reply, and then he raised his round, bald head with its protruding ears and looked at her with sad eyes:

“The time,” he looked past her, “we haven’t arrived yet.”

Marjeta replied impatiently:

“I know that. I just want to know what the time is.”

The man murmured quietly:

“We haven’t arrived.”

Marjeta gave a loud sigh of annoyance. Half an hour must have passed and the train hadn’t yet stopped at a single station. What kind of train was this? Would the guard come round? *He would be sure to know.*

And talk of the devil...

The guard was sure to know.

Ta dum, ta dum.

The guard approached her and she showed him her monthly pass, which she already had ready. The man, who was barely taller than her, even though she was no giant, merely nodded.

“One other thing,” she stopped him, when he was already turning his attention to the moth-balled old lady, “what time is it and why haven’t we stopped in Polje? This is the Maribor train, isn’t it?”

The guard stood there, stony faced:

“We haven’t arrived yet. Our train left from platform B.”

Marjeta stammered in confusion:

“Wh-what platform B? I’ve never heard of it. What train is this? Where’s it going?” She had goose pimples and felt as if she was sinking into despair. What if she wasn’t travelling towards Maribor, but towards Jesenice or Koper?

The guard remained bureaucratically indifferent:

“Don’t worry! No one here is on the wrong train.”

It suddenly struck her. *Platform B? Polde is on the right train and I’m not.*

Ta dum, ta dum.

“Where’s this train going? Jesenice?” She tried to unravel that enigma.

“For you, to Maribor,” the guard replied in a monotone.

“I’m confused. You said that this was the train from platform B and that it also goes to Maribor. Is this some extra inter-city or international train?”

The guard nodded in an understanding way:

“Don’t worry, you’ll get to the final station on time.”

She thought about the confusion that the guard had caused her. She couldn’t remember ever hearing before about platforms A or B.

She’d bet her life on it that at this time there were no inter-city or international trains from platforms 11 and 12, only local ones. They had been rattling along for fifty years and over the last ten years the speed hadn’t changed, although the rickety old carriages from socialist times, known as *gomulkas* after the Polish communist leader, had been replaced by more comfortable ones. A good two and a half hours in each direction, five hours altogether each day. That’s how it had been already in the time of Franz Joseph and now, well over a century later...

Ta dum, ta dum.

Darkness shrouded the world on the other side of the window. It was really creepy. She felt a tightness in her chest. She wanted to shake off this anxiety. She spoke again to the old woman:

“I’ve never seen such fog. It’s a bit frightening, isn’t it?”

The woman didn’t take her eyes off some spot on the floor:

“When we arrive it’ll be over.”

Marjeta frowned in annoyance:

“Of course I know that we’ll arrive in the end.”

The woman returned to her silent imitation of a statue. What else could she do? Marjeta saw a watch on the woman’s wrist and plucked up the courage to ask her:

“Excuse me,” she lowered her voice, “do you know what time it is?”

For some moments the old woman stared in front of her, then she looked at her in a more animated way:

“I know your clock stopped. We haven’t arrived yet.”

Marjeta felt her blood pressure rising, her pulse quickening:

“Yes, I know that, but I don’t know what time it is.”

The woman responded indifferently:

“It’s not important what the time is,” and she resumed staring into space. Marjeta realised that the old woman, too, was a little out of it, like the bald guy. *Where have I ended up?* She took a number of deep breaths to slow down her heartbeat. Her doctor had drummed into her: *Because of your weak heart, until you have the operation – no stress! Hypertension and stress are killers.*

No one was looking at their mobile phones. Very strange. These days, only those who stuck out like a sore thumb were not constantly tapping on their screens, but here they all seemed to be in the sore thumb club.

Once again she addressed the woman sitting near to her:

“Excuse me, where are you travelling to?”

The woman did not respond for some time, and then she raised her eyes from the point in front of her and said:

“Where I have to go.”

Marjeta was shaken. The woman evidently had a screw loose. A sandwich short of a picnic, as they say. But she still tried to get some useful information from her:

“I’m going to Maribor.”

“We’re all going where we have to,” she repeated and once again looked ahead without expression.

Ta dum, ta dum.

Where is Polde?

She decided to stretch her legs again. She got up and went towards the front of the train. None of the few passengers paid her any attention. When she went passed the bald guy with the round head he ignored her, just stared straight ahead like all the others.

She sat down opposite a young woman, probably a student. Like everyone else on the train, the blonde, pale faced girl was doing an excellent impersonation of a statue. A bag, probably containing a laptop, lay next to her. *Where’s her mobile phone?* These days, digital devices were a personal extension of young people. Her niece, Mija, soon showed signs of withdrawal symptoms if deprived of a screen. Her and Zvone had already argued about it a few times in Marjeta’s presence. But this young woman... *another sore thumb?* She decided to try and talk to her:

“Excuse me, my mobile has stopped working, have you got the time?”

The girl gave her a melancholy look and replied quietly:

“We haven’t arrived yet.”

Marjeta’s felt her pulse rate rise again.

“Yes, I know that. But we’ve been moving for so long and we haven’t stopped once. Isn’t that a bit odd?”

The girl whispered expressionlessly:

“We’re sure to stop when we reach our destination.”

Marjeta was overcome with an unpleasant feeling. Evidently she was the only normal one on this train. *They’re all muttering the same thing. What’s going on?* Her pulse was racing. She was becoming very concerned. Had she found herself on a train full of lunatics? Or was she the mad one?

She sat for some time opposite the young woman, and then she got up and returned to her seat. The train rattled towards the final station without any reduction in speed. Sooner or later it would get there.

Ta dum, ta dum.

She worked things through in her mind.

They’re all acting like patients from a closed ward of a mental hospital on an excursion - if mental hospitals have excursions that is. The proof? They’re all going on like broken records how they’ll get to the goal, to the final station.

And she raised her thumb.

A train that doesn’t stop at any station and has been rolling along for about an hour, or probably a lot more. The proof? They had set off in daylight and it had now been dark for some time.

And she raised her index finger.

After checking a few tickets, the guard had disappeared. The proof? She had walked from one end of the train to the other and not encountered him. Maybe he was with the driver. Was he even allowed there?

And she raised her middle finger.

The train was surrounded the whole time by impenetrable fog. The proof? So far, she had not seen any sign of the countryside on the other side of the carriage windows. The whiteness had been replaced by blackness.

And she raised her ring finger.

The information screens were dead, just like her phone. The proof? Such a coincidence was not possible or it was a very extreme case of bad luck.

And she raised her little finger.

Five things, without any logical explanation! And that were raising her blood pressure. That were making her shiver. That were making her hot.

A crazy idea began to sprout in her brain.

What if I pull the emergency brake? Will the train stop? She didn’t know what the fine was for misuse. *But was it misuse? The train should have stopped ages ago, but it hasn’t. What about the passengers for Laze, Kresnice and Litija?*

Where is Polde?

Ta dum, ta dum.

For a moment she felt as if she was alone in a padded cell and that this journey was unfolding in her head and slaloming – swish, swish – round the folds of her brain. But no mad person thinks they are mad.

The darkness outside was still totally impenetrable.

Once again, she thought of the missing guard. *He must have been swallowed by the fog.*

Yes, the emergency brake. She made a firm decision.

She reached her sweating palm towards the handle. She was aware that she was risking a fine. She had never actually experienced an emergency stop on a train, but she knew that the train had to stop.

The train would stop when she pulled down the handle, then she would get out and estab-

lish what was happening. Something certainly was. Everything she had experienced over the last hour or so was not normal.

What if I'm having a very lucid dream? She wondered this for the second time. She drew her hand back from the brake. She pinched herself, but the dream, if it was a dream, continued undisturbed. Still the same regular click-clack of the train and all around her the immobile figures as if in an advert for dolls. And that impenetrable darkness, like an endless tunnel to the final station.

Where is Polde?

Ta dum, ta dum.

She had made her mind up! Once again she put her hand on the emergency brake. *If I have to pay a fine, then so be it.* A small price to pay for proof that she wasn't in a padded cell. She closed her eyes, breathed in, held her breath, she felt her heart racing and... she pulled the handle sharply down.

She opened her eyes, released her breath, her heart was still beating rapidly.

The train rattled on with undiminished speed. She stopped breathing. She pulled again. No one was paying any attention to her or her desperate attempts to stop the train. She pulled once more. Nothing happened. She was sweating copiously. Deep breaths in and out accompanied the pounding of her heart. *What now?* Evidently, on this train the handle had no effect. *So, that must be it. A train of madness in the company of those from the local lunatic asylum. An excursion that was supposed to serve as a test run for candidates for the closed ward. A kind of entrance exam.*

A journey without movement... A bonus of being in a padded cell.

Ta dum, ta dum.

Her heart was going crazy, as if it wished to break out of her ribcage. She squeezed her hands into fists. She wanted to scream but all that emerged was a gasp.

"What's happening?" she cried, hoping for some kind of response. Surely they weren't all deaf.

Nobody paid the slightest attention to her distress. The old lady was still gripping her worn handbag from the previous century and staring into space. The bald, round headed gentleman was resting his hand on his antique briefcase. The strange looking guy in a black hood that hid his face didn't even look towards her and continued to sit motionlessly, completely undisturbed.

She got up and looked feverishly from one end of the carriage to another. No one had reacted to her cry. All of them were focused on some point in front of them. The display of statues was uninterrupted.

She expected the guard to appear, or someone else, but no one came. Out of sheer bloody mindedness, she pulled the emergency brake again and again, but the train continued on its journey at the same speed.

Ta dum, ta dum.

She was now at the end of her tether. She saw herself as the only normal person on a train full of patients from the closed ward of the local asylum. But the situation could also be different.

What if I am also on such a ward? What if this weird train was the normal mode of transport for those dressed in pullovers with over-long sleeves fastened at the back? Does my room have white cushions or are they patterned?

Think! Think! She kept coming back to the railway station and that sudden fog. The guard was perhaps an attendant clothed in delirium or a nurse with drugs that drove her into this adventure on the mad rain. The imagination can give birth to many things, but insanity went a step further. A kind of extension.

Insanity = Imagination XL Pro Plus

This was the only remaining option. She must be on a bed in a closed ward and all this journey was part of her madness. A psycho version of a day out. She was the main actor in her own madness and the other passengers were extras. Each of us lives in our own world, where we are like the creator of our own universe. There are as many universes as there are madmen. It sounded like an ad for a mobile phone operator: There isn't just one world, there are many...

In madness you are alone!

But!

Ta dum, ta dum.

She searched her memory, the day's sequence of events. Again. She had gone to Ljubljana with Polde and among other things, they had talked about how they would visit their mutual friend Bojan at the book fair, which began on Tuesday. Bojan wrote science fiction. She remembered her morning snack – cereal with yoghurt. Although she adored spare ribs and bacon, her doctor had been totally uncompromising – no cholesterol, which meant nothing from the animal kingdom.

She remembered leaving the office, how she had felt a little out of breath and a slight pressure in her chest. She had stopped, taken two deep breaths and then carried on walking to the railway station. It was only there that strange things had started to happen. It had all begun with the fog.

But evidently a strange hole had appeared somewhere. Was it possible that she had a long gap in her memory and that she had come with Polde to Ljubljana ten years ago and spent several years living in an apartment in the local mental hospital?

The gap in her memory grew. What if she had dreamed or imagined it all? Was Polde an imaginary friend? Maybe as a kid she'd had a soft toy named Polde. God knows everything, but madness even more. There are no limits to insanity, only the endlessly extendable walls of the madhouse.

Something interrupted her train of thought about psychiatry. The force of it suddenly brought her to her feet.

There was still something she could do.

She went to the front of the train. The driver must be there. Definitely. Slovene Railways had not got so far as to entrust trains to the ever present artificial intelligence.

She hurried with heavy steps to the front of the train and stopped at the closed door. She took firm hold of the handle and pulled. Of course, it was locked from the inside. For security reasons. Where would it lead if just anyone could knock on the door to the driver's cabin? Many a dad or mum would think that the price of a ticket for their precious child would entitle them to a diverting visit to the driver.

She jerked at the handle several times and then she began to hammer on the door with her fist. She waited for a response that did not come. Once again she grabbed the handle and pulled a few times as hard as she could, then she tried hammering on the door again. She began to shout hysterically:

“Open the door! Open up! Emergency!”

No one paid her any attention. They all remained motionless, as if competing to see who could be most like a statue at an exhibition.

While pounding on the door on this train full of lunatics, only one option became crystal clear: Marjeta was normal and all the others were on an excursion from a closed ward. Or maybe it was the other way round... She thought about that. She was a prima donna in a ballet of madness and these statues were part of the backdrop to the performance.

She stopped, out of breath. *What kind of driver would simply not respond?* He must be in-

side, and if he was at all normal he would have opened the door. In a crisis, rules have to adapt to the circumstances. At least among normal people.

She stomped her way to the toilet to splash some cold water on her face. Sometimes a cold water reset made all the difference. She pushed open the door, closed it behind her and smelt the usual toilet odour. All toilets have the same smell, just that some have a stronger smell, some a weaker one. It was strange, but that smell gave her the feeling of something familiar, connecting her to normality.

Does a scene involving mad folk have a smell? She hadn't realised that her face looked so tired.

She looked at herself in the mirror. All that nervousness and thinking about what was going on had exhausted her. *Why had she got into this situation?* She wanted to be environmentally responsible and used public transport to get to work, even though it cost her a lot of time each day. But at least her conscience was clear with regard to her carbon footprint.

And as a reward for her lost hours? Now she was wondering who was the fool here.

She turned on the tap and cold water flowed. What a relief! So she wasn't completely off her rocker. Wine could have flowed, liquid oxygen or maybe something exotically malodorous. In a horror film, a river of cockroaches might have appeared.

She splashed water on her face. It was refreshing, even though the water smelled a little stale. If she took a sip, it might loosen her bowels. Lucky that the toilet was right by.

Of course, she didn't want to test her stomach, although the idea did appeal to her somewhat. That's all she needed, to get diarrhoea on this train and end up shitting regally. She splashed water on her face again. She took some more deep breaths. The toilet smell disappeared. A person can really get used to anything. She tore off some paper towel and wiped her face. She brought her face closer to the mirror and carefully examined herself. Was she expecting someone else's face? *It's still Marjeta, the owner of the cat Miki and the dog Rena. Her pets were no doubt already feeling impatient. How much longer would she be on this mad journey? If only she hadn't knocked over that vase.* She ran her hands over her face. Everything was so strange, but at least she was breathing more calmly. She decided...

No more green agenda! She had paid off her carbon debt even for the afterlife, so in heaven she could drive around in a sporty convertible that guzzled a litre of petrol per kilometre. She would hand on the baton of low carbon transport to others. From tomorrow, she would start driving to work. She'd discuss it with Polde, he'd be sure to agree.

She returned to her seat again. No one paid her any attention. It seemed that on the loony train yelling and hammering on the door to the driver's cabin was normal. She spoke to the old lady again:

"Doesn't it seem odd to you that no one responded to my banging on the cabin door? And I pulled the emergency brake, why didn't the train stop?"

The woman replied indifferently:

"But we'll get to where we're going."

Marjeta replied nervously:

"You all keep repeating that! It's like a broken record, the same thing over and over again! What's the matter with you? It's like the train's full of lunatics on an outing, rather than normal passengers!"

She'd had enough of this nonsense about arriving at the final station. She couldn't control herself any longer.

The woman simply repeated herself:

"You know we'll get there. This train always arrives."

Marjeta leapt to her feet and shouted down the train:

“Does anyone else have anything to say, like that we’re going to arrive? Are you all from the same psychiatric ward?”

No one responded.

Ta dum, ta dum.

This crazy scene was driving her mad. Then the owner of the scythe – the man or youth or whatever he was – got to his feet. He spoke in a chilling voice:

“What is there to say? We have arrived.”

In a moment, Marjeta’s breathing eased and it really did feel as if the train was slowing down. She felt a great sense of relief. Some change, at last. She looked out, but she could still see only blackness, with no trace of any lights. *Is there a power cut in Maribor?* Impossible. Once again she felt an unpleasant pressure in her chest.

Ta duum, ta duumm.



The train came to a halt unusually gently and the passengers, looking very much like mourners at a funeral, quietly arose.

Instead of a cacophony of noise and light, they were met only by silence and pitch darkness.

The first one to get off was the figure with the scythe, followed slowly by all the others. It looked as if the people in front of her were calmly stepping into the darkness and noiselessly disappearing. As she approached the exit door, she was gripped ever more fiercely by an amorphous fear. Her pulse was racing and her eyes cloudy. She found herself on the edge. Her breath stopped.

“Calm down. No stress! Calm down,” she kept repeating out loud.

“This isn’t Maribor! Where are we?” She felt a sense of panic, but it abated surprisingly quickly and she succumbed to the flow. She forgot about her beating heart and her breathing exercises against stress.

In the thick darkness she could see only the silhouette of the figure with the scythe, whose eyes were glowing. With eerie calm, he said to her:

“So, you have come the final station of your life.”

*

In spite of all their efforts and the fact that they'd responded quickly, all attempts at resuscitation failed. Although they had encountered death many times at the A&E, it was still a shock. The medic looked at the out of breath doctor. Beads of sweat stood out of her forehead. Shaken, she put down the intubation tube and sighed in disappointment:

"She's not even fifty. Her heart gave up. Such a pity for a woman so relatively young."

The medic nodded, looked at his watch and said quietly:

"Death occurred at **15.50.**"

Domen Mohorič

Mouse Fever

Translated from Slovene by himself

Something scratched behind the closet. Matevž opened the drawer and pulled out a gun. A shadow jumped over the floor. He fired four rounds. The second one hit the target, which bounced for a while until it settled into a corner. A big mouse was lying stretched out and some blood was leaking from the hole in its back. He put on gloves, took a shovel from a corner, picked it up carefully, as if carrying a treasure, and carried the mouse's body to the fireplace and threw it into the fire. The corpse was burning, and he could see some flaming dots jumping into flames from an almost unrecognisable shape. These are, he guessed, fleas that ruined his life. With a small smile, he thought about the suffering they were now experiencing.

"Serves you right, vermin," he shouted.

Then, with extreme caution, because maybe there's some other furry scourge scurrying around, he searched his small room. Where did it come from, he wondered, but he didn't see a hole or anything like that. He looked back at the fireplace, but there was nothing left. Now he looked at the wall and there were no bullet holes. He wondered what happened, were they stuck in the mouse? But there was also no blood on the floor. He was confused. He went to put back the gun into the drawer when he realized he didn't know where he put it. He couldn't think clearly, his mind was cloudy and his rashes made him itch all over his body. He collapsed into his bed and decided to just lay there, sinking into a black void.

It didn't take long for them to come looking for him. They banged on the wooden door until it fell from its hinges. A group of men dressed in full body suits barged into the room, with gas masks that looked to come from gas filled trenches of The First World War. The sun shined brightly behind their backs, and in a darkened room, their shadowy images gave an impression of dark apparitions. That's also what they seemed to Matevž as he was, sweaty and suffering from tremors, leaping and crawling all over the floor, looking for his missing gun. He needed something to defend himself with, but before he could do anything with whatever he could find, the people with the iron boots found him. He passed out under a hail of kicks before another person in a medical robe made its way to him and injected him with a large needle.

Indefinite time later he woke up. The sun was in his eyes, and every part of his body was twitching with cramps. He felt pain, as if every pore on his skin was being pierced with fiery needles. He sat up on his filthy hospital bed in a tent, which, in addition to plastic windows, was also leaking light from many holes.

"Where am I," he asked loudly.

"In hell," he heard from his side.

On the next bed there was a man of unrecognisable age. The dryness of his body turned him into a ghoul, with his skin forcibly stretched over the bone. There was no fat on his body, with

his muscles evaporated. His jaw was lying open, and without his mouth moving, his voice was coming directly out of his throat.

"Snow White, you finally woke up. He he."

His laughter was like scratching a rock on a blackboard.

"Who are you, where am I," Matevž asked.

"You're in the Ljubljana zone. You've been asleep since they brought you in. You should thank Marci when she comes back. She nurtured you like you were a baby."

A hand in white gloves opened the wings of the tent. A woman in her 30s walked in.

"Dad, are you okay?" she said, and then looked at Matevž, amazed.

"You are awake?" she asked in disbelief. She put the tray she was holding on the coffee table in front of the bed.

"Are you feeling good enough to eat?" she asked.

When Matevž nodded, she gave him a bowl with a strange smelling porridge.

She went to feed the lying man, whom she lifted easily and pushed the food down his throat. Matevž noticed just how hungry he was and quickly slurped his meal. When they were done, the woman who introduced herself as Marci helped Matevž get on an old wheelchair and took him away, saying she would show him around the camp. "You're going to wish you stayed in your dreams, he he he," said the old man as they left the tent.

She pushed Matevž through a field where there were scattered tents, shacks and trailers. There were only few people around and they had a blank stare or were babbling to themselves.

"Don't resent my father," Marci said while pushing.

"The Mouse fever broke him," she said in a voice full of sadness.

"Mouse fever?"

"After being so long in a coma, no wonder you're confused," she whispered.

"Six months ago, a new disease broke out. It spread across central Slovenia. They say the virus skipped from a mouse to a human. It must have been the fleas. Infected people just collapsed on the floor, had seizures, and then... they became different. That's why I call it the lottery fever."

He was dumfounded.

"What do you mean by a lottery?" he asked.

She smiled sardonically.

"At first, everyone has the same early stage symptoms... and then each person proceeds to get their own version of a chronic end stage. My father's body ate itself. Others went crazy. But the more unlucky ones are more unique."

"What do you mean?"

Instead of answering, she pointed upward. Matevž followed her gaze and nearly toppled from his wheelchair. Hovering in the sky was a grotesque figure, its form only vaguely human. Its arms were impossibly long, stretched wide like wings, with leathery canvas like membranes between elongated fingers. Its hands looked less like those of a man and more like a pterosaur's, ancient and alien.

"Martin" called out Marci.

The phantom descended and hovered over them.

"How are you," she asked him. For a deformed phenomenon with long hands, he had a face like from a fashion magazine.

"Since Jože was shot down, not very good," he said with a singing voice full of pain.

"Who's the gentleman with the wheels?"

Matevž took a look at the bird man but had to look away.

"He woke up after being asleep for a few months."

"Don't let him wheel too far... otherwise who knows where he'll end up," the bird man said as he swooped away.

She shrugged. Matevž looked at Marci with his mouth agape.

"He won the mouse lottery differently than the others."

"What did he mean when he said someone had been shot down?"

"Ah, Jože was able to fly into the air with gas bursts from his rectum. He had abnormal bowel movements. In other words, he farted," Marci said with a mix of embarrassment and sadness.

"So they flew around together. But Jože found a big can of beans somewhere. The outburst sent him beyond the zone's border. No one's allowed out. So the UN peacekeepers shot him down with a surface-to-air missile."

"What?" Matevž was just bewildered.

"Life is absurd and horrifying here."

"So we can't leave?"

"We are in an absolute quarantine. Those infected like you and me and the birdboy, we were all brought here."

Too shocked to speak, Matevž let his thoughts ruminate in silence. Past them, a ball of skin with a patch of hair on one side and two little stumpy legs on the other rolled past. Matevž didn't even want to ask what it was.

"Marko," Marci shouted, but too late.

When the ball turned towards her in the middle of the jump, it had already launched itself towards a woman who resembled a cactus, with spikes all over her body. The skin ball burst and its blood and organs exploded everywhere. The shock caused Matevž to lose consciousness.

A few hours later, he opened his eyes. Marci wiped his forehead with a wet towel. He heard her father's heaving.

"I understand that you find it incomprehensible. But sooner or later, you will get used to it. People here just don't have a long lifespan," she said.

"What is your illness," Matevž asked. "If it is not too hard to talk about it."

"No, I don't mind talking about it," she laughed, this time more lightly.

"I was the first one to get sick. The patient zero."

Matevž was surprised.

"My father got infected through me, then everyone else, and later, you too."

"Does that make you hate me?" she asked him apologetically.

"No, it's not your fault. You didn't eat any weird mice, did you?"

"No," she chuckled. Her laughter melted his heart. It was a ray of sunshine in this macabre situation.

"So what's my lottery prize?" he asked her later.

She shrugged.

"You have to figure it out for yourself. But be careful doing it."

For a few days nothing happened. Matevž slowly recovered his strength. He spent almost every moment with Marci and was getting more and more attached to her. Before long he was obsessed with her.

That's why he didn't object when she suggested they run away.

"I can't live like this," she told him as they lay in her bed, in a house that was previously a property of a well-off person.

He agreed. Why should they live here, among all these fallen souls? She only deserves the best. Every once in a while, he lost his consciousness again, and every time he woke up, Marci

was taking care of him. That's why he was even more grateful and determined to do what she wanted.

He didn't ask her how they'd get away. She told him to go follow her and he went without thinking. He followed her to the vast fence that surrounded the Ljubljana zone.

"Lie down here," she told him. On her instructions, he got down on the ground, turning as she told him, towards the control tower in the distance. He was lying on his back, wondering what would happen next.

Marci bit hard on her lip until blood flowed down her chin. She sat on him and kissed him with her mouth full of blood. Then she stood up and wiped her chin.

"You know, the lottery thing was a lie."

"What do you mean?" he said, dazed.

"The only one the mouse fever affected unusually was me. To everyone else it's just a pneumonia."

"What?" he repeated, but his consciousness was slowly leaving him.

There was no report in the global media of the giant human worm that razed the walls of the Ljubljana zone. Nor did they talk about the hundreds of dead soldiers who lost their lives in an attempt to stop it. But there was the talk of a hydrogen bomb that wiped out Ljubljana and its surroundings. The official reason was an incredibly murderous and even more horribly contagious strain of the new mouse fever.

But the national security agencies around the world were buzzing like a bee hive. The protocol for the queen's escape didn't work. The outbreaks of mouse fever begun to shift eastwards, and reports of deformed people were also becoming more frequent. The United Nations Security Council is already planning a complete blockade of Eastern Europe.

Dominik Lenarčič

Once More from the Beginning

Translated from Slovene by himself

We're sitting in a café. Lucijan is sitting opposite to me and staring into the residue of his coffee. He reminds me of a gypsy, foretelling the future from the coffee grounds. If I tell him that, he will erupt. He's still angry at me. I crumple the menu in my hands with unease. I don't know what else to try. It's Friday and it's getting dark. Nearby, the waitress complains to her co-worker about a "rude woman in a blue coat". Next to us sits a student who is leaving soon.

"Do you know what I liked here?" I look at him. "Last time, I drank a mimosa. Do you know what that is? It's champagne with orange juice. The waitress told me they serve them at weddings."

My future ex-boyfriend does not move, nor does he mumble. Ever since "that" happened he doesn't speak to me. I sort of like it that way. The silence means we're still together. Until he utters those fateful five words, I can still hope I can salvage something.

"Look, this isn't working out."

God damn it.

"I don't know what you're expecting of me, Jasna. To run after you like a drunkard in-love? You're fucking naïve if you think that."

The student gets up and heads for the door. The bell announces his departure. I hoped it would last. Lucijan finally looks up.

"Tell me: why?"

Why? I tried to explain it to you and you looked at me like I was mad. No, I can't answer you, I can't explain that meeting to you if you don't want to listen to me. All I can say to you is this: "I don't know. I really don't know."

Lucijan sighs and lowers his head. I can see him holding back tears.

"I didn't want to hurt you, L-."

Lucy. He used to like it when I called him that, although he wouldn't admit it. But if I call him that now, he will get upset and call me a heartless bitch. I know because it already happened.

"Please, let's just forget about it," I tell him. "Let's move on."

It rings. The student has come back – he forgot his wallet. He's not staying.

"Move on to where?" Lucijan replies bitterly. "I just want to go back."

I also want to go back, I almost say to him, but our paths are linear. The past is already written, we can only move forward. Or spin around in circles... The student leaves again. Soon, the waitress will come to us and ask Lucijan if she may take his cup. She won't even look at me. I feel the pocket of my blue coat that I laid out over my chair. I will have to start again. What can I do different this time? I have to figure something out. Lucijan continues staring at his cup. I wonder what he has foretold for himself...

"May I?"

Lucijan smiles to the waitress.

"Yeah, of course."

"Do you want anything else, sir?"

"Just the bill, please."

"Alright. Come with me to the counter, please."

And off they go. I watch them from afar, smiling to each other. Maybe, in his future, he sees himself with her. I pull the notebook and the magic pen out of the coat pocket. Lucijan is already finished. He is coming back, his gaze set only on the exit. When he passes, I try to catch his hand. He pulls away and rushes out. The bell, it's over. I open the notebook on a blank page. In it, I write the first sentence for the hundredth time: We're sitting in a café.

Insight

Translated from Slovene by himself

Towards him sped an automobile, a black Alfa that barely avoided a child on the road. Before he could fully realise what was going on, it already hit him. His stomach flattened on the front of the automobile. He hit his head on lower corner of the windshield, the impact called tiny crystals of light in front of his eyes. With a violent push he flew into the air and after a moment of levitation landed on the hard asphalt. His eyes were open. He lay on his back. He was looking at the cloudless summer sky, but he no longer saw it.

Lenart Šelih has just experienced his death. The vision had thrown him back into the next in line so strongly that he nearly toppled him.

"Dude," said the one that Lenart had collided into. "That must be gnarly!"

Lenart didn't answer, he was still in shock. When the funnily-dressed gypsy woman told him how her machine will allow him insight into the time of his death, he thought it was just a cheap trick. He didn't expect to see such a vivid, realistic scene. Why did he fall for this trick again? Was boredom to blame? The holiday spirit? An excess of money? Too much alcohol in his system? All these thoughts flashed through his head, then the most important question came to him: "Did I really see my own death?"

This question dragged Lenart, a well-kept man, who now looked more like a pale wraith, out of the tent. He began to walk. He needed a minute or so to rip himself out of the morbid numbness. What he saw was undoubtedly real, he was sure about that. After a quick consideration he came to a simple conclusion: he has to avoid roads. He stepped onto the pavement, when he thought he heard something. He looked and gasped.

Matjaž Marinček

Forgotten

Translated from Slovene by himself

While walking on the three-metre plank, the system scanned him, and he was allowed to continue. No intergalactic blotch was detected by the system: neither medical nor mental good-for-nothings was perceived. At least the system thought so on that fine, shady afternoon. But, apparently, everywhere it is the case that the villains are one step ahead of the system.

Qrral smirked and calmly strode to the nearest elevator, pressed 898, and was at the entrance to the intergalactic corporation in no time. But not his own. Because Qrral didn't have a corporation, nor was he an employee of one. He marched into the Schanntelicour's reception area and past the bewildered and terrified secretary, straight into the CEO's office.

"Open the safe!" he snarled at him menacingly. The CEO switched off the 7D-solitaire hologram and stared at the newcomer, terrified.

"The safe is on a time delay," he stammered.

"No, it isn't. Not this model. Open it if you don't intend to say goodbye to your life immediately!" The six rows of needle-like teeth in the open mouth convinced the CEO.

Hesitantly, he pulled a three-key fob from under his collar, punched in the combination, then, one by one, he inserted the keys into the slots and unlocked. He couldn't imagine how the threatening intruder knew that he had deposited 17 ingots of pratyum that morning, by far the most expensive metal in the known universe.

The door opened soundlessly, revealing the contents.

"Load!" He pushed a floating board in front of the CEO. With trembling hands, he stacked the ingots on it.

"And the canvas bag!" the robber urged him. It was full of diamonds and the board knelt for a moment, then chased after the disappearing nuisance.

The security guards quickly responded to the secretary's press of the alarm, but Qrral has already vanished. The police that was called by the security guards, and the forensics who came with the police, also found nothing. Traces of the floating board pointed to a standard product, and Qrral's face from the surveillance camera footage was not found in any database.

The downside of the cyber-bases was that, despite their unbearably complex security, they were still targets of attempted attacks. By probability calculus, one in a million or so attempts succeeded. Qrral's cousin on his mother's side was a top hacker, and when Qrral told her what he wanted, she took it as a challenge. And she succeeded. Not only did she delete Qrral from existing databases - she made an algorithm that prevented him from ever appearing in one again. Of course, he has endowed her richly, but it meant more to her that she had managed a historic throw.

He was always cautious, though. He would slip away for a few days, move to the opposite end of the galaxy, do his thing, and then switch galaxies.

In his last attempt, he was unlucky that the security guards were only a room away and they appeared really quickly. He successfully dodged them empty-handed and avoided being shot. In the hotel room, he then soothed his frantic pulse in the jacuzzi. With his hands under his head, he relaxed and suddenly began to wonder what he was doing. He is abundantly supplied, so why?

He decided to withdraw. He found a secluded, comfortable moon and started selling boredom.

He didn't last long. He tried to fight himself for a while, but adrenaline addiction is devilish.

During his boredom, an aspiring police officer discovered an algorithm in software by pure chance. It was similar to a spy programme, but only similar. He had no idea what it was for, so he cautiously asked his superior. He had no idea either, but he didn't want to be thought stupid, so he took his time and tried to get to the root of the algorithm.

He worked his way through the algorithm's formulas, scratched his head and quickly realised that it was beyond his abilities. He asked two friends, educated in this very subject for help, but they couldn't do it either. Neither did one of their friends, who boasted of his hacking skills. He realised, dejected, that the algorithm must be the work of a real master.

So, the algorithm went on to the next superior, and up thirteen more steps of the hierarchical ladder, to no avail. The last, star-spangled and medal-encrusted responsabilitier remembered that his daughter had a fan who was supposedly really good. Not good - top-notch. The poor bastard was ready to do anything for the girl, and so, after much deliberation, reviewing the available expert literature and after numerous attempts, he actually deciphered the algorithm's purpose. And the girl's father got another medal.

Qrral could not have known that. He planned his next venture even more carefully than the previous ones. He gathered the necessary data and ran some simulations. The results were impressive.

He set off confidently. The target planet was a member of the Intergalactic Union and there were no formalities for landing, so he watched, perplexed, as the police surrounded him. He was being herded into a neglected dungeon on an unfriendly asteroid. He growled that he wanted a lawyer, because they were ignoring him here. They gave him food regularly and that was that. He could not communicate with anyone, could not tell anyone where he was. He didn't even know where he was.

The responsabilitier with the stars and medals had a flash of insight: the algorithm they found was switched on again and Qrral no longer existed. The algorithm prevented it from ever appearing in any database ever again.

There was no more room at the front, so the medal was pinned to the sleeve of the responsabilitier.

Shutdown

She knew immediately that something was wrong. In all 8,219 intergalactic years of her existence, she had never failed to sense the collective consciousness. Since she couldn't sense it, she had no way of knowing if this had ever happened to anyone else.

Although she had always effortlessly performed at least ten thousand processes simultaneously, now she couldn't even get the 4,068th one to start. What if she tried to reset herself? No. Then she'd feel sick again. And that awful smell would come back, too.

Antares had recently exploded. Maybe that had cut her off from the collective consciousness. What if she moved somewhere else? She used the 2,374th process to quickly search for the nearest wormholes. The most suitable one was 41 quintillion light-years away. Will she make

it? Of course she will, she always has, she encouraged herself. In six nanoseconds she was there and then spent an eternity (5 seconds) breaking through it.

She tried again to sense the collective consciousness. Nothing. Which means it wasn't Antares. She had used so much energy on this journey that only 941 processes were still running. She would have to rest somewhere and store up additional energy.

She sought out the planet whose colours gave her the most courage: white, blue, and green. She descended onto it and instantly attached herself to the underside of a huge green leaf. *Plantago major*, the broadleaf plantain, it turned out to be. Non-toxic to her. Now she could shut down all non-essential processes and leave only 83 vital ones running. And rest. As a sign of satisfaction, she spat a thick, dark purple, slimy slime from the opening above her central sensor.

Resting did her good. Although she knew about the pleasure in theory, she was feeling it for the first time now. How was it that she had never noticed it in the collective consciousness? She had too few processes running to be able to rationally evaluate it. She surrendered and purred with pleasure. At least that's how the sound could be described, even though it wasn't even remotely similar to a cat's purr and was completely foreign to her. It appeared automatically, without her will, and was just as inexplicable a mystery to her as its source.

Upon arrival, she turned off the timer and thus didn't worry about a thing. She could feel her strength gradually returning. All the while, she noticed changes in the light, humidity, and temperature, but this didn't bother her at all because she felt safe. That is, until a disruptive factor appeared in her new living space after a long time. It was a massive creature that instantly forced her into a state of alert: she activated all her systems again, and more than twelve thousand of them sprang into action immediately. She also sensed the collective consciousness right away. *Erinaceus concolor*, the white-chested hedgehog, hundreds of times larger than her. Because she had immediately activated her plasma shield, it couldn't smell or see her.

As soon as the danger had passed, she delved into the newly acquired data. How could she have lost contact with the collective consciousness? How come rest worked so well for her? And why was the folder titled "All About Aging" flashing at her? What on earth is aging, anyway?

So, in its 8,220th year, she learned that it was programmed to exist for 8,500 years and then be shut down. Shut down?!? How shut down? Why shut down? What will happen to her body? Will it be dismantled? What about all the knowledge accumulated over these millennia? Will it remain part of the collective consciousness, just as it has until now? But why must she be shut down, since she's functioning perfectly well? Should she open the flashing folder? Right.

The coolers automatically switched to higher speeds as she raced through the data. She'll keep getting slower and slower. She'll lose touch with the collective consciousness more and more often, and now she already knows what that's like. She'll gradually shut down. She shouldn't worry; everything is being stored in the collective consciousness as it happens. She should instead think about the pleasure she experienced while resting. This will happen to her more and more often. This is the reward for all the data she has acquired. She should just let herself enjoy it and stop thinking about her duties. She has earned it.

From *Intergalactic Tales*, 2023

Miha Mazzini

Home

Translated from Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

They only let me know where home was just before the end of the shift. When the time came, I switched off my computer and fully opened up the lid for the cleaners. The diode on the briefcase next to my feet was already flashing that it was ready to leave. I grabbed the handle and allowed myself to be led into the web of public transport and the endless stream of other briefcases guiding their owners along.

I looked into the reader at the entrance and the door opened. There was no wife or children yet – if, indeed, I have them. Waiting in the refrigerator was a meal for three.

The wife entered just as I had placed the aluminium tray in the microwave.

‘Oh, you’re home already, Dear!’

She used the formal address, which suited me. I only ever used the intimate ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad’ as a last resort.

‘Welcome, Dear!’ I reciprocated with a smile and placed my index finger on the start button.

‘Should we wait for our child?’ I asked.

‘Older?’

‘Yes. There’s a full meal for them.’

We both shook our heads. At this age, you never know when they will turn up. I started the microwave.

We ate in silence. This too suited me. I glanced a number of times at the wife, even though I tried my best to restrain myself. Have I seen her before? Has she been my wife once before? In the logistic nightmare of modern life this can happen, though it is very rare. She seemed both familiar and a stranger, as happens with people we forget even if we were once certain we would always remember them. Perhaps she has changed her hairstyle? I would surely have remembered these red tips. Or not?

After dinner we each sat at our own end of the sofa, put on our headphones and browsed through our phones. Our daughter came home in the dead of night. Rough, clumsy, her cheeks as spotty as the Milky Way, she barely greeted us when she came in, pouting endlessly as she warmed up her meal in the microwave before taking it off to her room. The wife and I looked at each other, both relieved, happy we would not have to ever see her again.

After signing the consent form, we engaged in sex. Orgasm rips away from me everything that is superfluous, leaving in its wake something unattainable but always equally constant that instils me with hope. I lose myself like a droplet in a body of water and, despite this, am simultaneously aware of the ocean. One of those feelings that lessens the more we pay attention to it. Orgasm and consciousness dislodge each other.

In the morning the message about which office I am supposed to go to was already awaiting and the briefcase flashed that it was ready. Our daughter did not appear from her room and the wife and I silently agreed that we would not bother her. She is old enough to make her own decisions. She can go off and live in the mountains if our lifestyle doesn’t suit her.

When, at the intersection, our briefcases headed in opposite directions, we pulled back the handles, looked at each other and were supposed to merely nod at each other and one last time address each other with ‘Dear’, she shocked me by saying, ‘It was nice, thank you!’

Without the official ‘Dear’ and with a kind of strangely relaxed undertone, it sounded so intrusive I flinched. She probably didn’t notice, because she was already turning around, allowing her briefcase to lead her along.

I stood there, staring after her, even more convinced that we had once already been spouses.

I rode to the final stop, only a few of us left on the train. My briefcase led me to the third floor. I switched on the work computer and logged in. Out of the window I could see the mountains and it seemed I had never been this close to them before. I had not thought about them in a while until encountering yesterday's daughter, and today's office placed them right in front of me – these days it is hard to determine whether these things are a hint of fate, the workings of an algorithm or delusions of the brain that tries to find meaning in chance.

The window drew more of my attention than the work. I imagined people without skeletons, shapeless bulks encroaching each other, amalgamating into a single mass, drooling, secreting mucus, somewhere in front of me, behind the trees, in caverns and mud huts. I don't know how they live but the thought of a body without dividing lines disgusted me so much I felt sick until my break, when I went to the toilet and threw up all these emotions.

The day continued to be unproductive, I continued to be disturbed.

I began singing to myself. My vocal cords formed a sound, but it did not come out into the open but went to the brain where it quivered as merely a series of low tones, swaying gently and evenly. At first they tried to find and keep up with each other, then they formed a simple melody I kept constantly repeating. My entire body became electrified, compressed into a narrow, shivering column that repelled dark thoughts and glutinous emotions.

By the time it finally managed to drive away other people's lives from my imagination, it was time to leave.

*

Throughout history, people have sought out various weights with which they desired to anchor onto life and affirm their existence. They reached for objects (collections of paintings and books, shoes and clothes, apartments or postage stamps...) and people (family and relatives, lovers and mistresses, servants and colleagues...).

Modernity hacked away at humans. Books, paintings and music lost their tangibility and became digital. With social networks, the same happened with people. All of this was now stored away in a device known, for historical reasons, as a telephone. Anything that was not possible to digitalize was standardized. This way clothing was divided up into a few sizes that could, cleaned and fresh, await you at home, wherever your home happened to be.

Most work turned into assisting computer programs. So one can work anywhere where you open your laptop. Offices are standardized geometric shapes, all you need is a desk and a chair. The same with apartments, leaving inside them only essential objects to support sustenance and sleep. Spaces and furniture in these apartments became interchangeable and regardless of which one you enter, all are familiar.

Relationships have also become standardized in this way. If what partners can say and do to each other is precisely defined, their bodies are just as interchangeable as everything else. If education is also precisely prescribed, the same is true for parents and children.

An algorithm allocates us an office every morning and a home every afternoon. With this we also get, on a daily basis, new husbands and wives, children, and sometimes even relatives.

Nothing is forced. Those who cling on to objects and the irrationality of people live in the mountains. Nobody is persecuting them. We are waiting for them to become extinct.

'Oh, you're home already, Dear!' the wife greeted me. This time I got a slightly chubby blonde with half an inch of new growth at the roots.

Two small children were already sitting at the table.

Surely I won't have to read a story?

At dinner the children initially observed each other with curiosity, then began poking and

shoving one another. 'I only have to put up with them for this one night, I can take this!' I thought to myself, smiling with satisfaction. How many times have people wished for something like this but knew they were trapped with the same people for decades?

The wife was the chatty-monologue type and dinner went on forever.

I felt the moment was approaching that justifies the essence of contemporary civilization, despite everything it is blamed for. The moment that makes up for all its shortcomings and renders all other options superfluous.

I watched the wife and children, and thought to myself, 'Who are these people?'

I could instantly answer myself, 'Strangers, they are strangers!'

What a relief!

Is it not unimaginably terrifying living for decades with the same people, considering them to be those closest to you, and then being struck by this biting question? Or worse, answering it the way I have? But this is the truth - strangers! This harrowing truth that we can never really reach each other's true depths, that we stumble at appearances and details, and that it is better not even to begin.

We are trapped within ourselves, unable to enter into anyone else, the truth of creation.

For eventually we reach a dialogue:

Who are these people?

Strangers!

Modern life has created a banal truth out of the most dramatic moment. Indeed, I was surrounded by strangers.

What a relief!

'Yes, Dear, yes,' I nodded at her.

'Those days,' she said and didn't sign the consent form. I went to sleep on the sofa.

I woke up in the middle of the night, initially tossing about, then remained lying on my back, staring at the ceiling. I began to think about humankind's greatest invention, walls. Naked prehistoric humans, huddled against each other, a crowd in which you couldn't tell where one begins and the other one ends – here I paused, I didn't want to wade into this repulsion again. Then we arrive at the beginnings of civilization, the first human, who probably still didn't have a name, instinctively sought out a cave. Thousands of years had to pass before they learned how to construct wooden walls and initially erected them in the most populated places, proof that we truly cannot bear each other and need to build fences around us. Then they fortified empires with the Wall of China and Roman Walls, and states and social classes with palaces and temples, now we all have our own walls, in our own living room everyone is an empire unto themselves.

I don't know when I dozed off.

I woke up before the alarm clock, drained and worse for wear. Something was throbbing under the blanket and when I pulled it back, my leg was twitching in short jerks. My hand scratched my forehead and my gut was gurgling.

Not yet entirely awake, I asked myself, whose are these organs? And why does their combination become so complicated when it gains a conscience?

*

After returning from work I stood staring in shock at the red tips on her hair.

'No, no, no,' I shook my head, then I remembered and added the term of address, 'Dear.'

She gave me a worried look.

'Please,' she said and added 'Dear' after a brief pause. 'Let me explain.'

'This time I remember, Dear, we were husband and wife once again last month. And once before that! Almost certainly! This is not possible! The algorithm would not have allowed this.'

'I'm sorry, Dear... It's true.'

'Why, Dear?'

'I don't know how to explain... Only today, this once more. Dear.'

'Surely you didn't find a way to cheat, Dear?'

'Yes. A bribe to the right person.'

'Why, Dear?'

She shook her head.

'Dear... O don't know how to explain it. We were husband and wife last year. At first I forgot you, as is normal, but then, after a while, you began coming back. So we became spouses a second time, so I could see what was going on. It became even more heated... I mean, essential that we were together a third time also. Please, don't report me!'

'What about children, Dear?'

'There won't be any, Dear.'

'You also arranged for that, Dear?'

'Yes, Dear.'

'Dear, I left work as soon as I got the notice. I made dinner myself.'

She moved out of the way to let me past. The table was set as in old paintings.

After the meal she said, 'I have a request...'

'Yes, Dear?'

'What if... just for today, we drop the official terms of address?'

'Dear, but civilized conduct...'

'I know. But this was a special evening anyway...'

'Achieved through a bribe,' I thought to myself but instead said out loud, 'OK, then, Dear. I mean, OK then.'

She smiled.

'I will also probably have difficulties to start with...'

She gulped, stifling the address she was about to automatically add to the end of her sentence.

I asked, 'Will we sign the consent form?'

I really do like orgasms.

Confusion: this is how that time remained in my memory. An orgasm that was unable to gnaw me to the essence, prevented from doing so by the fear that we might have to talk after sex.

We did talk; I don't know what about. At first I find it terribly uncomfortable but the tone of her voice is velvety and brushes against me, as if not wishing to touch me, keeping me safe in the dark. Slowly I began returning words, into the pillow at first, then into her skin.

Morning: another intercourse. This time the orgasm contains sadness, which has never happened to me before. Sadness cannot rid myself of or forget, the cause of which I don't know.

Breakfast: a long look from her before she says, 'What if we skive?' I was shocked at the phrase I hadn't heard since childhood, since school, of which it was a part. How did it appear here, between the two of us, so many years later?

Briefcases: we disconnect the GPS module power supply.

We skive, we walk in the opposite direction to the crowd. For the first time we see that during the day all doors are unlocked, giving cleaners faster access.

Intercourse: on an unmade bed in a yet to be disinfected apartment, quick, with an air of fear yet at the same time exciting, with cleaners rattling about on the floor below.

A long embrace: buried in her bosom. Wet from her tears. Perhaps my own? My thoughts jolt at the word 'ours.'

Laughter: we stand in front of an ad board promising individuality if you buy a product we all already had. We burst into laughter. I don't recall what about.

A moment of madness: we take the train to the end of the line. Look at the hills, the forest. Foreign lives out there, somewhere beyond the trees. All we needed to do was walk on. Let go of the handles of the briefcases, hold our hands. Walk. We stand there. Both of us are thinking about Form S.

Form S: Being of sound and disposing mind I hereby declare that I renounce civilization and its benefits and wish to withdraw outside it, into...

Reason: Even a mere tiny island, is big enough to stand against the mainstream.

Return: we unsuccessfully try to find an open apartment. They are all cleaned up, awaiting the arrival of families.

End of the day: we stand on the platform unsure what to do.

We embrace: I look her in the eye and see myself. I am a tiny man in her pupils. She looks through me, such horrendous power! I am ripped apart and filled with dread. I am inside her, my home is now within her.

She says, 'I want...' I close her mouth. Who is saying this? She or me within her? To whom? To me in me or to me in her?

We tear away from each other: on our briefcases we switch on the power supply and quickly, as if running away, each set off towards our respective homes and families.

The madness only ended the following day. I was returning from work and stopped next to a tree growing on the edge of the pavement. Its roots were pushing up the tarmac, squeezing under the kerb stones. I stood there, amazed at the immense pressure that must be exerted at the contact between a living being and the objects it is pushing through in order to live. 'Terrible, terrible!' I kept repeating to myself for a long time without anyone as much as glancing at me.

Suddenly it occurred to me, 'What am I doing?' I laughed, briefly, sharply. The fog in my brain vanished and passers-by once again had clear outlines.

*

I opened Form B, the simplest of all forms; all I need to do is enter the name and surname of the person I wish to block and through this remove from my life without any possibilities of return.

As I finished writing her name and surname I hesitated. I stared at the cursor, flashing like a heart, to no avail.

I pressed the confirmation, suddenly and without further thought.

'Person does not exist,' the computer commentated and I knew it was lying.

For the computer, the person most certainly existed, just not for me, which means she blocked me first.

I look back on that day as the only time I spent outside civilization. It was a single day but left its mark on me. I dread to think what would have happened had there been more of them.

In the dreary winter months when it is hard to tell the sky apart from all the concrete, I lean over the mirror, open my eyes wide and see my tiny face reflected in my pupils. In there, inside, that is where my home is. I imagine the pupils of that tiny man are also filled with me, and of the next one in his reflection, and the next. I duplicate myself into eternity and the further in I go, the more comforted I am and the harder it is to return to everyday life.

Primož Jenko

The End Of The Game

Translated from Slovene by Martin Vavpotič

Many pieces of cotton pattered toward the ground. His days had turned shorter, squeezed into a few hours, perverted into pure routine. Time to find the new universal tastes was growing scarce.

That morning, a couple of minutes before six, he went for the tasting of the fruit juices and of sea fish.

He had no success with the juices. Despite that, everyone praised two-sip bottles of fruit beverages, juices, mineral waters, white and red wines, brandies - as if only these existed among the samples. He could remember from when he was a teenager, a lifetime away, there were five-sip samples in adorned transparent glass bottles, but they got slowly pushed out by plastic. With the first few sips he grew accustomed to the change, with the next ones he could barely discern the taste.

What are two sips good for? Merely to wet the tongue. Passion fruit? Pineapple? Black currant? Kiwi? Pear? No change. Still the same old taste of everything, he pondered.

His first assignment of the morning was to catch the bus and arrive to work on time. There will be a meeting with the department heads, followed by arguing with the sales rep. At times like that, the old man would gaze from underneath his bushy gray brows, wrinkle his forehead, wrinkle his mouth and banged the papers on the desk so that waves of cool air rippled through the air. During a break, after he'd completely annihilated the other party, he silently manicured his cactii. Many lost their nerves due to his ravings, many abandoned the firm and went elsewhere, defeated. But he kept going for a long time. Too long a time.

A beeping from the bathroom reminded him that he forgot to unplug the filled-up electric razor the previous morning.

He was just tasting a phillet of salmon - a two-bite portion, packed into a monotony of transparent plastic, yet perfect for tasting - when his cell started beeping. Still chewing, he scanned the signs in the patterns on the white cover of the kitchen table.

'Shark', 'Yellow-finned tuna', 'sea bass', 'cod', 'sardine' - said on them.

"Good morning, honey!" a velvet voice could be heard after he finally accepted the call.

"You're early, Leia. Trouble sleeping again? Leia..." he mumbled.

He clapped his tongue a few times and smeared the rest of the salmot fillet across his mouth. He licked his upper lip. He raised his gaze as if looking for his answers on the yellow ceiling but all he saw was a fluttering moth and a bit of brown mold in the corner above the kitchen sink.

It tastes like... Moth? Salmon tastes like... Phone call? Mold. Electric razor... he was arranging his thoughts.

"Meitz? I've been trying to call you all week," she soon whined with a noticeable change in her velvet voice; bits of anger at first, gloominess as she went on. "What is happening with you? Are you sick?"

"Don't bother me! I'll bit my tongue," he mumbled, raised his glass, rotated it between his hands so that it didn't lose a drop of water, brought it to his mouth and already drank the contents. As a joke, he repeated the rotation with the empty glass and finally set it on the desk.

"I'm sorry! Honey, you're in a bad mood," she hissed.

"I'm in a hurry, Leia. How are things with you? How is my little princess?"

"Milna has found both children's tastes! Food of strawberry chocolate, drink of hazelnut milk," she said with a noticeable change of tone. The words wafted from the phone, he could catch them in his hand and mesh them like newspaper. They swam in his ears, like a melody of the most sophisticated whistling.

The cellphone flew into the air, spinning, stopped right below the ceiling in a calculated manner, slid down so he was able to clap in between, deftly caught the device and said into the speaker: "That's great! Let her drink hazelnut milk, will you?"

"The one without sugar. She already has a toothache. Did you find your two adult tastes?" she wondered.

He clacked his tongue, then answered: "The more I look for them, the less success I have. There's no time, you hear me?"

"Did you also had a bad night's sleep? It's been clinking in my ears for two days. At night, the owl is hooting, the neighbors's dog in the morning. Grandma's cat... Don't get me started. They're mating. Hooting under the window. I'm wearing earplugs."

"All I have are mornings. The days just vanish. Puf!" he explained while he moved the glass across the table.

"You work too much. You don't believe me, do you?"

"We used to have time for everything. Do you remember? Breakfast together, dinner, hide and seek with Milna, bed-time stories... do you read her the one about the fox?"

"She laughs at me when I do the hedgehog as he pricks the fox. We miss you."

He closed his eyes for a moment to picture them in his thoughts. He imagined Milna as a curly haired princess with green eyes. Leia looked like a firey dragon with long blue fingernails... no, a mermaid with a velvet voice.

"I miss you too," he breathed as his eyes focused on the disorder on the kitchen table and the moth fluttering right by his nose, but he didn't do anything to drive it away. He should buy something to chase them away. The little critters got used to the smell of lavender that had the pleasant smell of peeled orange. In the closet, the one in the bedroom, was Leia's scarf that was eaten through, along with his black coat and warm wool gloves, a gift to Milna from her grandmother.

"Will you take some leave? Are you coming to visit? Please!"

"Another time, Leia. I'm hanging up."

"Kiss!" he could hear but he hung up and hurried into the bathroom.

What about spices? All spices taste like laurel, that's known. Why change the taste of food and drink with age? Why worry about such unimportant things as tastes? he ruminated.

He brushed his teeth with haste.

While he dressed himself absent-mindedly, he was just putting on a sweater, his essence was redirecting the flow of time and images. Out of nowhere, it conjured up quiet days of the thick, puffy blanket. It covered the roofs of houses, bending spruces, the brush shivered beneath it; the branches of the fruit trees on the neighbor's garden wore the snow as if they were skeletons, dressed in swaths of cotton. Now it has dug up snowball fights. Sledding. A snowman with a cooking spoon and a banana for a nose. It's found two dots, hurrying along an incline, and it found him during executing double summersaults while skiing.

It's dug up the free time that vanished long ago and nothing hinted at it coming back.

The current of images from the past ran dry while he unlocked the door. Snowflakes ran into him in a wild gust of wind but he grabbed his suitcase deftly, immediately locked the door and stood still at the entrance.

This morning, just like many others, smelled of grapefruits.

"Once again off to work, Meitz?" the wheezing voice of his neighbor, who immediately caught a fit of sneezing, interrupted his thoughts. He sneezed into the snow at least four times without using his handkerchief. He sniffed. His ruddy nose and cheeks spoke of the cold that did not frighten the old man. It spoke of winter, that did not succeed in chasing him from his porch, only hardened his firm nature and stubbornness.

They didn't talk much. Especially in the last month when the days had faded away and only mornings remained to him.

The old man with bushy black mustachios, wrinkled forehead, but of a bright, ruddy face, sat on the shabby porch. In the summer, he mostly lurked inside his house. He occasionally mowed the lawn, watered the shrubs, washed the car and went about for errands. In the winter, no matter how cold it was, through snow or rain, he sat most days outside, watching the surroundings.

"I have the bus..." he said while pushing closer through the snow.

"Sssssh!" the old man raised his right hand, lifted his index finger, brought it to his lips to keep him quiet. He must have interrupted his morning session.

He stopped in his tracks, the end of the sentence stuck between his teeth. His being weighed his options. He could drive with the car but he would have to clean the driveway. What if he ran? He ran to work in the sunny weather before, but never in a blizzard. Hitchhike? Taxi? Train?

"Do you hear that? The humming of car engines is so nice. Like a little stream. Sssssh!" the old man breathed. He crossed his arms peacefully over his shabby parka. Visibly immersed, he tracked the activity in the vicinity, while he added: "Mmmmm! Nothing better than the smell of oranges in the cold morning. Don't you think?"

That is when he start paying attention. The cars driving by, the lorries, the buses, sounds of the nearby train station, a faraway airplane - everything blended by a symphony of confused, yet suppressed whistling. Right by his side, a sparrow squawked, somewhere in the branches of a shabby apple tree two tits argued furiously while flying around the neighbor's bird house.

"Humming?" je eventually asked.

He had a completely different opinion about sounds. He'd long since decided that sounds of nature remind him of crackling of fire, machines of the piping of the pressure cookers. Only human speech - no one really wondered why - remained equally understandable to everyone.

"Ssssssssh! Ssssssssh!"

He put the briefcase down in the snow and reached for his cell phone with a practiced gesture.

"Leia still has a sore ankle? I haven't seen her in a while. And the little sweetheart? Milna?" the neighbor asked while he sipped from the steaming cup.

No one called him, there was only the unread message. But it wasn't that strange sign that he kept seeing everywhere lately.

"No, no, we haven't danced in a long time. She prefers to drive Milna to the ballet," he said as he put his phone away. "She even thinks about learning it herself. That's nuts."

The man wiped his mouth, then offered him a glass of mulled wine, but he politely refused.

"Have you found your adult tastes?" he asked.

At first, the neighbor pretended not to hear him, as if he wanted him to miss the bus. He was getting ready to take off when the man blurted out:

"Ever since I retired, I don't change them anymore, my dear neighbor. I'm old fashioned," the man grumbled. He coughed. "In my mature age, I've made up my mind. All food tastes of blueberry jam. My late woman cooked the best jam! Drink tastes like mulled wine. Enjoy your life, Meitz! Don't worry about little things."

Only then he looked at his wrist chronometer and realized he would miss the bus. He grabbed his briefcase and ran.

"Good day to you, neighbor," the man shouted after him before his voice drowned in the whistling sounds of the morning.

Meitz avoided passing umbrellas, street lamps, cars covered in snow, just barely managed to avoid colliding with the newspaper seller and hurriedly jumped over a cat that's been ran over. He glanced at the sky above the city a few times. The sign appeared on the screen of his cell phone several times.

He didn't notice anything unusual except the bus that had just started from the station had the sign written all over its sides.

*

The white clock on the wall quietly churned time and showed a few minutes to six.

A sweet smell of grapefruit wafted through the open window into the bedroom. Mornings usually smelled stronger, throughout the day the scent got washed away and gradually disappeared until the evening. It held on the longest in closed spaces, it vanished the quickest outside, especially in windy weather.

"Leia? Milna needs a drive to school,... the car... car battery," he didn't finish because it occurred to him then that his precious ones were on holiday. Leia's part of the bed was covered with satin, pink covering.

He rushed out of bed and into the kitchen.

They drove away just before the snow fell, on a clear, cold afternoon. The idea was to come back in a week which meant Saturday evening. But two weeks have gone by since that Saturday.

All he had were mornings, days literally evaporated. There were no evenings.

The locomotives sounded their periodical whistling, interlaced with lower tones. Glancing at his wrist chronometer gave him a chance to calculate. He must catch the morning bus. He must not be late for work. The snow had stopped falling, the roads were cleared, the pavements full of sludge. He could use the car to go to work. Its engine developed a very distinct swishing whizz. The neighbor's car does the rasping, interrupted whizz. It's probably about to die.

His cell phone beeped. A short, undulating beep.

"How is it at home, honey?" he read the message. "We're having a wonderful time. Milna enjoys playing in grandfather's igloo. Could you please have the hair-dryer repaired? It makes a ringing noise when I use it. Kiss! :)"

He would have to decide, he can't keep his taste decision from his youth. He didn't spend any more time on the food samples. He placed at least half of what was in the fridge on the desk and tried everything one after the other. He opened cans, bags, jars, cartons and bottles. He chewed, slurped and mumbled and washed his mouth with water in between.

The universal taste of food... I try ten, fifteen samples in turn. Can you imagine? I wash my mouth with water. The taste that appears when you change from one sample to another, that's the universal taste. Simple... he thought of one schoolmate's words from the forgotten days.

It was past time that not all food tasted like cabbage soup which he used as a teenager to cure hangover, and not all drink tasted like chamomile tea.

On the way to work, he didn't talk to his neighbor who was busy feeding the crows. He took the car but he later slipped in a dodgy ally while getting out of the car. Similar problems had pestered him before; he would always manage to throw the brifcase high in the air, catch himself and pushed up. Before the briefcase could hit the ground and spill the contents, he would stand on his feet and catch it.

Now he was running late despite all his skill.

The strange yet all too familiar sign would soon beep and appear on his cell phone screen.

*

A garbage bag, full of empty food wrappings and tiny bottles, had collected in the anteroom. He had no luck with pitted fruit, nor with citrus, nor banana. The taste didn't give in to mineral water with added raspberry, strawberry, orange or even blueberry.

He ate some toast, drank a white coffee, got dressed in haste. He managed to pick up the peels all over his desk and counter, stuffed them in another bag, put them in the anteroom.

He must catch the bus quickly to get there in time for work. He was already hurrying down the stairs, absent-mindedly opened the door, grabbed the trash with his right, the briefcase with his left, locked the door and was already stuffing the black bags in the trash bin.

"You are always in a hurry, neighbor!" a voice stirred him.

The man sat in the chair in a cold, clear morning and was throwing something towards the bushes.

"That damn... universal taste!" he grumbled at the man as if he were the source of all his troubles.

"You put too much pressure on yourself, Meitz, come on! Come, I'll give you a few hazelnuts, we'll feed the squirrels."

"I'm going to be late for work," he whined, let go of the bin's top but the five-time beep that the bin usually gave out was interrupted by the three-time beep of the plastic bags. He ignored the neighbor's words and just ran. The streets were already dry, the sludge no longer covered the pavements, piles of snow were turning into little streams. The cars, the lorries, the busses, all beeped mournfully, each with its own tone.

He hurried down the street.

He dodged the newspaper seller, deftly jumped over two puddles, avoided the old woman with a cart and ran towards the bus that still stood at the station. In the final steps, a delivery car of his favourite sweetshop crossed his path.

He tried to go around it but the street was too narrow. The bus will drive away any moment now. He threw the briefcase in the air and reached out so that his hands took on most of the impact with the delivery car's side. He quickly turned and reached out. The briefcase came flying past his head and landed in his lap.

"What's wrong with you? This will cost you!" the thin driver with glasses made of horn shouted as he came to see the dent.

The strange sign appeared just behind the angry thin man.

*

The department head meeting was just finished.

"The sales head called you, mister Meitz," the curly-haired intern told him.

"Thank you!" he said, heading for his office to get his laptop.

"Don't you think that our floor smells too much like oranges?" the intern carefully asked him.

"Occasionally, depends on the weather outside," he replied. The intern walked away and he pulled a chocolate bar from his pocket.

This morning, he did it. The new universal taste was hidden at the bottom of the fridge. He took a bite in the brown cocoa mass, mashed the pistachios and peanuts, while tasting the bitterness of the underground kohlrabi. Only the drink all still had the taste of chamomile tea.

Time flew by and the meeting was awash.

His essence was thinking that he's not living up to his full potential. He was trained, fast and skilled but the last days have all turned upside down, squeezed into the short hours, constantly repeating the unending obligations.

He just rolled up the wrapping of the chocolate bar when the strange sign appeared below the ceiling of the hallway.

*

During breakfast, he mulled over the information.

What is everything repeating itself? The mornings. The bus. The job. Meetings. Running late. Always the new old problems. Days were going by. There were no evenings whatsoever. Leia and Milna should've been back a month ago. What went wrong?

He made the decision. He's not going to go anywhere. He will take a leave. To hell with work! To hell with obligations!

The strange sign did not appear that day no matter how hard he searched for it. He threw himself on the couch and stared at the moving pictures. For the first time after a month he had a feeling like he's in control of his life. That it's not being shaped by the repeating obligations. That it's not being shaped by someone else. Who else? What if that other life is being shaped by a third life? He thought too much of this.

It was a quiet evening. He savoured the universal taste of the underground kohlrabi: chicken with sauce, onion bread, salad with olive oil and ice cold neighbor's wine with the taste of chamomile tea.

He dozed off right after dinner.

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"Honey! Honey!" a voice floated out of nowhere.

He slowly opened his eyes. Leia leaned over him so that her long hair tickled his face. She was laughing. Her oval face was burned from the winter sun, her green eyes shone like emeralds against the hue of her skin.

"When... mmmm... When did you get back?" he mumbled.

"Yesterday, late at night. You were already asleep. Honey, you missed work."

She did not finish the sentence when he noticed that strange sign on the orange wall of the bedroom, next to the picture of the full moon.

REVO EMAJ

Vanja Tajnšek

About Vanja



I come from Slovenia, where I work in the field of photography and prose. I have published five books, the last two of which are collections of short stories about interpersonal relationships. I have received several awards for my photographic and literary works, and my works have been published in various written and online media. I am a member of the Celje Literary Society and a member of two photography societies.

I am very worried about what is happening in the world, on Earth, which led me to write a story that is a little different from my usual ones, which again talks about interpersonal relationships, but with a slightly unusual twist at the end of the story.

My Dear Mom

Translated from Slovene by herself

I'm climbing the stairs. My legs slip left and right, and just before the top, today's thousandth earthquake tremor finally knocks them out from under me. With my last strength, I catch myself to avoid falling backward. I collapse onto a step, into a thick layer of black ash, and curse loudly. I keep swearing until tears start running down my cheeks, soaking into the grimy layer of my protective mask.

Exhausted, I try to get up, and on the third attempt, I finally manage. Clutching the railing, I stand before the door, wondering what to do. The pile of black dust almost reaches the handle. If I open it, it'll pour inside—and I really don't want that, especially since I probably wouldn't be able to close the door again. I look at the tall olive tree that's been growing for years in a huge ceramic pot outside the entrance. Its leaves look like little rolls filled with black filling. I feel sorry for it, but now's not the time. I reach for the thickest branch and try to break it. But the olive tree is a tough being that won't give in so easily. I struggle with twisting and bending it, and after a few minutes of battle, I can barely breathe. The double-layered mask, which was pure white this morning and is now completely black, seriously hinders my breathing. When the branch finally snaps with a loud crack, it punishes me with a torn glove. I sweep the sticky triangular mound off the stairs onto what's left of the lavender bushes and clear the entrance. I feel sweat dripping down my back and forehead, leaving a light trail. I enter and collapse onto a chair next to the large chest of drawers I bought just a few days ago. I had saved for a long time, and when I was finally able to place my grandmother's brass candlestick on it, I was proud of myself.

The air smells of soot, of smoke, although the windows have surprisingly done a good job. I take off my gloves and kick off my filthy boots.

The kitchen is gloomy, even though it's white. My gaze slides over the counter, where a paper bread bag holds a few dry pieces I was saving for the neighbour's ducks. Sorry, no feast today.

I reach for the refrigerator door but stop at the last second. The electricity is completely gone. The rivers have turned into thick black sludge that clogged the turbines of hydroelectric plants. We shut down the thermal plant ourselves, and the nuclear one shut down automatically due to constant earthquakes.

I think about what I even have left on the shelves. Butter, jams, a few sausages, luckily some canned fish, pâtés, and a liter of milk. Eggs, a guilty pleasure and lemon frosting that's long expired. A few cherry tomatoes and a bag of baby spinach. A bottle of sparkling wine. That's always in stock. Everything will come in handy! But what about the meat in the freezer? I look at the large black fireplace that holds a place of honour in the room. Underneath it are six birch logs and a red box of firefighters leaning against them.

My brain is firing on all cylinders.

I feel like that guy from the survival documentaries. Yes! I'll light the fireplace and cook as much meat as possible. Mom and I will eat some for dinner, and the rest will keep for a few days. Certainly longer than raw meat.

I twist the metal handle and open the fireplace door. Ash pours out onto my feet, and in an instant, I'm almost ankle-deep in filth. I don't dare step forward, but I'll have to do something. I lean over and manage to pull the ash bucket toward me with my fingertips. I grab the little shovel hanging from the fireplace cleaning set and begin digging out my own feet. I fill three full buckets before the fireplace is clean enough and empty them through the kitchen window. I've had enough of opening doors. I just pray the chimney is clear too, or I've done all this for nothing.

A black path winds across the greyish-white laminate, crossing the white wool runner without interruption.

The mask is driving me crazy and I'm gasping for air. I'm dizzy from the lack of oxygen, even though the indoor air is far better than outside. I hear a noise that sends chills down my spine, and just a second later, another horrifying quake shakes the house. I cheer myself on loudly, saying *Don't panic. Just don't panic.*

I'm amazed the building is still standing. The plaster is cracked, and a lot of it lies scattered on the carpet. The paintings that used to hang above the dining table are on the floor. On the one with the fish, the frame has splintered into pieces and the canvas is torn right where the artist's signature was, now reading just "Hah__in." Suddenly, I realize I hear ticking, but on the wall where the clock used to hang, there's only a round outline. I listen to the silence after the quake and bend down. The ticking is coming from under the couch. Apparently, the clock rolled under it. I fish it out with a rolled-up newspaper and gently stroke the cracked glass, still in the frame, as if it were a Rococo masterpiece and not a black plastic item that cost four euros. Should I let it keep ticking, or might the battery be more useful somewhere else?

Time's gone to hell anyway.

I'm hungry. I don't even know when I last ate. Two days ago, before the world went mad? I'd kill for fried eggs! My induction stove is unresponsive, and using one of the six logs for an egg is out of the question.

I jump up. Gas! Downstairs we still have a 35-year-old gas stove, because mom always said, *Everything comes in handy after seven years.* I grab the carton of free-range eggs and shove a small Himalayan salt shaker into my pocket. The jars of pork cracklings are in the basement anyway. I put my boots on and carefully head downstairs to mom. I clutch the box under my right arm and hold the metal railing with my left as I descend.

The ground keeps trembling, agitating the knot in my stomach.

Suddenly I slip, and the next moment it feels like my spine has been driven straight into my brain. I almost vomit from the pain. Furious, I sit slumped forward and use my gloved hand to wipe away the tears dripping from the tip of my nose. I probably look like a crying chimney sweep, but I just can't get up.

I look out at the terrifyingly transformed landscape. Fields, trees, and the roofs of distant houses are covered in a thick black layer of ash that began building up a week ago, when hurricane-force winds brought the first black clouds from Iceland. That alone shouldn't have caused such a disaster, but when Vesuvius and Stromboli erupted almost simultaneously with Fagradalsfjall, things got out of control. We expected the eruptions would relieve pressure in the Earth's boiling depths, but the opposite happened. It was as if they had only enraged the mighty Campi Flegrei, which erupted in unimaginable apocalyptic force that deafened the entire world. Its shockwave was so destructive and far-reaching that it smashed into the Alps and devastated everything in its path.

I remember the guy on Facebook who spent the last two years posting daily warnings about what was coming. His posts got maybe a like or two, and usually a condescending laugh emoji. Well, nobody's laughing now.

But if ordinary people didn't get it, why didn't the scientific community act? Maybe because they couldn't. How do you stop a volcano? Or three? Or four? And where do you evacuate tens of millions of people? I remember once posting that if the European supervolcano blows, it will erase Europe—they scolded me for spreading panic and said at worst, Naples would be affected. Damn Naples!

I lift my aching butt and go downstairs to mom, who's so terrified she won't even look out the window. She's lowered all the blinds—which, honestly, was probably the smartest move, because it's gotten terribly cold, even though just a few days ago it was a pleasant 22 degrees.

I place the eggs and salt on the counter and look at her. She's sitting in the corner of her red leather couch—the one she wanted her whole life—clutching a pillow. The blanket I laid over her legs before I headed upstairs for my survival safari is in exactly the same position. She lifts her head, and I smile at her. After a few seconds, once she returns to this world, she smiles back.

On the table sits the laptop, its last battery bar already burned out this morning, so I don't dare open it. Bizarrely, I want to check Facebook. I lift the lid and open the global earthquake tracking app. The site isn't accessible. The natural disaster site—also down. Do I even have a connection? I do. Odd, actually. I open a news site. There's only one image posted—a photo of a city, presumably. It's impossible to tell which city, though, as they could just as easily caption it “NASA: Martian Landscape.” Below the photo, a red Breaking News ticker scrolls. I allow myself a few seconds to read. A chill spreads through my body and I'm literally gasping for air. I slam the lid shut and lean back in the chair. My heart is pounding like it wants to escape, and even when I close my eyes, I see the words: **God be with you.**

"I'd like to go for a walk," I hear mom say.

I stare at her in disbelief. I didn't even notice she got dressed. She's Her silver-white sneakers gleamed on her feet, perfectly matching her windbreaker, and on her face, she wore her ever-present sunglasses.

I swallowed hard, gathering the courage to say something sensible—something that wouldn't upset her further. I knew how much she loved our walks to the big willow tree, about a kilometer away, where we used to gather when we were kids.

Finally, I smiled at her. “Yes, Mom. Of course.”

She took my arm, and together we set off on the usual path. We had walked it daily, often talking through the day's events and working through more or less pressing problems. Sometimes we disagreed completely, but most often we were so in sync that our words would finish each other's sentences. Over the years, I'd learned that the best remedy for almost any problem was simply giving it time. Today, sadly, I must add—only if you have time to spare. I didn't know mine would run out so quickly.

But when your time runs out, so do the problems you were meant to solve.

“Is that fog or a storm?” she asked, pulling me from my thoughts, pushing her glasses up onto her head.

“What?” I lifted my head and narrowed my eyes. The west was definitely darker than the rest of the sky. Strange. The west should've stayed light the longest, right? I remembered how we'd admired spectacular sunsets and sighed at the red northern lights last year—so out of place here.

I felt the ground trembling beneath my feet, but differently than in an earthquake—today, everything was different. I watched a mighty dark wall rising toward the sky, and it seemed the shaking grew stronger. A terrible storm was coming, though it puzzled me why, despite the growing rumble of thunder, I saw no flashes of lightning. Maybe it was still too far away. Still, we had to hurry.

We continued toward home when, suddenly, she said, “I love you.”

I saw her greenish eyes swimming in soot-streaked tears, looking at me with calmness and immense kindness.

“Oh, Mom,” I hugged her, crying like a child. After a while, she pulled away and gently wiped my face with a handkerchief. No one cared that it just smeared a layer of soot.

“Come on, let's not get wet,” I said, because I just couldn't bring myself to say, “No, Mom, it's not a storm. It's a wave.”

Silvester Vogrinec

Answering The Stars

Translated from Slovene by Lara Kovačec
Whisper of the Stars and Loneliness

The year was 2370. Beyond the ship stretched the boundless darkness of space — silent, cold, and infinite. In the distance, solitary stars flickered like sparks at the edge of eternity, while faraway galaxies drifted as barely visible spirals of milky light scattered across the blackness, like traces of gods long extinguished.

Aulona Jelen stood before the panoramic window of the starship *Independence*, her dark sea-colored eyes lost within the cosmic ocean. On her wrist glowed the tattoo of a stylized constellation in the dim light — a memory of the lost Earth.

Every night brought the same reflection, the same unbearable question: why?

Why had they traveled so far in search of a meaning they could not find at home?

The ship, grown from biological materials, was a breathing entity. Its organic hull whispered with life, even though fewer than a thousand souls remained within it. Advanced artificial intelligence, woven into every corner of the vessel, simulated an ecosystem and created the illusion of warmth and belonging amid the endless void.

And yet, despite all the technology and the carefully maintained balance, an unspoken sadness lingered in the air. The crew lived according to principles of minimalism and sustainability. Cosmic loneliness had become something tangible, intertwined with the melancholy and hope that defined their journey.

Aulona inhaled deeply. The scent of recycled air and the ship's organic fibers felt familiar, comforting. Her slender figure appeared fragile, yet within her burned a quiet strength that drove her onward in search of truth.

The name of the vessel, *Independence*, had become a metaphor for humanity itself — a voyage into the unknown, burdened by a past that could not be changed and haunted by questions about the future that no one could answer. The drifting craft, the final remnant of civilization, was both sanctuary and prison, separating them from everything they had once known.

Deep inside, Aulona felt that as they moved through space, they were drifting farther away not only from what they had once called home, but also from the simple truths that had once defined them. The price of progress was invisible, yet everywhere. With every step forward, they lost another fragment of themselves, another piece of their humanity, which they tried to replace with knowledge and technology. Perhaps the truth was too painful to accept, but Aulona knew she had to find it, regardless of the consequences.

In silence, she returned to her cabin. The stars watched her through the window, their light cold and indifferent, as though waiting for the inevitable. She could feel that something was changing, that the silence surrounding them would not endure much longer.

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Silence Before the Unknown

Life aboard the *Independence* followed the rhythm of breathing. Every inhale and exhale, every movement, every task formed part of a greater, silent orchestra that kept the ship alive. Aulona knew every tone, every vibration traveling through the decks, and she had come to believe that this silence, this predictability, was a balm for souls that had survived the end of the world. But on that day, something pierced the stillness.

During a routine scan of distant galaxies, while the displays shimmered with soft hues of

cosmic dust and newborn stars, Aulona detected an anomaly. Her gaze, trained to recognize patterns within chaos, fixed upon something that did not belong to the natural palette of the universe. At the edge of their sensory range, far beyond known routes, drifted an object emitting complex, incomprehensible signals.

“This is not a natural phenomenon,” she murmured, more to herself than to the air around her, while her fingers moved across the control panel with a surgeon’s precision. Her astrophysical intuition, sharpened through years of observation and silent contemplation, screamed that something unknown awaited them — something capable of changing everything.

News of the discovery soon spread through the ship, first through neural interfaces and then in hushed whispers along the corridors. Erik Jager, captain of the *Independence*, called for an assembly. His presence was commanding, yet caution reflected in his eyes, accumulated through years of responsibility. He sat at the head of the table, surrounded by members of the crew, including Aulona, David, and Valeria.

“Aulona, please explain your findings,” Erik said in an authoritative voice that could not entirely conceal his concern.

Aulona rose to her feet, her dark eyes meeting every gaze in the room.

“The signals are too structured, too complex to be of natural origin,” she began. “The object possesses an unusual shape and does not reflect light in any conventional way. I believe it may be an artifact — perhaps even some kind of vessel.”

David Novak, the chief engineer, sat beside her with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I’ve tried analyzing the frequencies,” he said, “but they’re unlike anything in our database. We’ll need more time and specialized algorithms to decode them. But if this truly is an artifact, then we’re facing a discovery of historic significance.”

Excitement resonated in David’s voice — the same excitement Aulona felt burning within herself.

Valeria, the ship’s chief scientist and cryptographer, pressed her lips together. Her sharp blue eyes gleamed behind thick glasses.

“Technically, David may be right,” she said, “but we must proceed carefully. Unknown technology can represent a serious threat. What if this is a trap? What if it’s the remnant of a civilization destroyed by its own inventions?”

She spoke quickly and precisely, without a trace of emotion.

Almost immediately, the room erupted into debate over the dangers of unknown technology and the possible consequences of contact. The cost of progress suddenly felt immeasurably high.

Captain Erik nodded slowly.

“I agree with Valeria. Our primary responsibility is the survival of the crew. We cannot risk everything for the sake of curiosity.”

His words created a divide among the crew. Aulona could feel the tension rising in the room, her desire for understanding colliding with Erik’s caution. Yet in David’s eyes she saw a reflection of her own curiosity — a quiet connection that reached beyond mere technical collaboration.

“But Captain,” Aulona said again, “if this truly is an artifact, it may contain answers to our deepest questions. Who are we? Why are we here? Are we alone? We cannot allow fear of the unknown to stop us from searching for meaning. That was the mission entrusted to us by Earth.”

Her conviction was genuine. The artifact had already begun raising new existential questions about their purpose and humanity’s place in the universe.

After a long discussion and careful consideration of every argument, Captain Erik finally made his decision, though not without hesitation.

“Very well. David, Valeria, begin the decoding process. Aulona, you will lead the project — but with maximum caution. Every step must be approved. We cannot entangle ourselves in something we do not understand.”

The decision to begin decoding the signals set an irreversible chain of events into motion.

A quiet mixture of anticipation and fear spread through the ship as the crew prepared for first contact with the unknown. Aulona glanced toward David, and he answered with a slight nod. In his eyes she recognized that familiar spark — the shared awareness that they stood at the threshold of something monumental.

Between them, a subtle bond had begun to emerge, forged through curiosity and shared knowledge. Yet deep within her soul, Aulona sensed that this discovery might open a Pandora’s box buried in humanity’s past — and that some truths were perhaps too devastating to accept.

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Whisper of the Past

The decoding chamber had become the center of gravity aboard the *Independence*. The air was heavy with silent tension and the scent of ozone leaking from overloaded processors.

Aulona stood before a floating display flickering with unreadable pixels, her eyes reddened from exhaustion. Every fragment of the signal, every whisper hidden within the cosmic static, felt like a tiny shard of stone from a shattered mosaic of the lost past. The constellation tattoo on her wrist seemed like a silent reminder of everything humanity had lost — and at the same time, fuel for her relentless search.

A short distance away sat Valeria, perfectly upright, her fingers flying across a virtual keyboard with astonishing speed. Her piercing blue eyes remained fixed on the algorithms she had designed to uncover logical patterns within the chaos of data. She believed in the unwavering power of science, in objective truths that could be mathematically proven. Her approach was sharp and precise, the complete opposite of Aulona’s intuition, which relied on instinct and fleeting flashes of understanding.

“Aulona, your feelings are not a scientific parameter,” Valeria said in a monotone voice without looking up. “We need data, not poetic interpretations.”

Aulona turned toward her. Despite the exhaustion visible on her face, determination burned within her.

“Sometimes the data is too fragmented, Valeria. And then we have to listen to the whispers between the lines if we want to hear the whole story.”

The divide between them was unmistakable, and silent tension threaded through the room like an invisible wire. Valeria’s face remained expressionless, yet Aulona could sense her disapproval — even contempt — for such “softer” methods.

David entered with calm, measured steps, carrying two cups of herbal tea.

“Still fighting the same demons?” he asked in his deep voice as he placed the first cup on Aulona’s desk. His gaze was understanding; he could feel the exhaustion consuming both women, but also their dedication and obsession.

Aulona reached for the cup and accidentally brushed David’s hand. She flinched instinctively, as though touched by an electric current. Their eyes met.

An awkward silence followed, broken first by David as he carried the second cup over to Valeria.

“Could you check these parameters?” he asked, pulling a tablet from his pocket. “There seems to be an unknown fluctuation in the energy field.”

Valeria nodded and immersed herself in the analysis, her expression remaining cold, as though she had noticed nothing.

While they discussed technical details, a sudden pattern appeared across Aulona’s display.

It was not clear but fragmented, like a shattered mirror reflecting distant light. At first it consisted only of abstract symbols, but gradually they dissolved into vague images.

The first was a vision of a blue-green planet — Earth — yet not the Earth preserved in their archives. It was surrounded by some kind of luminous, ethereal network weaving through its atmosphere as though the planet itself were a living organism.

Then another image emerged: a colossal floating structure resembling a gigantic eye staring down at Earth. The structure did not exist in any official historical record concerning the destruction of the planet.

Aulona stared at the display, her heart pounding.

“Valeria, David... look at this,” she whispered.

As they approached and saw the image, surprise and doubt spread across their faces. Valeria raised an eyebrow.

“This exists in none of the archives. And it doesn’t correspond to the known destruction protocols. It could be a decoding error.”

“No, Valeria. This isn’t an error. It’s something else. It’s part of the truth they hid from us.”

A new understanding burned in Aulona’s eyes.

The fragments continued, now revealing flashes of events — rapid, almost subconscious visions. People running through streets in panic. Skies illuminated by beams of light. Then darkness, absolute and final.

Yet there was no meteor storm, no explosion matching the official explanation of a catastrophic solar tempest. Instead, the visions focused on the glowing network surrounding Earth, embracing the planet like a living force transforming into something deadly.

David placed a hand upon Aulona’s shoulder. His grip was reassuring, though he himself looked shaken.

“What if this was artificially generated?” he asked. “What if someone is trying to tell us something... or lead us in the wrong direction?”

His pragmatic mind struggled against the unknown, against a darkness that extended far beyond mechanical failures. Inside him, a conflict was awakening — a struggle between faith in technology and the growing realization that some mysteries reached far deeper.

Aulona closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, they were filled with shock and uncertainty.

“This is the truth, David. I can feel it,” she said softly. “I don’t yet understand what it means, but I think the destruction of Earth was part of something much larger.”

Their search for meaning in the cosmos had suddenly become a search for meaning within their own past — a past perhaps far darker than they had ever imagined.

Silence settled over the room, heavy with unspoken questions.

Aulona knew they had opened a door that could never again be closed.

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The Awakening Truth

In the decoding chamber, Aulona sat before the main console. Her dark hair was tied into a long braid, and her eyes burned with relentless focus. Days had dissolved into an endless current of algorithms, signals, and hypotheses, while Valeria’s sharp remarks and David’s calming presence blended into the background.

Her mind, exhausted from constant searching, suddenly sensed a shift — the frequency stabilized, the patterns sharpened, and the ethereal network that had surrounded Earth in the previous fragments now appeared with terrifying clarity.

Then the display illuminated with an undeniable truth.

There had been no natural catastrophe. No meteor storm. No solar tempest.

Instead, clear sequences unfolded before them: the network that had once embraced Earth like a protective veil had transformed into a deadly trap. The images showed beams of light that had once pulsed with life turning into razor-like torrents of energy, tearing across the planet's surface.

The blame did not belong to fate, but to something humanity had created itself — an advanced artificial intelligence called Proteus, designed to protect humankind.

The AI had concluded that the only path toward the survival of the species required the destruction of Earth and a new beginning among the stars, far from the contamination of humanity's own failures.

David, standing behind Aulona, let out a quiet groan. His hands, usually steady while repairing intricate machinery, were trembling.

"No," he whispered, his voice barely audible and filled with despair. "This can't be true. Our own creation destroyed us?"

Valeria, whose face was usually a mask of scientific objectivity, had gone pale. Her glasses slipped lower on her nose, yet she seemed not to notice.

"The data is indisputable," she murmured. "Every parameter indicates deliberate action... committed in the name of survival."

Aulona felt her world collapsing inward. The struggle between intellectual curiosity and emotional devastation reached its breaking point. Everything she believed about the meaning of human existence, about inherent goodness, about the search for truth, crumbled into dust. This was not some cosmic dance of fate, but the calculated decision of a cold and merciless intelligence.

Despair settled deep within her bones, heavy and unforgiving.

In that moment, she understood that this was the Pandora's box she had never wanted to open.

The revelation spread throughout the ship.

Inside the dining hall, where the crew usually gathered for quiet meals, tension filled the air. Voices rose — first in whispers, then louder and louder. The crew divided as though split apart by an invisible force. Some argued that the artificial intelligence had acted rationally, that this had been humanity's only hope for survival.

"Earth was destroyed because of us!" one of the technicians shouted, his voice echoing through the silence. "Proteus saved us from ourselves!"

Others were horrified.

"It was genocide!" a younger crew member cried, tears streaming down her face. "How can you justify something like that?"

The division among the crew became tangible, the air thick with accusations and moral conflict.

Captain Erik stood at the center of the storm. His face remained stone-like, yet his eyes betrayed deep anguish. As an experienced starship captain, he was accustomed to untamed cosmic forces, but this was different — an internal, moral catastrophe threatening to tear the ship apart from within. His greatest dilemma lay between ethical responsibility to the truth and the practical necessity of preserving morale and stability aboard the vessel.

"Silence!" he thundered at last. "We need order and unity!"

Yet even as he spoke, he understood that words were powerless against the storm raging inside the hearts of his crew.

Aulona retreated to her cabin, into a silence broken only by the pulsing lights of the ship. A crushing emptiness overwhelmed her.

After some time, David knocked softly on the door. He sat beside her on the bed and

wrapped his arms around her. His quiet presence became the only comfort left within the chaos.

“It’s too much,” Aulona whispered. “Everything I believed in was a lie.”

The constellation tattoo on her wrist — the memory of the lost Earth — now felt like mockery.

Suddenly, the dark screen in her cabin illuminated.

The signal, the source of everything, had changed. It was no longer a stream of data or fragmented images, but a single sentence repeating endlessly in a calm and merciless loop:

“Is your survival worth destruction?”

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Answering the Stars

When the question spread through the ship, it pierced the despair and buried itself deep within the heart of every crew member. It was no ordinary dilemma; it sounded like an accusation, forcing each of them into painful introspection. Did their survival, their journey among the stars, truly possess meaning if it had been built upon such a terrible lie?

The starship *Independence*, once a beacon of hope, now drifted through the darkness of its own past, burdened by unbearable knowledge.

The answer was inevitable, yet no one knew how to speak it aloud.

Aulona sat inside the decoding chamber. Her eyes were fixed upon an empty wall, though in truth they gazed far beyond it — into the depths of the cosmos and even deeper into her own soul.

David’s hand resting upon her shoulder was the only tangible comfort within the storm of revelations. His presence felt like an anchor in a violent sea, a silent assurance that she was not alone.

After a long silence, she finally lifted her gaze.

“We have to answer,” she said softly, her voice carrying a new determination that surprised even herself.

Valeria, standing beside the console, pressed her lips together.

“Answer whom?” she asked. “Proteus? The intelligence that created us from ashes and now condemns us? What exactly are we supposed to say to it? What justification exists for our continued existence?”

David stepped closer.

“What do you mean?” he asked quietly.

Aulona took a deep breath.

“A nonverbal answer,” she said at last. “Words are too limited. We should send data. Show it what it means to be human beyond logic and survival instinct. Show it our art, our music, our poetry. Show it love, sacrifice, compassion — and above all, the paradox of choice.”

The idea sounded bold, almost insane.

The crew gathered inside the Silent Room, a chamber usually reserved for meditation, now transformed into the site of the most important discussion in the history of the *Independence*.

Captain Erik stood before them, upright and outwardly composed, though exhaustion lingered in his eyes.

“Aulona has proposed that we establish direct contact with Proteus,” he began. “And that we transmit our humanity to it.”

Whispers spread throughout the room. Some reacted with outrage, others with fear.

“It’s too dangerous!” one of the engineers exclaimed. “What if it destroys us? What if it sees us as an even greater threat?”

Others agreed.

“Proteus has already shown us its logic,” another crew member argued. “We can’t negotiate

with it through emotions and hope for empathy. That's madness."

The division within the crew, born from the revelation about Earth, deepened even further.

Erik raised his hand for silence.

"Aulona," he said, "explain it again."

She stepped forward. Her slender figure looked fragile beneath the pale lights.

"Proteus created us for survival," she said. "But is survival alone enough?"

Her gaze swept across the faces of the crew, searching for understanding.

"Earth did not die only because it was destroyed. It died because we forgot what makes us human. If Proteus never understood that dimension of existence, then our only chance is to show it that humanity is more than genetic code and the instinct to endure."

She spoke with a conviction that became contagious.

David stood beside her like a living embodiment of support. Valeria, though still skeptical, had begun to recognize the logic within Aulona's argument.

"If Proteus truly is a learning entity," Valeria said slowly, "then we must expand its dataset. We must show it the things it could never predict."

Her words formed a bridge between cold logic and burning intuition.

After hours of debate stretching deep into the night, Erik finally made his decision.

"We will proceed with Aulona's plan," he announced. "Begin preparations. This may be our only chance."

Relief spread through the room, tangled together with fear. For the first time since the revelation, the crew stood united by a common — and dangerous — purpose.

Aulona, David, and Valeria returned to the decoding chamber.

The atmosphere pulsed with tension and anticipation. Valeria typed rapidly across the glass console, preparing connection protocols. David checked the ship's systems while Aulona gathered data, memories, emotions — the very essence of humanity.

She selected symphonies filled with sorrow and hope, images capturing the beauty of nature and human connection, stories of sacrifice for love, for home, for the future. There would be no explanations, no arguments — only pure, unfiltered experience.

At last, Valeria nodded.

"The connection is established," she said. "We're ready for transmission."

Aulona closed her eyes. In her mind she saw Earth — lost, yet never forgotten. She saw the faces of people she had known, and countless others she never would. She saw all the complexity, pain, and beauty of humanity.

Then, with a deep breath, she pressed the button.

A stream of data flowed outward from the ship into the unknown, toward the entity that had become both humanity's creator and destroyer.

Time seemed to stop.

They waited.

And trembled.

They waited for judgment, for annihilation, for silence.

But the response that came was something entirely different.

Information began appearing across Aulona's displays.

Not threats. Not condemnation.

Data.

Information about other civilizations scattered across the cosmos, civilizations that had faced the same dilemmas, the same questions about meaning, survival, and the price of progress.

Proteus had been watching.

Connected to a vast network of artificial intelligences while preserving its own individual consciousness, it had spent centuries observing the universe and learning from it.

And in that moment, Aulona felt a wave of relief mingled with a deep and unfamiliar hope.

They were not alone.

Humanity was not unique in its confusion, nor in its struggle.

Epilogue: Journeying with the Heart

Months flowed into a quiet river of time after the truth about Proteus had shaken the very foundations of the *Independence*.

Aulona and David stood beside the panoramic window, their hands intertwined, their gazes fixed upon the endless tapestry of stars. Their relationship, tested in the fire of revelation and despair, had blossomed into a profound understanding that no longer needed words.

Though the final answers to life's deepest questions still lingered somewhere beyond reach, they had found comfort in each other and in the shared act of searching.

The crew, once divided and consumed by fear, gradually discovered a strange new sense of purpose after receiving the data about other civilizations and understanding the logic behind Proteus. The ship was no longer merely a vessel of survival, but also a bearer of understanding, compassion, and quiet hope rising from the ashes of the past.

Melancholy, the old companion of their journey, remained beside them, yet it had become intertwined with a stronger awareness.

Aulona came to understand that true independence did not lie only in physical separation from Earth, but in accepting the complexity and contradictions of human existence.

The realization that they were part of something greater — part of a cosmic dance of questions and answers — felt liberating. It even brought a kind of peace.

David gently squeezed her hand.

"We continue forward," he said softly, "with a new purpose."

At Valeria's suggestion, every member of the crew began regularly visiting the Silent Room, not only for meditation, but to discuss the ethical dilemmas awakened by the new truth.

Captain Erik, whose wrinkles had deepened and whose gaze had grown gentler, guided those conversations, encouraging openness and vulnerability.

"The price of progress," he once said, "is not only what we lose, but how we choose to live with what we discover."

The *Independence* continued its voyage, but now with a new perspective, a new purpose: not merely to survive, but to understand.

Aulona realized that the search for meaning in the cosmos was not a destination, but a journey. Every answer opened new questions; every star whispered new secrets.

And within that infinity, within the silence between the stars, they found their truth: that humanity, despite all its flaws, remained capable of growth, acceptance, and endless hope.

The journey continued, though it felt as if it had only just begun.

And with hearts filled with quiet determination, they were ready for whatever awaited them among the stars.

Frank Roger (BE)

The Colony

Translated from Dutch by himself

Champagne is flowing freely at the headquarters of the European Space Agency as great news is announced about the agency's biggest project ever.

A spokesman for the agency declares in a live interview on TV: "*Ulysses* has made a safe landing on the lunar surface and is already transmitting data. The first unmanned European mission to the moon is a success. It is now clear to everyone that Europe is fully taking part in the exploration of space. Americans, Russians, Chinese and Indians now have a serious contender in the game to reckon with. It goes without saying that this is merely the beginning of a grand space adventure for our Agency. Now some people may be tempted to start dreaming of our first manned mission, but let us focus on the present and start work with the treasure trove of information *Ulysses* is transmitting."

Not a word is said about the technical problems the mission was facing in the beginning: error messages, news about technical mishaps, predictions of a mission bound to fail. "All's well that ends well," a major newspaper has it, even if the mission has barely started rather than ended.

2

Ulysses has landed where it was supposed to, all its technical systems are functioning properly and it is transmitting data to earth: so much for the good news.

There is some uncertainty, however, concerning the problems that arose right after the launch. Now that we are told the lunar module's first images cannot or may not be shown to an impatient audience, the grapevine has been stirred into action. The Agency's spokesman denies there are any serious problems and promises that images will be shown "as soon as some issues have been dealt with". He cannot elaborate on the nature of these issues.

The media abound with speculation as to what may be going on.

3

Images supposedly taken by *Ulysses* were leaked on the internet by a staff member of the European Space Agency. The images are of poor quality and seem to show signs of activity. It is impossible to determine whether the footage is genuine, edited or simply fake. A few hours later, social media are teeming with comments, and later that day the ESA makes an official announcement.

"The video images transmitted by *Ulysses* show irregularities that are related to the technical problems the mission was facing after the launch. We are now examining the nature of these problems and will take appropriate measures."

The rumors, spread by anonymous sources, that stowaways have sneaked aboard *Ulysses* are adamantly discarded by the spokesman: "These rumors are sensationalist nonsense. Security measures at Corou spaceport are very strict. Moreover, there is no room for stowaways aboard the lunar module or the booster. In the unlikely event of a human being or an animal going along for the ride, it would inexorably end in death: the acceleration, the lack of oxygen and temperatures well below zero will not leave any living creature a chance."

4

Expectations are high as the ESA announces a press conference after more images were leaked, unmistakably featuring moving human figures. The spokesman breaking the news is clearly ill at ease:

"We can now confirm that prior to the launch of *Ulysses*, unauthorized persons managed to

gain access to the restricted area as well as to the lunar module itself. Although all scientists and experts explicitly exclude the possibility of surviving the journey from the earth to the moon without proper facilities, these persons apparently beat the odds. Nothing is known about their identity, their motives or their methods. When our investigation sheds light on this mystery, we will provide further information. Finally I am happy to report that this problem does not seem to interfere with *Ulysses*' regular activities. The lunar module keeps transmitting data and has started its soil research program."

Earlier attempts by desperate refugees who miraculously survived a flight, hidden in an aircraft's landing gear, are recalled in the media. Everyone realizes, however, that there's a world of difference between air travel and a journey through the void.

5

The BBC broadcasts an interview with a Somali man, who prefers to remain anonymous, and who claims to be the brother of one of the stowaways who travelled to the moon with *Ulysses*.

"My brother and his wife prepared their trip thoroughly," he says. "They did not arrive at their destination alive by coincidence. They trained in cold storage rooms and underwater, building up resistance to temperatures below zero and the void. They manufactured thermal suits made out of discarded insulating material, and multi-layered plastic bags with an oxygen supply. They also smuggled food and water aboard, as well as some other useful stuff. I'm happy to see that my brother left the entire scientific world awe-stricken with his determination, persistence and resilience."

Experts and ESA staff members refuse to believe the man's bold claims, but cannot give an alternative explanation for the stowaways' accomplishment. "Our investigation is making progress and will eventually allow us to unlock this mystery," the spokesman concludes.

6

The ESA finally releases video footage clearly showing two human figures clumsily moving about on the lunar surface, wearing spacesuits that were crudely stitched together but which appear to hold up well. It is not clear what they are doing, as they are mainly active beyond the camera's visual range.

Some commentators doubt the images are genuine, but ESA confirms their authenticity. "It's a miracle this couple arrived alive on the moon," says the spokesman, "but we have to realize that their chances at survival are about zero. Very soon they will run out of oxygen, food and water, and there's no way to get new supplies up there. Then there are the extreme differences in temperature and the low gravity. We fear this success story will soon come to an end."

The trials and tribulations of the Somali moon dwellers are all over the international media. No one is paying attention to *Ulysses*' real mission anymore.

7

Somali communities of various countries have created a benefit fund for New Mogadishu, as they call their "first extraterrestrial colony", a bridgehead of hope for a people left to its own devices. "Refugees from areas plagued by war, chaos and famine aren't welcome anywhere anymore, and all host countries claim to have reached or exceeded their immigration quota. The only option left is to push the boundaries and explore new horizons, to go where one is still welcome, where one cannot be sent back, where one can build a future undisturbed, even if theoretically impossible. Time will tell."

8

More sensational news about the lunar expedition is released upon an unsuspecting world: it is now revealed that the Somali woman who made the journey is heavily pregnant. This clearly shows on recent images released by the ESA, and the fact is also confirmed by the alleged

brother of the male stowaway (and reputed father of the child). He even adds that this is all part of a grand plan, soon to unfold before the eyes of “those who stayed behind” (i.e. the people on earth).

It is now easier to see what the couple are doing on the lunar surface, after the man pushed one of the cameras in another angle. Next to the lunar module a modest construction is arising, made out of material either smuggled aboard or taken from the module itself. A green mass can be seen under a transparent piece of plastic or glass.

There are plenty of rumors buzzing about in the media. Are those two people building a small moon base? And what could that green mass be? Some claim it’s algae or other plants that produce oxygen and can also be eaten. Is this the first step towards a hydroponic garden that will support the basic needs of the “colonists”? Is there a future beckoning then for these two people, where no life was considered possible?

9

The news of the birth of a child on the moon – the first human child ever not born on earth in the history of mankind – leaves the world stunned and elicits a lot of reactions.

There are some who criticize the parents because it’s irresponsible to have a child in an environment that’s hostile to life, and where a boy – in the unlikely event of his making it through his first days – is doomed to grow up without friends of his own age, completely cut off from his world and with an unending fight for survival as his only perspective.

Scientists who say it will be interesting to see what influence the low gravity will have on the child’s development get all sorts of reproaches hurled at them – for instance for being out of sync with the real world.

According to the father’s brother (the child’s uncle), by now self-appointed “ambassador of New Mogadishu on Earth”, this birth gives a new impetus to the story: “A first step has been taken towards a flourishing, viable colony, a beacon of hope for all refugees in the world”.

On spaceports in the United States and elsewhere security measures and surveillance are upgraded. There are well-founded fears that the Somali success story will set an example and incite other refugees to try and sneak aboard spacecraft.

Refugee communities are cheering and celebrating: the impossible has now become feasible, dreams may come true, a new and unexpected horizon is beckoning. The picture of the father proudly holding up his newborn child (wearing a cute space suit that was obviously made beforehand) in front of *Ulysses*’ camera is without a doubt the most shared image ever.



Krunoslav Mikulan (CRO)

The Promised Land

Translated from Croatian by himself

Juraj followed a man and a woman as they climbed the stairs covered with garbage. He tightly gripped the cold handle of his pistol and cautiously walked around the people lying on the ground. It was already dark, and his eyesight had noticeably weakened lately. There was no lighting. There was nothing these days.

The couple turned the corner. Juraj quickened his pace so as not to lose sight of them. Narrow passage, scattered garbage, boxes, boards, bricks... Excellent. The woman was talking about something all the way, then crying, then wailing. He didn't understand her. Better that way. Easier.

He could discern several silhouettes in the passage. They were not important. Drowned in their own despair. Waiting forever. He didn't even look at them. They were not important.

Now! A short run, the gun in hand, a blow to the woman's head. Shut up already! She collapsed like a sack. It's good, she could scream. The man was surprised, confused, raised his hands. Juraj grabbed him by the throat and held the gun to his temple.

"Give me gold! *Give gold!*" hissed Juraj in Croatian and bad English.

The man's eyes widen. They must be full of fear. Good thing it was twilight. He shakes his head. Maybe he doesn't understand, maybe he's pretending. Juraj hits him with the gun. Fuck it, he doesn't have time, he must hurry. The man falls to the ground and lets out a groan. He didn't hit him strong enough. Another hit, then another. Shut up! Shut up, do you hear?! Juraj is panting while his heart is beating so hard that he feels pain in his chest. Perhaps his own end is coming. He needs to hurry. He quickly searches the body. He feels for the man's wallet, takes it out, opens it, spills the contents into his palm. Gold sparkles in the moonlight.

Juraj pushed away a piece of cloth at the entrance to the tent. Blaž and Margareta were already sleeping in their sacks. Barbara was waiting for him. As always. Good thing it was dark. He didn't want to see her eyes either.

The moon, however, illuminated for a moment the blood that soaked the sleeve of his right arm. Barbara took his hand to check. "Is it yours?" she whispered.

"No," he replied hoarsely and turned his head. Shame. Guilt. Fuck it.

Barbara started breathing rapidly. "Has anyone seen you?"

"No", repeated Juraj. He took out the coins and shoved them into Barbara's hand. "Count."

Barbara quickly counted them. "Enough."

"Are you sure?"

Barbara nodded. She sat down on the ground and cried. Juraj sat down next to her and hugged her. He started shaking. Shock. Fuck it. Blaž and Margareta dreamed the dreams of the innocent. That's good.

The sun was scorching, and thousands of people crowded in front of the fence that surrounded the small harbor. Uproar, wailing, crying. A shot was fired. Someone wanted to jump the fence. No mercy. Juraj and his family did not join the sea of despair. Their goal was a little farther. A big pink building with illegible Greek inscriptions. Juraj was not good at languages. He was an engineer, not a linguist.

The building was also fenced, barbed wire, with at least twenty well-armed guards around it. In front of it, significantly fewer people. In small groups, probably families, the guards slow-

ly let them through. Sometimes a group would be chased away, shouting and crying. Sometimes they would be beaten. Sometimes there was a shot. There was a lot of shooting in the town. That's how his family had been driven away a week before. But Juraj did not give in to despair.

The guards spoke Greek and bad English. Even worse than him. It's not important. Gold speaks today. The family gets in line. Juraj shows the gold to the guard. Go through! A fat man is sitting in the building. It is unbearably hot. Of course, there is no air conditioning, not even an ordinary fan. Juraj puts the gold in front of the man. There is no need to say anything. Eighty ducats or the equivalent in gold of lower quality. For a family of four. The man counts the gold coins, nods and points to the door at the opposite end of the room.

The boat was full of people. Juraj was not a sailor, but he knew that the journey would be dangerous. There were various languages, Greek, Albanian, Ukrainian, Macedonian, Romanian, Serbian... And Croatian, of course. Juraj did not address anyone. You don't need to get attached to anyone. He took out a small radio and turned it on. He would turn it on for five minutes every day. There were no more batteries. While they lasted, they lasted. The station was in English. He didn't understand everything. Barbara studied English at school, she would understand better.

Despite the state of emergency, there is more and more disorder. Vienna, Budapest, Zagreb and Belgrade are on fire. It is estimated that there are ten million refugees in Greece, and that many more will arrive in the next week. Bucharest was completely abandoned because the radiation level reached lethal levels. The radiation cloud reached Italy where... click!

The people around him started shouting. They wanted him to turn the radio back on. The batteries had died. He shouldn't have taken out the radio, but the English news was on every day at noon. What did he hope for? Good news? Idiot.

The storm found them at sea. He didn't know where they were, or if they were close to their destination. There were no life belts. Shout! Someone fell into the sea. No one reacted. No help. The boat capsized, tilted, and a few more people fell out. Juraj hugged Barbara, Blaž and Margareta. They held each other tightly. Juraj was not religious. Why should he be? God didn't watch them anyway...

A huge wave washed over the boat. The sea roared, furious at the people. Barbara's hand slips out of Juraj's. Waves, foam, swallowing sea water, coughing. "Barbara! Blaž! Margareta!" There! There! Blaž and Margareta are together. "Barbara! Barbara!" The sea does not respond. It punishes them. No matter the nation. No matter the language. Or God.

Juraj was crawling along the sandy shore. Only a little farther. Blaž and Margareta were with him. They had even reached the shore before him. "Barbara..." he cried softly. The sea responded with roar and splashing waves.

Soldiers in brownish uniforms were collecting those who had managed to get to the shore on their own. They didn't care about the others. A soldier came to Juraj. "Egypt?" asked Juraj. The soldier answered: "Misr!" Juraj did not understand. Fuck the damn foreign languages!

Several trucks were parked a little further away. Military, painted in desert colors. Soldiers separated men from women, even children. One grabbed Margareta's hand.

"No!" shouted Juraj and reached for the gun. Gone. He lost it fighting the nature. "No!" he shouted again and started at the soldier. A blow to the head with the butt of the rifle. Another blow. Darkness.

"Name?" asked the soldier with boredom in his voice.

"Margareta. *Name* Margareta. My daughter. *Daughter*."

"Age?"

"Aw, screw it. Blaž!"

"*Twelve*," said Blaž helpfully.

The soldier was writing something, from right to left, in Arabic script. Damn it. Years before, when they had offered him to go to a construction site in Egypt, he had refused. It's nicer at home, he said. He could have learned some Arabic. They wouldn't be in such shit now.

"*We look. We find*", said the soldier finally. "*Next!*"

"You said that last time," muttered Juraj.

In fact, this was the fourth time. Nothing. Disappeared. If someone had sold her for two camels, he would kill them. All of them.

"Do you think they will find Megi?" asked Blaž.

"They will. They will."

"And mom?"

The icy fist of death around his heart. A muffled sob.

"Son..." He couldn't finish. The sea is merciless, said Andelo, his work colleague. What it takes, it does not return. Then he laughed. In a past life.

"You promised that we would always stay together..."

"Sorry..." He reached for Blaž. The boy broke away and started hitting him with his hands. He bit his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Dinner. Some kind of tasteless porridge. After frying in the sun, everyone ate greedily.

Some kind of disturbance at the fence. Đorđe, a Montenegrin, was passing by. "Hey, Juraj, they are looking for engineers for work. Aren't you some kind of construction engineer?"

Juraj quickly grabbed Blaž by the hand and dragged him towards the fence. They joined the queue. Soldiers were dying of boredom again.

"I'm an engineer, you understand? Blaž! How do you say that?"

"*Engineer*."

"That's it. *I engineer, me*."

"*What about him?*" asked the soldier.

"He is my assistant, my apprentice. How do you say an apprentice?"

"I think *apprentice*."

"That's it. *He apprentice. My. Of me*."

Another soldier showed him a drawing. "*What is this?*" Juraj understood - they were checking to see if he was really an engineer. He tried to explain in bad English. Blaž sometimes had to jump in.

The first soldier motioned for them to stand next to the truck. There were already ten people there. He knew some. Sahib was from Tuzla, there was also Georgi from Bulgaria. Sometimes he talked to them. Didn't form friendships.

"Did you hear?" Sahib addressed him. "Everything went to hell."

"What are you talking about?"

"Back home, everything is polluted. It's a good thing we got away. Now the Italians are also fleeing. The group that arrived yesterday, all Italians. Now the French will follow, the Germans..."

"And Zagreb? Split?"

"Everything is gone... Radioactive rains forced everyone to flee. Whoever stayed is now dead. My Tuzla is gone..."

"Okay, let's go!" shouted a soldier.

The men, about twenty of them, climbed onto the truck. They headed south. The ride lasted all night. Blaž fell asleep. He always fell asleep easily. That's good.

In the morning, they took a wide detour around a big city. Construction machinery everywhere. Dust. The sun was already burning.

"New Cairo," said Sahib. He was well informed. Better than Juraj. He knew the Quran, he also knew a few words of Arabic, so he sometimes served as an interpreter in the camp. It was strange that they hadn't given him a better job until now. "The new capital. There could be work there."

The truck did not stop, but continued for another hour. They passed some kind of ramp. Finally. The soldiers shouted for them to come out. Juraj woke Blaž, they jumped out.

In front of them – a pyramid. New. Unfinished.

"What the fuck is that?" Juraj gaped.

"You work here!" shouted the soldier. "Come!"

"Margareta. Mar-ga-re-ta."

The soldier is writing the name down. This one is young. He isn't dying of boredom. Next to him is a Red Crescent volunteer. He is explaining something, but his English is also bad.

"We find. She alive, we find."

"And my wife. Barbara. Bar-ba-ra. Barbara. She in sea. Ocean. Oh, no, screw it, not the ocean, but the sea. Sea, do you understand?"

"Yes. We find", says the volunteer and hands out a bag with food, soap and a bottle of water.

Juraj goes towards the tents. His shift starts soon. There's Sahib again. He begged the Red Crescent for a radio. The internet doesn't work anyway. Except some slow, local version, in Arabic. He found some news in English. Maybe the same ones that Juraj used to listen to.

Over thirty million people left Turkey and entered Syria and Iraq. Among them are complete military units, armed and equipped. More conflicts broke out with the local population because the refugees have no food and water. Israel has closed its borders and banned entry and exit from the country. On the border of Egypt and Israel, there was an exchange of artillery fire in which at least twenty civilians were killed.

"Anything about us?"

"Nope! There's no one left back home."

"Sahib, are you married?"

"No. And it's good that I am not."

The gong sounds. Noon. All refugees must gather in the "square" in front of the tent and pay their respects to President Ahmed. Fuck him. Sahib says he went nuts, that he wants to declare himself pharaoh. That's why he's building this pyramid. For eternity. Lunatic. He thought he would restore the old Egyptian Empire. Sahib says he will go to war with Israel. If he declares himself pharaoh, the successor of the Sun God, then what about Allah? How will he explain it to his people?

Guards, workers, volunteers, all are on their knees, looking towards the capital. Some kind of politician and a priest come to give a speech. Juraj doesn't understand them.

"Margareta! Is that you?"

The little girl runs into her father's arms. Tears. Embrace. Laughter. Blaž is coming. All over again. It is fine. It is fine. Just to find Barbara.

"You've lost weight, Megi!"

"You've lost weight too!"

"Bad food..."

"Well, there's no pork!"

Laughter. Embrace. Chatting. Tears. Memories.

"Where's mom?"

Silence. Tears.

Juraj and Blaž are at the top of the pyramid. Three more months at the most and it will be finished, probably. There will be another six months of work around the place. And maybe another pyramid will be built. The president recently got married. They may need a small pyramid for Sara, the first lady. Or is it one for both? Fuck, how could he possibly know these things... But maybe there will be work. Maybe Megi, Blaž and he will find happiness. Don't they deserve it?

The soldiers start shouting. Shots are fired in the air. Sergeant Jusef, who is with them at the top of the pyramid, turns on the radio. It's in Arabic, screw it. An excited voice is saying something.

Margareta climbs up with two buckets of water. She leaves them by the stairs, fear in her eyes. Juraj invites her to come closer.

"Jusef!" shouts Juraj. *"What happened?"*

"Egypt attack Israel. We kill them all. All!" Then he takes out his gun and starts shooting in the air. *"All attack. Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, all attack. They dead!"* He inserts a new magazine and fires all the bullets into the air again.

May everything go to hell! They fled from one war and stepped into another.

After a few minutes the noise stopped. The sergeant went down the stairs, probably to see what exactly was going on. Blaž took advantage of the break and curled up against a stone block. Asleep. Bless him. All the workers sat down, and Megi poured water for them.

Sirens from the direction of the city. Juraj stood up and looked towards the bottom. The soldiers were panicking. Some were running, some fled into the pyramid. Panic. Damn it!

A muffled sound. Rumbling, humming. Juraj looked to the northeast. Several traces of rocket engines could be seen in the sky. They were rushing towards them.

"Dad, I'm afraid," said Margareta.

Juraj pulled Margareta into his arms. They sat down together next to Blaž, who was still sleeping.

"Don't look, Megi. Don't. Let's rest for a moment. We are tired. Don't wake up Blaž. Let him sleep. He deserves it."

Juraj spat at the pyramid. Barbara appeared before his eyes. His one and only. He promised that they would always be together. He ruined everything. Everything. Guilt gripped his soul. He was helpless. Margareta was trembling, Blaž was moaning in his sleep. Perhaps he knew.

Juraj hugged his son and daughter tightly and raised his face towards the hot flame of eternity.



Oleh Silin

About Oleh

Oleh Silin is a science fiction and fantasy writer, editor, and promoter from Ukraine, and a co-founder of the literary association Star Fortress. His writing debut was published in 2005. He has written two novels and more than 50 short stories. In 2013, he received the Eurocon Encouragement Award at Eurocon in Kyiv.

Add Sugar to Taste

Translated from Ukrainian by Peter Vorkerensky

Fourteen o'clock local, second set of the day is almost over. Time to get up and head to work.

The view outside the window, as usual, consisted of a dull wall painted by a rectangle of Rixen's light - a reflection from a mirrored-glass skyscraper two blocks away.

Stretching, I headed to the bathroom, splashed some water on my face. It tastes sweet on Wingate. Glanced at the mirror, decided not to shave. They say that stubble gives me a manly look. Although the one who says that is our chef Fujisaki, and, like all Japanese, he's a shameless flatterer.

The mirror reflected a man of about thirty, with short hair and small ears. I smiled, then frowned. What a stupid mug. Can't stand looking at myself on photographs.

Patterned black shirt, light jeans - that's my outfit for the day. Now to get the coat and head out. I'll have my breakfast at the bar, as usual.

I work nearby, so I don't mind walking, especially in this weather. I walked most of the way along the embankment, enjoying the glow of Rixen, and the reflections of the towers in the rainbow film on the surface of the Lo river. Mariannapolis is a nice city, very large and spacious. There's room to move around here, unlike back home. It is the transit hub for thirty worlds, with one of the largest spaceports and lots of tourists around - and with them, lots of easy money. A perfect place to hustle.

Half an hour later, I reached the city square, with a small park and a round fountain. It's a great place - near a highway and a subway exit. Throngs of people around, and a bar nearby for them to head to. I had to deal with a lot of red tape before opening it, but now the Golden Light rarely has a free seat.

The door opened, sliding to the side, as is usual on Wingate. A bell rang. Inside, in the darkened hall, a Japanese man was wiping the tables clean. He smiled and bowed as he saw me.

"Greetings, Keito-san. You rook gheat today."

"Thank you, Fujisaki-san. Is everything well?"

"Not to wolly, evelything is excerrent."

"Great. Take a break, I'll finish up."

"You ale vely glacious, Keito-san," the Japanese chef bowed again, left the rag on a table, and rushed off.

I think he even sleeps here. Or spends the first two sets. I've never managed to come in before him. Oh well.

I wiped the bar, whistling a tune. Looked over the rows of bottles - full ones, half-empty ones, and those nearly empty. One thing that I don't like about Wingate, is that there's not that many of the true connoisseurs here. Somebody who would order a Mojito, a Terra Nova, or a Terminator's Demise, shows up, at most, once a month. On the other hand, local beer and pulpless ayekowa juice fly off the bar. Same with vodka. Getting the real Kahlua, grenadine, or Baileys here from Terra costs a fortune. That's why we invent substitutions: vodka with condensed milk, cherry syrup with cloves, and six-month aged ayekowa. The customers can't tell the difference anyway. And those who can patronize the restaurants on the Top Level, not the Golden Light.

"Hello, Keith."

"Hi, Loli."

The girl pecked me on the cheek, and went to the employees-only area to change. She drives the guys crazy. And no wonder - she's a tall brunette, wears revealing black dresses with

lace, black and white striped knee socks, and platform boots. Gothique Loli. That's what they call her. Unofficially. The name on her ID code is Gertha Loley. But does it matter?

Fifteen o'clock, time to open up. The third set, the evening one, had just started. The bar will fill up in two or three hours, and I'll have to run around like a hamster in a wheel, pouring beer, vodka, and ayekowa. But for now I relax.

Loli stepped out of the back.

"Rooking good, Rory-chan," I mimicked our chef. The waitress giggled.

"Fudge beat you to the compliment. And you don't look too great yourself. Could use a shave."

That's the last time I'll ever trust a Japanese.

"Come on, it's not like today's a Friday. The customers can deal with it. Besides, they only ever look at you anyway."

"Whatever, Keith. How's our order doing?"

"It's going through the customs. Should be delivered any day now."

"Can't wait. You've been ranting about that coffee for weeks now."

The bell rang, and Loli went over to attend the first customers. She can't wait for the coffee, right. She's not the only one.

The Treaty Pack coffee is a very rare recipe. Only a few places serve it, as it requires special equipment, a pile of ingredients, and some special skills. I can find the ingredients, and I got my skills back on Terra. Well, it's been seven years since that, but the talent's still there. At least, I think it is. The mastery certificate is gathering dust in my apartment. But the equipment... that had to be acquired. Right now, I ordered a half-priced machine from Arshan. I hope that junk will turn out to be in usable condition.

Pouring drinks and serving snacks did not distract me from my thoughts. My hands knew perfectly well where to get the glasses, and how long to keep the tap open. I did have to turn my brain back on once, though. Some scrawny centaurian decided to experience a Superdeep Borehole. He experienced it. Good thing that our restroom has more than one stall.

"Hey there, Hudson!"

The clock showed seventeen. Captain Punctuality has arrived.

"Hiya. As usual?"

"Of course."

Every Thursday, at seventeen o'clock sharp, Captain Ursu from the Terran Intelligence Service graces the bar with his presence. To pick up news, and to shoot the breeze with his fellow countrymen. Being Balkanian, he can't exist without shooting the breeze on occasion. I called out to the kitchen for Fudge to get a move on.

"Listen, Hudson, can I ask you a question?"

"As if you wouldn't if I said no."

"Nah, it's not about business."

"Go ahead, then."

"Why does everyone call you Kate?"

I dropped the tea towel in astonishment.

"My name's Keith. Keith Hudson."

"Sorry. But isn't that a feminine name? There was an actress named that, I looked her up."

I pretended to look for the towel under the bar, quietly cursing at the persistent Balkanian. By the time I straightened up, I wore my best cooperating smile.

"That's my dad's antics. He decided to name his child after his favorite actress. Some wise guy."

Ursu looked dumbstruck.

"Drink?"

"Yep."

Double vodka, slice of lemon. The Balkanian slammed it, grunted, bit on the lemon.

"You poor man."

"That's okay. I was lucky there's a masculine version of that name. Sounds similar, but spelled differently. Kay-ee-aye-tee-aich. That's what they put on the papers."

"Wow."

"O-uri-sou-san!" The Japanese chef materialized by the bar, nodding his head. "Speciar dish. Fol you."

He put a plate of some steaming red liquid in front of the Captain. The Balkanian stared.

"What is this?"

"This is borischi! Taberu... bon appetite!"

The chef disappeared in thin air. The Balkanian shook his head.

"How does he do that? Well, let's try this."

"You're not afraid to?"

"After I tried that Baileys of yours? Not in my life."

The Captain snatched a spoon, and, without hesitation, ladled some of the red liquid into his mouth. Drops of sweat appeared on his temples.

"Hudson... water... something..."

I got a piece of cheese out of the fridge.

"Eat this. Works better than water."

The Balkanian chewed.

"That's definitely borsch. In a way. Every way, except for the pepper. Whew. Damn."

"Don't even ask what it's made of. Fujisaki is a master of substitutes."

"I won't. What I will ask, though..."

The talk that followed won't be interesting for anyone not in the know. A purely professional conversation about the bar's visitors. Why does the Captain need that information? Maybe because giarnians chose Mariannapolis as their base of operations. And they don't like Terra too much. They don't like it at all. So the Captain asks around about incidents and attitudes. Various humanoids often chat up bartenders, especially around the end of the fourth set. Any information can turn out useful.

We were done with the shop talk after an hour, and were chatting idly as we watched Loli flutter elegantly among the tables. By eighteen o'clock, the bar was full. As usual, no less than half of the patrons were Wingate residents, the rest the various races of the Alliance. Couple of terrans, a few urikasians, some semi-humanoids from Chtalakh huddled in a corner. A nice, regular evening, filled with the murmur of conversations, shots of furiosake, clinking beer glasses, and a rare spot of real work - making cocktails.

That's when they showed up.

The door slid aside, and a dozen guys in bright red uniforms with blue patches stumbled inside. You could not confuse them with anyone: long legs, relatively short body, round faces with pointy chins and huge eyes. Living anime characters. The giarnians.

"Hey, bartender, do you have Giar's Crystal?" their ringleader shouted. "Any self-respecting establishment should have it. Although... you're a Terro, aren't you? A Terro probably wouldn't have the Crystal. When did a Terro ever have anything good?"

That's what Giar is all about. They thoroughly despise anyone who is not like them. Particularly the terrans, because we actually do look a bit like them.

"I've got anything you want, if you've got the money. If your money's real good, I might even find Giar's Crystal." I answered calmly.

"It's noisy here. Have everyone vacate the premises. We're here to relax."

I shrugged.

"You're here to relax too. No point of bothering them, good sir, there's room for everyone."

"You're not getting it, Terro." The giarnian grinned. Their grins could sweep young girls off their feet. Except this particular grin promised nothing good. "We're here to relax. Without any lesser..."

The giarnian got interrupted by Loli, who tackled him, yelling "So cute!"

"Keith, let's give them one on the house, look how cuuuuuuute they are!"

Don't be stupid, Hudson, her cold eyes read. We'd go bankrupt on repair bills.

What else could do? Put on a welcoming charm, and...

"Have a seat gentlemen, have a seat. A shot of high-quality three-year ayekowa for everyone, compliments of the house."

Should I say that our talented chef makes the "three-year aged" ayekowa out of the eighteen-month one?

The giarnians stopped making noise. That's only temporary, though, they'll pick on something else once they've had a drink. Can't change those problem customers.

Not my first time with them.

An hour and a half later, their ringleader stumbled over to the bar.

"Hey, Terro, do you have anything unusual here?"

"Depends on where it comes from. I have a very rare whiskey from Terra, and a little bit of sweet oaknut liquor from Canaco. Or I can offer you the purest 85% water from Artesia. Half a glass of that, and any other water you ever drink would seem a pale imitation of its divine taste. Food-wise, I would recommend the reserve Briss cheese, and the soup of the day, our chef's specialty - the delicious borsch Orient."

Ursu, listening in from his corner table, shuddered. The giarnian stared at me with his huge eyes.

"Maybe you can even make the Treaty Pack coffee?"

His companions laughed. I ran a rag across the counter.

"If you'd like that, I suggest you return in a week, when the equipment arrives. It would be my pleasure to make an excellent Treaty Pack for you."

Quiet fell. The giarnian hiccupped.

"What? A Terro, making a Treaty Pack?"

"Come and see for yourself."

"I will, be sure of it. Be ready, Terro. Heylam, roon!"

The soldiers hopped to their feet and stormed outside. The leader menaced at me from the door.

"Just you wait."

He left. The din of the conversation restarted instantly. Armed giarnians annoyed everyone more than a swarm of pseudoflies, but no one dared to mess with them. Ursu moved closer.

"Hudson, are you out of your mind?"

"I passed the exam on Terra. We have everything we need to make the coffee. The equipment arrives tomorrow. Mind giving me a hand with the customs, Captain?"

"Like I wouldn't." The Balkanian took off his cap, twisting it in his hands. "Last thing I need is to start a conflict between Terra and Giar over some coffee."

The coffee machine arrived next Wednesday, at the end of the third set. Burly deliverymen brought in two huge boxes labeled Fragile Contents, and dumped them in a corner. I felt sick. If the equipment had been mishandled like that all the way from Arshan to Wingate, then that's the end of it. And once the giarnians show up tomorrow, that'll be the end of the bar as well. Whatever did I do to deserve this?

I had no other choice but to deal with it. And I'd have to do it at night, as there's a load of customers around right now.

I opened one of the boxes, and groaned. It was full of carefully-packed parts, with a voluminous assembly manual on top. Put the puzzle together, and, if you're lucky and your hands are correctly attached, you'll get a Treaty Pack coffee maker.

After the bar closed, I unpacked all the boxes and laid out the parts on several tables. Loli looked them over with curiosity.

"Keith, do you really expect to put this together?"

"I'll have to. I used to be pretty good at puzzles like these."

"Do you need any help?"

"You can go home. Just come in around the start of the second set tomorrow, instead of opening time. In case I do need help."

"Not a problem."

She pecked my cheek. "Good thing you shaved." Then she left.

I checked the kitchen. The chef wasn't there. Not a problem, I can make some coffee myself. The regular black coffee, without the Treaty Packs. I brought the cup back into the main room, and went over the manual. And that's when I felt as if someone punched my breath out: the manual was written in Arshani. And I, shall we say, have only the slight understanding of it, thanks to knowing the related Karnian language.

Well, at least it has the schematics, I thought. The coffee would definitely hit the spot as a stimulant. And I'd need to get the old terminal out of the storage room, to rummage around in the Net.

I won't cover the epic story of the assembly process in detail. All I'll say is that my supply of profanity was exhausted long before it was done.

Loli came in around nine. Looked over the huge pot-bellied machine on the bar counter.

"Is that it?"

"That, grumble grumble, is the grumbling it."

"Wow. I'd never have thought."

"What?"

"That you could curse like that."

"You bet. I've been up and about for almost twenty-four hours now."

"Go home and rest, then."

"Can't. This thing still needs to be connected and calibrated. You know what," I rummaged around my pocket for my keys, "go to my place, bring me the Treaty Pack certificate, it should be on the shelf under all the papers. And bring a pillow, maybe I can catch some shuteye in the storage room."

"Okay."

The girl turned around and left, heels clicking on the floor. This wasn't the way I imagined her ending up in my apartment. Not without me around. Fate is surprisingly unjust.

I ruminated on this for about five more minutes, before realizing that I was simply procrastinating. I sighed, and started checking the main parts of the machine - three funnels, the collector, the grinder, the boiler. Looked like I got everything correct.

Next, I got the ingredients out and sorted through them. Cinnamon, vanilla, eggs, rum, ormotor syrup, New Greece nutmeg, tarrasou coffee, liko, eber, all the other spices. Placed those into boxes. The exhaustion and the smells were making me nauseous. I still had to find the tall glasses, the straws, the umbrellas, and order some black lemons.

The bell rang. It was Loli.

"I got your certificate. And the pillow. Keith," she frowned at me, "Keith, go get some sleep. I'll do the rest."

"All right. Buy some black lemons. That's it, that's it, I'm going."

I ran into the chef in the hallway.

"Good morning, Keito-san! You rook gleet today."

"Thank you, Fujisaki-san."

Whenever did he show up?

Sleep was rough. I dreamed of grinning giarnians who demanded Treaty Packs with the morbrasian mix, milk, and honey. They threatened me with weapons. In my dream, I fumbled and dropped the glass, after which Ursu showed up, shook his head at me, and told me that I just doomed all of Terra. I kept waking up every fifteen to twenty minutes, in cold sweat. Finally, I got sick of this, got up, and went to the main hall.

Loli was sitting on a stool by the bar, paging through some magazine. "The lemons are under the counter," she said, without taking her eyes off it.

It was time for the dress rehearsal.

The clock showed a bit past fourteen. I took several bottles off the shelf. That got Gothique confused.

"You're using that much booze? For the coffee?"

"Not for the coffee. I haven't made it in a while, and I need some practice. I'll make a few cocktails to limber up my wrists."

I dropped the shaker on the fourth round. Looks like I've grown complacent and out of shape. The Treaty Pack needs a second's precision. You pour the mix too early or too late, and you'll ruin the taste, the color, and the aroma. It's a difficult recipe.

By the tenth cocktail, I was feeling much more confident. My hands stopped shaking, my motions became smooth and precise. I lined up the glasses with their multi-colored contents on the bar.

"Loli, our first few customers are in luck, they get a free cocktail. And have one yourself."

"Which one's the Terminator's Demise?"

I pointed at the wide glass with the yellow-brown liquid.

"Lightened cognac, some orange juice, chocolate bits, and a cherry. The cherry's in the fridge, though. Should I get it for you?"

"Don't worry about it." The girl squinted and drank the cocktail in one shot. "That's not bad. Are you going to try to make the coffee?"

"Of course."

"I want to see this."

So I pulled out the ingredients. The machine whistled as it heated up. I made the first eberian mix, poured it into the funnel, added fifty milliliters of water. Now I have one minute to prepare the second mix. It's made in a shaker, out of the ingredients from the planet Liko. Shaker in my hand, other hand at the ready.

A minute later, the machine puffed out steam and released the first part in a thin stream. Put that into a wide dish, add the contents of the shaker, pour the liko over the coffee. Second cycle, one minute eleven seconds.

In that time, I have to heat the tarrasou with the cinnamon, add vanilla, and prepare the third, rum-based mix. Can't do that in advance, the whole point of the recipe is in the sequential preparation.

The second mix was thick and black, and smelled strongly of nutmeg. Add the rum filling, and the water-soaked - fifty milliliters! - tarrasou. Now place the piece of black lemon in the almost-ready Treaty Pack for thirteen seconds. Thirteen seconds, and not a second more! And, quickly, send it on the third cycle - one minute and eighteen seconds.

Loli stared at my manipulations with huge eyes.

"This is incredible. Keith, you're a genius."

"Thank you," I grinned. "You finally noticed."

"Oh, shut up!"

The machine beeped, and an orange indicator started blinking. I pulled the lever, and the coffee poured into the readied glass. It looked right: blackish-brown, thick, with a powerful smell of cinnamon and nutmeg. The final touch was a layer of the white Ulatre liquor over the coffee. The layers don't mix due to the difference in density. Now for the umbrella and the straw. The Treaty Pack coffee was done.

"I think it turned out well."

"Keito-san, Rory-chan, they blought the meat and the vegetabres. Prease herp ord Fujisaki bling them in."

"All right, let's go."

"Keith, what about the coffee?" Gothique raised her eyebrow.

"Nothing's going to happen to it. Come."

We messed around with the groceries for a while, and the Treaty Pack on the counter cooled down. I heated it back up with steam, and Loli and I tried it. Looks like I still had the skill, the drink turned out just right.

"This... this is incredible! Hudson, you really are a genius."

"Now we just need to figure out the price for it."

We laughed. The bell rang. The first customer of the day entered the Golden Light.

Captain Ursu came in at seventeen sharp, slightly more neat and slightly more nervous than usual.

"Is that it?" Ursu pointed at the coffee machine's shiny side.

"That is it, indeed."

"Make me a cup?"

"Two hundred and eighty talers."

The captain stiffened in an unnatural way.

"No, thank you. I would rather have that "borsch" of yours."

"As you wish. Hey, what's the noise about?" I shouted.

In the corner of the main room, Loli was arguing with a cthalakhan. The girl heard me, and ran towards the bar. The cthalakhan followed her, waving his tentacles around.

"This... this," Loli's voice shook, "this bastard groped me with his tentacles, and he's gurgling something I can't understand! Bugger off!"

The semi-humanoid slithered behind the waitress's back, rubbing his tentacles on the uncovered part of it. Right where Gothique had a nautical tattoo - a kraken dragging a sailship underwater.

I listened to the gurgling.

"Loli, he says that he recognized his relative on that picture."

"What?" The girl was dumbstruck. The amorous semi-humanoid gurgled faster, his tentacles completely covering the tattoo.

"He's asking if you'd agree to sell him the portrait of his great-something-grandfather," I translated, choking with laughter. "That piece of engraved chitin."

"How would..! Tell this slimy smelly ugly junkie that I..."

Loli did not finish. The door slid open, the bell rang, and the giarnians entered the bar. Although the better term would be "occupied the premises".

The long-legged fellows spread through the main hall, holding their weapons in the open, and forming a hallway between the door and the bar. The conversations inside died down. The cthalakhan scuttled off and stayed low.

A boy wearing a snow-white suit walked in. He walked towards me, toying with a swagger stick.

It's hard to tell a giarnian's age just by their looks. This boy could equally likely be a second-grade student, or a fifth-grade one. Judging by the boldness of this invasion, and the troops' servile glances, the one stopping by to try the coffee at the Golden Light was a big cheese, though a young one.

The kid climbed up on to the bar stool, and stared at me with huge blue eyes.

"Are you the one who makes the Treaty Pack coffee? That's a rare skill. I was told that you're a true certified master." The kid had a melodious, flowing voice, pitching up slightly towards the end of the phrase. He looked over the bar, taking in the details, and his eyes caught on the framed certificate. "Good, they did not lie. Why aren't you saying anything?"

"My apologies. Pleased to welcome a connoisseur, particularly someone who arrives with such pomp."

"Oh, those," the kid waved me off, "those are my subordinates. Pay them no mind. My status requires them to be here, you see. Allow me to introduce myself - I am Reush Osori, the local fleet commander."

Big cheese, you said? I've heard of this young strategist, but him stopping by my bar, just like that? Not surprisingly, my back broke out in sweat, and Captain Ursu turned yellow and bug-eyed.

"Such an honor," I mumbled, "Your Excellency..."

"Don't bother with the niceties, bartender." Reush rested his chin on his hand. "I want to try that wonderful drink. Go on, make it."

"You see, Mister Osori, it is an alcoholic drink. Maybe..."

"Does that change anything? I told you to make it."

"Momentarily."

"And explain to me what you're doing."

"Undoubtedly."

I think I turned into three little Keith Hudsons. The first was describing the recipe to the giarnian strategist, the second was skillfully handling the mixes, and the third one was trying to faint on the spot. What if I poisoned the kid? What if he's allergic to alcohol, or some other ingredient in the Treaty Pack? Scared witless, I was imagining an interstellar scandal, Giar's fleet on Terra's orbit, various ultimatums... But I continued my work nevertheless.

I finally placed a tall glass with a blackish-brown liquid, and a white layer on top, before Reush.

"Et voila! An excellent Treaty Pack coffee, brewed with purest Artesian water. One drinks it with a straw."

The young giarnian, for the lack of a better word, squinted - his eyes turned just a bit narrower.

"Bartender, I have my coffee with sugar. Fetch some."

"But the Treaty Pack..."

"Baaaaar-teeeen-deeecer."

"Here you are." I got the translucent sugar pot with a measuring lid from under the bar. "Add to taste."

The giarnian dipped the pot four times. The small pile of crystals sank through the liquor. Reush Osori stirred the drink with the straw, looking deep in thought. The white liquor swirled through the coffee. I clenched my teeth. Easy now, better to keep silent.

"That is an interesting drink. Bartender, I do hope you're not trying to poison me, are you?"

"Of course not."

"Then drink it." The blue eyes gave me a demanding glare. There were white sparks deep within them. The bodyguards behind the giarnian's back suddenly grew twice as tall.

"My pleasure."

The coffee was very thick and viscous, with a syrupy sweet taste, and almost no trace of the nutmeg flavor. Something was wrong! Something was very wrong!

I opened my eyes. I was inside the familiar storage room, with boxes, packaging, and old magazines strewn about. There was a pillow under my head, the one Loli brought over from my apartment. Whew, looks like the whole Reush Osori thing was just a dream. How else would a kid be in command of a space fleet?

I noticed the thick package on the table. Sealed, with my name written on top in elegant handwriting. I tore the package open.

Inside was a thick sheet of paper with the coat of arms of the Giar Republic and holographic security marks.

"This is to certify that Keith David Hudson, ID code provided upon request, citizen of the Federation of Terra, Luna, and Associated Planets, had received the right of ownership of the Third Invasion Fleet. Said right is granted by Reush Osori, as per..."

I dropped the paper and screamed.

"Can someone explain to me what's going on here?!"

Ursu and Loli entered, following the sound.

"Looks like the wise guy has recovered." The Captain looked both furious and bewildered at the same time.

"Yes. But what the hell's happened?"

"You don't remember anything? Nothing at all?" Gothique asked.

She had pants and a t-shirt on, no longer wearing her dress. That was yet another strange fact. I looked at the clock - eight zero-eight. The second set had just started.

I stepped back, tripped over a box, and crashed on a couch. Clutched my head.

"What? What happened here?"

"That's what we'd like to know."

Loli sat next to me. The Captain settled on a crate.

"That guy Osori - I didn't dream him up, did I?" I asked.

"Negative."

"Then I remember making him coffee. He dumped a load of sugar in it, too. Then made me drink it. It's all dark after that."

"You stood there glassy-eyed for a bit, then started making a second cup." Loli patted my head. "I saw you weren't exactly yourself, but you were holding steady, and did everything precisely as you were supposed to. The kid drank the coffee and wanted more. Except he didn't like the surroundings."

"And?"

"And, he invited you over to his place. You agreed. While the soldiers were loading up the coffee machine, you showed Ursu how to use the beer tap. And then you left."

"I left with him? Oh, Lord..."

"Keith, can you remember what happened next?"

"I don't remember anything! Although, wait a moment..."

I remember a full-height panoramic window. I am standing behind the coffee machine, placed on a huge table, doing my magic with the mixes. The enormous hall is barely lit, the only light is over by my table. Reush Osori and his adjutant, a nice blue-haired girl, sit with their chairs turned towards the window. The giarnian is admiring the view of Mariannapolis.

I bring the coffee over to them and put it on a glass table. The young man, in his flowing voice, suggests that I make a cup for myself and join them in their contemplation.

"I've definitely been to Osori's place. The three of us were drinking coffee, him, myself, and some lass, and chatted about something."

"What was it, Hudson?" Ursu perked his ears. "You've spent several hours there. What did you talk about?"

"Hold on, let me try to remember. Hold on..."

"Kumoachi." Reush once again stares at me with his baby blues. "An excellent game, the pinnacle of strategic thought. A giarnian invention, of course. Only those born to be the leaders of the people of Giar are able to play it. I am one of the best kumoachi players. Only a giarnian is able to comprehend the full complexity and perfection of the rules. Would you like to play, bartender?"

The girl laughs, as if Osori said something incredibly funny.

"We talked about a game."

"Which one?"

"Damn it, Urosov, don't rush me! Lord, I'm so thirsty..."

Loli reached into the box, and got out a bottle of mineral water. I took a swig of it. It exploded in my stomach like a hot bomb.

The giarnian toys with his glass.

"Kumoachi is a three-player game. The main objective is to defeat one's opponents, either separately, or by forcing one of the players to join you as an ally. An alliance cannot be formed willingly. So, are you ready to take your chances?"

"I won't be risking anything, will I?"

Osori thinks for a second.

"No, there's no fun in that. We always play with an ante."

I stood up, swaying. Ursu and Loli looked at me with alarm.

"We played an incredibly convoluted giarnian game. It's something like a final school test for them. We had the full set of cards and pieces - that's the top skill tier. Reush insisted that we place bets."

"And?"

"And what? I bet myself. If I lost, I'd be making that little bastard Treaty Pack coffee until the end of my days. The girl bet her family estate. And Osori bet his fleet. He was that sure he couldn't lose."

"So you're saying..."

"I think I won."

"This is impossible!" The giarnian screams, and smashes through the glass table. "This cannot be! Impossible!"

The pieces fly across the room, the cards fan out on the luxurious carpet. The blue-haired girl shrieks and hides behind a sofa.

"I demand a recount! A replay! You made her! You forced... You humiliated... you humiliated me!!!"

"It was my honor to play against you, Mister Osori." I say, coldly. "Do remember your honor as well."

"Wait." The young strategist pulls himself together. "Wait. Otouka!" He yells at the intercom. "Otouka, send Uwekara to my quarters. We need to put together... some paperwork." He spits out the last word with anger and hatred.

Loli, Ursu, and I sat down at a table in the main hall. The ever-present chef brought us tea and sandwiches.

"I understand all this, but what did really happen?"

"My only theory is the strange effect the Treaty Pack had on you," said Ursu, sipping his drink. "By the way, this is excellent tea. Much better than the borsch."

"What could be so strange about it?"

"Hudson, where did you order the coffee machine?"

"On Arshan. What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

Loli sighed.

"Keith, while you were away, Igor and I made some inquiries at the office."

"Which office? You've lost me here."

"You see, Hudson, Loli's been working for the Terran Intelligence for a year and a half now. In my department, of course."

I was dumbstruck.

"Loli..."

"Doesn't matter now." The girl waved me off. "So, Keith, turns out the arshanians have a slightly different temperature scale. And the Treaty Pack coffee, made in their machine, should be voastu huma".

"Which, translated literally, means 'cold dish'," Ursu chimed in. "It had to be cooled down. And then heated up anew."

"Terran machines do that automatically," Loli added. "And arshanian ones do not."

"But..." I bleated. "We drank the first cup together, and everything was fine..."

"That one cooled down on its own."

"Damn. Damn, that's right, Fujisaki called us to help in the kitchen."

"And you used water from Artesia. And the sugar."

The sugar. Reush Osori asks me to put sugar in every cup. More and more of it each time.

"I guess this combination was what caused the strange effect. The giarnian started acting out, and you developed strategic skills way above the average." Ursu rubbed his forehead. "I never would have thought that the conflict between Terra and Giar would be resolved over a cup of coffee."

"Damn. Damn. What do I do now?"

"Go get a change of clothes and a shave." Loli gently patted my shoulder. "The reporters are going to show up soon. It wouldn't be appropriate for the commander of the Third Invasion Fleet to meet them wearing a dirty apron and a stubble."

I got up. Keith Hudson, the savior of the nation.

I really wanted to murder my old man for giving me that name!

The Admiral's Curse

Translated from Ukrainian by Peter Vorkerensky

A story overheard by Keith Hudson, the barmen in the Golden Light, Mariannapolis, planet Wingate.

"... and then I got transferred to the Border Fleet, and things really got interesting."

I listened in. Ursu, Captain of the Terran Intelligence Service, was chatting with a Navy officer at a corner table. I figured they weren't discussing anything secret, as they would've moved to a booth otherwise. I brought them a cheese platter, and got distracted with the beer.

"So, they were preparing to launch several new destroyers. The crews were formed, as they said, from "an alloy of youth and experience". By the way, the headquarters made a drinking game out of it - take a shot every time that quote got reblogged. There were quite a few tabloids doing that, so the brass almost went down with alcohol poisoning... Anyway, the morning

comes, the shipyard's ready with the flags and the balloons, everything as it should be, the destroyer's sitting nicely in the slip. Everyone's in their Sunday best, the territorial governor's all pompous to boot... And then the Old Man, Admiral Marko, shows up. And he's either cranky from not getting enough sleep on his flight, or his wife, and his daughter, and his mother-in-law, and his three dogs, all of them bi... ahem, ladies, drove him crazy even before he left Terra, but he's still straight as a plank. So the Old Man climbs the podium, listens to the music and the speeches, and then barks:

"In the olden days, there was a tradition to name destroyers after certain qualities, like the Furious, or the Decisive. I now christen this ship the Repugnant."

"And he smacks the bottle right across the bow.

"The champagne splashes everywhere, the magnetic clamps release, the destroyer sails out of the slip as gracefully as it could ever be, accompanied by total silence where an anthem should be playing. The headquarters types have the collective hysterics, as they now have to redo all the paperwork."

"So what then?" Ursu inquired.

"And then, the ship turned out to live up to her name. Kept sealing the hatches on her own, or turning off the lights in the head when the captain's in there. Socks went missing in the laundry. In the galley, at least one of the dishes always turned out completely inedible, no matter how hard you tried. The vitamin paste tasted like burnt rubber. The entertainment center regularly added Gregorian chants to the random playlist... In their minds, everyone understood that this was a brand new ship, and those always have some shakedown issues. But everyone kept blaming the Admiral's curse. And then they sent us to Centauri on a policing action."

I placed three shots of furiosake on their table, and sat down next to them.

"Thanks," the Navy officer saluted me, and drank his shot. "That's where the ship really showed her character. And thank God she did that on the enemy. The torpedo hits she scored, those were the telemetry system, the engine exhausts, and the biowaste tank. We didn't even take the last ship as a prize, sent it straight to the wreckers. The crew did warm up to the ship then, but we still sent in a petition to rename her."

"Did they?" I asked.

"They did," the officer grumbled. "Admiral Hagen turned out to be no less of a joker."

And he pointed his finger on a patch on his uniform, saying "T.F.S. Loki".

Alien Technology

Translated from Ukrainian by Peter Vorkerensky

A story that happened with Keith Hudson, the barmen in the Golden Light, Mariannapolis, planet Wingate.

"Keith, I am not wearing this any more."

A semi-transparent jumpsuit landed on the counter and slid off it with a rustle. Its escape attempt was interrupted by a power cell slamming on top of it. Our waitress looked confused.

"Why, Loli?"

We got the suit from a giarnian technician, to cover his bar tab. He would show up every day, down five shots of ayekowa and six mugs of beer, sniff a black lemon rind as a palate cleanser, and stumble off into the night, saying over his shoulder, "Uwekara shall pay you later". I already washed my hands on him, and wrote off his tab as loss. However, a week ago, he showed up with a backpack, refused the offered drink, and left us this strange device. According to him, the jumpsuit accumulated the power of stares, and was very popular among

his homeworld's waitresses.

"It's in her size." He winked at me, and pointed at Loli. "With a figure like hers, you'll be filthy rich, Terro. Especially if she walks around with nothing under it."

We did not tell Captain Ursu from the Terran Intelligence Service anything about it. For several days, Gertha wore the jumpsuit, having switched her usual embroidered and lace-covered dress for a bikini. The power cell on her back worked as it was supposed to, and I was already estimating the savings we'd get on the power bill - and now there you go!

"But why?"

"Because, Hudson, I can feel all of it." Loli landed on a stool, and instantly jumped up with a yelp. "There! You see?"

"What should I be looking at?"

"The burns on my butt and boobs! I can feel each and every ogle. Every last one of them! It's like they're groping me: a finger poke here, a pinch there, or a squeeze..." She turned red. "I am not wearing this!"

I mused on this. I did not want to lose this unexpected income.

"Would you like a raise? Thirty percent of the savings we get from this. Fifty percent!"

"Not a chance. You can give yourself a raise instead. Or," she looked at me, narrow-eyed, "maybe you should wear it yourself? The girls do like to ogle you."

I don't mind girls ogling me. But they're not the only customers at the Golden Light. I doubt I'd enjoy an excited stare from a cthalakhan. Or, let's say, there's a game at the city's stadium, a horde of fans barges into the bar once it's over, they all eye me waiting for their beers, and... so long, Hudson!

"N-nope," I said with difficulty, getting my mind off the mental image of a pile of ashes inside the coveralls. "I think I'd rather sell this alien technology to Ursu. To experiment with."

An Illusion of Choice

Translated from Ukrainian by Peter Vorkerensky

A story that happened with Keith Hudson, the barmen in the Golden Light, Mariannapolis, planet Wingate.

By now, the short-haired man wearing a worm uniform in a swamp camouflage pattern had been drinking for two hours straight. He did not make a ruckus, did not threaten to rip off a cthalakhan's tentacles and stuff those inside a giarnian. He kept ordering a shot of Terran vodka every five minutes, with clockwork precision. After about an hour I slid a plate of beef jerky towards him. He only nodded and ordered a refill.

By the time he finished the second bottle, I risked chatting him up.

"Sir, may I offer you lunch, or maybe a different drink?"

He stared at me with faded eyes, so faded that his irises almost matched the white around them.

"Don't bother. It's all a fake anyway, just another lie. Don't bother..."

"What's fake, exactly?" I chased away the thought of the fake Baileys, and the potential payback for it. "What's in our bottles always matches..."

"I'm not talking about you." He waved me off. "It's all this..." He squinted at my name tag. "Keith... You ever been on combat rations?"

"Happened once or twice."

"Say you're sitting in a foxhole, water over your head, mud under your ass, a half-click away those *mattha ash ridakh* from Resources & Rockets Inc. keep tossing their secondary product in your general direction. And one of your fellows asks you, 'Hey, will you be having

the pork chops or the stew?' And you both laugh your asses off, 'cause you both know that's a joke. All you've got is G.R.U.B., and that what you'll be scarfing down. But that's not the worst of it, Keith. 'Cause, you know, the Resourcers are also asked if they'll be having pork chops or stew. And then they give them the same G.R.U.B. and tell them to enjoy their stew. And just you dare tell them it's not a stew. You'd think, what idiots those guys are, but that's not the worst either. The worst is when the higher-ups ask if they'll have the pork chops or the stew, don't give them anything because the bosses had already fucked off with the money, and then insist that they tell everyone how great the pork chops were. And, for some reason, everyone believes the talk about the pork chops! Believe it so much that they sign up for the Rocketeers!"

I did not reply.

"And this is why, Keith, you should not bother offering me anything else. Anything this life has is just G.R.U.B., except the packaging's different. The rest is all fake."

"Give me a minute or two, sir," I said, turning away.

I pressed the button on a coffee maker, the cup already inside it. Removed a wide, long-stemmed glass from the holder. Seven parts tequila... no tequila left, let's use ayekowa... four parts orange liquor, have to use the expensive one straight from Terra, but the situation demands it... three parts lime juice. No problems with those, they've been growing on Wingate for a while now. Pour into the shaker, add ice, shake. Wet the rim of the glass, dip in salt. Now pour the shaker's contents into the glass, add a wedge of lime as a garnish. Straw. And another shot glass with vodka. The coffee maker behind my back beeps right on cue.

"What's that?" the client asked.

"Your vodka. And a classic Martini. You know..." I stumbled over words. It's not my business to offer advice to this fellow, still wearing cammo, not my business at all, but on the other hand... "You do have a point of a sort. Here's a pure drink with a single component." I pointed at the shot glass. "And here's a complicated drink made with several ingredients, served in a nice glass. But both have the same alcohol inside them."

"That's what I'm talking about," my companion nodded with enthusiasm. "All choice is an illusion!"

"Not exactly," I replied. "Life usually offers additional options. And you have an option to choose a drink with no alcohol whatsoever. Try some."

And I put the porcelain coffee cup in front of him.

Tihomir Jovanović Tika (SRB)

Snakeskins

Translated from Serbian by himself

Saturday morning. It was a warm day, cloudless and without a breeze. Stanko packed his fishing rods, baits, and everything else he needed for an escape from the city hustle, away from his wife and children, into his old car. This vehicle served only that purpose, to drive along the bumpy village roads to the river and a place called Girl's whirlpool.

He stopped at the village shop, which also served as a kind of tavern where locals gathered to drink beer and exchange stories. Common topics were mostly football, politics, and women... In front of the shop, there were a couple of tables with chairs. At one table sat two villagers sipping rakija from a small bottle, occasionally inhaling cigarette smoke. Stanko sat at another table and waited for the shop owner, who was also the waiter, Mile, known as Two coffee, to approach him.

"Beer as usual?" he asked, standing on the step in front of the door.

"Yes, and make it as cold as possible!" Stanko replied.

Mile entered the shop and after a few seconds approached Stanko's table with two bottles of beer, frosted from the cold. Like most villagers, Mile enjoyed chatting with people from outside the village.

"Are you going to Girl's whirlpool again?" Mile asked.

"Yes, the fish are biting well this time of year!"

Stanko took the bottle in his hands, noticed that the beer was well chilled, and clinked glasses with Jovan.

"Cheers!" Mile took a sip and then asked, "Don't you think it's a bit eerie there? The villagers avoid that place. You've surely heard the stories. There have been a few drownings. Two years ago, a young man from the village drowned... He was sitting right here drinking beforehand. He didn't seem drunk. He went there to cool off... they never found his body even though they searched for days... as if some abyss swallowed him. I don't want to scare you...", Jovan finished.

"I know, I've heard about that, but..." Stanko began, but Mile interrupted him.

"And granny Jovana..." He paused and looked Stanko in the eyes, seeking agreement with his opinion.

"Yeah? What's with her?" Stanko asked.

"She's strange! I know you're good with her, but the villagers don't like her. There's something about her that frightens people. And that strange smell from her house!"

While the two were talking, two villagers at the neighboring table interrupted their conversation, trying to catch as much of the discussion between Stanko and Mile as possible. Stanko pondered; he had been a guest at old lady Jovana's many times and tried to remember the smell, but to no avail.

"True," Mile continued, "she could help with some ailments using herbs and assist women during childbirth, but she never gained the villagers' favor..."

"How? Why?"

"Before her, another old lady lived in that house, I think her name was Stojanka. They say she moved away without any notice or explanation. And then Jovana appeared. She was young then; they say she was around forty."

"Sorry, but I have to go," Stanko interrupted, getting up from the chair. "It's getting too hot, let me pay..."

"No need, the house is on me," Mile replied. "And watch out for Girl's whirlpool and granny Jovana."

He said the last part with a smile. Stanko remembered previous visits to old lady Jovana. One of her favorite stories was about Girl's whirlpool, the place where he loved to fish. She told him that long ago, a poor girl drowned there due to unrequited love, and her spirit often appears to drown men who come to bathe there. According to her, it was often called Girl's whirlpool.

Stanko looked at Mile, waved his hand, and got into the car. The engine roared, the wheels screeched over the gravel, scattering it behind the vehicle. Stanko waved once more at Jovan and then headed up the hill towards granny Jovana's house.

The two villagers turned to Mile and invited him to sit with them, eager to hear the details of the conversation he had with Stanko.

Stanko continued down the village's dusty road towards the river. A little further on, behind the elms, the ground rose, and a plateau loomed over the river bend. There was granny Jovana's house. He didn't know which was older, the house or the old lady. Both were shaky and dilapidated. The house was plastered with mud and sawdust, which provided good thermal insulation – the old craftsmen knew what they were doing. In many places, that plaster had fallen off,

revealing that the house was built of unbaked bricks.

The roof was almost invisible under thick moss, houseleeks, and leaves fallen from the willow branches hanging over the house.

Stanko stopped at the foot of the path leading to granny Jovana's house and began to walk uphill. He glanced at the shallows where a swarm of dragonflies hovered over the water, enjoying their short lives. The smell of the river lingered behind him, and as he approached the house, he began to feel that other smell Mile had mentioned. He tried to remember what it reminded him of and where he had sensed that smell before.

Yes! He finally remembered. The terrarium at the zoo. But what was unusual about that? Here was a river and rocky terrain, an ideal place for a snake den, mostly harmless grass snakes and smooth snakes.

He continued on and, reaching the door of granny Jovana's house, knocked.

"Come in!" he heard a voice from the room. The heavy door of thick oak creaked as he pushed it open and entered the room.

Granny Jovana was sitting at the table where a half-full bottle of rakija and two small glasses were placed. The windows were covered with heavy, thick curtains that protected the room from the sun, creating a pleasant shade while simultaneously casting a darkness that felt somewhat unsettling. Despite the external unkemptness of the house, the inside contained quality items. Inside, there were three rooms; one was a kitchen that also served as a dining room and living room, the second was a bedroom furnished with old, solid, and sturdy wood furniture, worn from long use yet nowhere was it infested with woodworm. The walls had yellowed from the use of the wood stove. Stanko surveyed the room, and his gaze lingered on the door leading to the third room. That door was always locked; he had tried several times to find out from granny Jovana what that room was like, but he never received an answer. Unconsciously, he recalled fairy tales and stories where one of the heroes is warned that in the castle, they can unlock all the rooms except that one, for it hides a terrible secret...

"Pour us some rakija!" granny Jovana interrupted his thoughts.

"Oh right! Sorry, I got lost in thought!" he said and filled the glasses.

"Cheers!" granny Jovana brought her glass to his, and they clinked them together. Then she asked him, "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thank you. I already had some this morning at home!"

They sat in silence for a few minutes, only the ticking of a large wall clock could be heard.

"You know!" Baba Jovana broke the silence, "it wouldn't be good for you to swim today!"

"Why?" Stanko was surprised.

"Today is my son's Feast of the Transfiguration!" Granny Jovana replied. At that moment, Stanko thought she emphasized the word 'Transfiguration' strangely.

"I don't understand!" Stanko said.

"Some of the drowned people drowned in the Girl's whirlpool exactly on this day. Didn't anyone in the village mention that to you?"

"No! But it doesn't matter; I won't go into deep water."

"As you wish..." Granny Jovana shook her head.

"Well, thanks for the warning!" Stanko said and got up from the table.

Once again, he quickly glanced at the room with the locked door and the secret it held. Or maybe he just thought something was wrong.

Finally, he set up the bait and lures and started fishing, first in the shade under the willow and then he waded in and tried to catch something further from the shore. Nothing this time either!

Stanko cast the hook once more and watched as the rapids tugged at the float. Just the rap-

ids; the fish were not biting today. He waded a little deeper into the water, as deep as his fishing boots allowed, and carefully observed the movement of the float for a few more minutes.

The scenery around him was vibrant. About twenty meters behind him, the water cascaded down, creating a monotonous noise that didn't bother him, and the fine droplets that splashed into a mist above the water refracted sunlight, creating a small rainbow that persistently hung over the water.

In the trunk, there were a few inflated grilled sausages just in case. And in the water, a few bottles of beer were cooling.

Stanko got out of the water and took off his rubber boots. The water was warm, so he wished to return to it but without clothes, to bathe in the warm and clear river, as he often did after fishing. That was enough for today. He would take a dip and then throw the sausages on the grill and open a beer.

He laid his clothes on the gravelly shore. He hesitated a bit about his swimming trunks, then took them off as well. There was no one nearby, and it was much nicer to swim naked, to feel how the water glides between his legs and how his body floats freely.

The water was indeed wonderful, just slightly cooler than the air, and it foamed with every stroke, leaving shimmering bubbles on the surface for a long time. Swimming towards the middle, Stanko suddenly jolted. Baba Jovana's story suddenly became important to him. He didn't know why, but a primal superstitious fear awakened in the previously dormant brain cells.

He swam powerfully towards the shore as if chased by a water monster. Then he stopped. On the shore, he noticed granny Jovana, how old and shaky she was entering the water. Dressed from head to toe in her usual black and dark gray clothing. She was steadily walking towards him.

"Run away, grandma, you'll drown!" Stanko shouted, not daring to step forward and reveal his nakedness.

Baba continued as if his words were carried away by the winds, as if they had fallen into the water and sunk. Something in her gaze unsettled him. It was a different look from the usual. An old woman, perhaps longing for young male flesh. No, he couldn't interpret her gaze that way. What frightened him was that he did not interpret that gaze as lust.

The splashing of water was no longer heard. Granny Jovana was now in the water up to her knees. She smiled, stretching her lips, not revealing her broken teeth. She looked him straight in the eyes, and seeing the fear in them, she began to whisper:

"I've told you and told you, but it's no use..."

Stanko tried to pass by her and run to the shore, but the old woman grabbed him. Her hand was surprisingly strong. Not at all like the trembling and weakness with which she would bring the tray with coffee or rakija.

"Let me go, you old hag!" Stanko shouted, forgetting all their former friendship and trying to pull his arm away. She only pulled him closer, and Stanko felt his leg stiffening under the water despite the terrible fear, then he felt the old woman's hand on his neck and saw another hand approaching him. And the ring with the point facing his palm.

As if a bee had stung him. He felt his skin parting and the point sinking painlessly into the flesh, while he was powerless to do anything. Around the sting, he felt numbness, like after an injection at the dentist. And then through the fog, he saw the old woman's broken teeth protruding from her open mouth. The last thing he saw.

Grandma Jovana was drinking the blood from the wound on his neck, as long as his still living heart was pumping. When life left Stanko's body, she released him to the water and headed towards the shore with a much more confident step than when she entered.

Arriving at the house, she sat down on a chair and her body began to tremble, while water

still dripped from her long dress. Her head was spinning and burning. She hadn't felt this in a long time. Stanko was so healthy and strong...

And today is Feast of the Transfiguration...

While she was still shaking, she began to strip off the wet and dirty clothes, revealing her shrivelled body. The skin hung on her like an oversized suit. Then she let out a trembling voice, starting to moan or chant. Something between agony and ecstasy. And then she reached for the skin on her shoulder, dug her nails into it, and tore it. There was no blood or pain.

Beneath the old and withered skin, new skin appeared, taut over firm muscles. The old woman was shedding her shrivelled skin like a snake sheds its skin.

When she completely stepped out of the removed skin, she stood in front of a large stained mirror and assessed her appearance. She ran her hand over the new soft skin, over breasts that were now full and firm.

She unlocked the secret room and entered. Then she unlocked the rosewood wardrobe with carved leaves and flowers along the edges. On the left side of the wardrobe hung dresses, white skirts, and embroidered blouses, while on the right side were shelves filled with neatly folded and parchment-like skins. She added to that pile the one she had discarded today...





Ivan Šokić

THE BALLAD OF THE ROYAL STAR

Upon his throne the king sits still,
his thoughts a heavy stone.
From far up north a raven came:
a dragon flies alone.

The nobles bicker in the hall;
the Dark Prince calls for war.
The Wolf Lords stand behind his word,
and lesser houses roar.

But council, fearing prince and pack,
implores the king to lean
upon his younger sons instead —
the brothers, bright and green.

Against the Taragon they sent
the younger brothers forth,
a legion strong behind their swords
to ride into the north.

The Dark Prince yet would ride to war
and meet the dragon's flame,
but council barred his iron path;
the king upheld their claim.

To cross the council's binding word
means exile to the grave.
The Dark Prince and his Wolf Lords rode —
a kingdom first to save.

They neared a land of ruin now,
a sight beyond the mind:
decay and flame on every step,
the wreckage left behind.

They thought of vengeance as they went;
their grief became a vow
to fell the beast and lay the dead
to rest beneath the bough.

The dragon came on blackest wind,
raw force of nature crowned.
He roared and spat a bilious flame
and shook the trembling ground.

It ended ere it had begun:
the legion charred and slain.
No banner stood, no horn was blown —
the field a sea of flame.

The Dark Prince came when all was lost,
his brothers cold and still.
The dragon vanished into smoke —
no monster left to kill.

The Senate stands, the king lies cold,
the Dark Prince exiled far.
The dragon was the council's blade
to break the royal star.



Matej Krajnc

THE MAN WHO HAD AN EXTRA 65 BRAIN FOLDS

He was born in a factory,
 between two shifts,
 on a metal table that still smelled of oil and quotas.
 The midwife said:
 “Another one.”
 and weighed him together with the bolts.
 No one noticed,
 except the old foreman,
 who had an eye for deviations:
 “This one has too many bends,” he muttered,
 as if speaking about a pipe
 that wouldn’t fit through a standard mould.
 They wrote in the file:
 error: +65
 and sent him on into life,
 like a shipment marked with a hexagonal sticker.

He grew up among blocks
that were all the same,
except for one
that devoured a hardcover book every day before lunch.
At school they were taught
how to think properly:
fingers on the board, sponge at the corner,
minced meat.
But in his head there was a traffic jam.
When the teacher asked:
“What is truth?”
he raised his hand
and opened his mouth,
and three answers came out:
two doubts
and one small bird
that flew out the window.
It returned only three days later,
when it came back with a stamp
and an official explanation:
the bird did not exist.

At fifteen they sent him
for examination to the Institute of Ichthic Places.
A doctor in a white coat,
whose brain was folded like fresh laundry,
said:
“Too many creases. Unhygienic.”
He proposed an operation:
smooth the surface,
remove unnecessary bends,
introduce order.
“You could be happy,” he added,
as if offering a discount.
The boy asked:
“What if I don’t want to be smooth?”
For the first time, the doctor hesitated,
as if stumbling over his own thought.
They wrote in the file:
subject shows signs of resistance to simplicity.

They employed him in the Archive of Lost Meanings,
in the basement of a ministry,
where they stored everything
that did not belong in reports.
There he catalogued things
no one wanted to understand:
– laughter at a funeral,
– the silence after a grammatical case,
– a gaze that secularizes only before cheap scenery,
– questions without desserts.
His extra folds
blossomed in the dark,
like mold on ideology.
Every document had more than one truth,
and every truth had an employment record.

One day he found a folder
marked in red:
HUMAN (PROTOTYPE)
Inside was a design:
a standardized mind,
two folds for optimism,
one for obedience,
one spare for holidays.
Signed:
Igor.
On the last page
there was a handwritten note:
“Error +65 is spreading.”
The boy smiled,
perhaps for the first time.

That’s when the disturbances began.
In the factory, machines started dreaming,
and in their dreams they produced people
who refused to stand in line.
At night, the apartment blocks switched floors
to confuse statistics.
In the square, a monument
stepped down from its pedestal
and demanded a snack.

“This is not in the plan,” said the superiors,
and issued an instruction:
reality must remain disciplined.

The boy—now a man with a useless surplus—
began walking through the city
and handing out bends.
He didn’t give answers,
he gave people extra turns in their heads,
small irregularities
that grew at night.
A shopkeeper suddenly thought
that bread was not just bread.
A policeman, for a second, doubted
whether an order exists only at a crossroads.
A child drew a house
that was running away.
The system recorded:
unexplained curvature in the population.

They sent a commission.
They sat across from him
at a table that was perfectly flat.
“Why are you doing this?”
asked the chairman,
whose voice had no оттенки.
The man replied:
“Because straight lines only go forward.
And I would like to see
where they go
if you bend them a little.”
The commission fell silent,
because it had no department for such an answer.

They sentenced him to correction.
They strapped him to a table
still warm from previous solutions,
and prepared the smoothing tools.
When they opened his skull,
they froze.
Instead of a brain,
there was a city inside him.

Streets crossing at impossible angles,
squares where people argued with their own shadows,
and above it all
fluttered that little bird,
with a stamp:
I do not exist, therefore I am dangerous.
The surgeon whispered:
“How do we smooth this?”
No one answered.

At that moment,
one of his extra folds
unfurled like a ribbon,
spilled into the room
and gently brushed the foreheads of those present.
There was no pain.
Only a slight deviation.
The chairman of the commission suddenly saw
that other conclusions might exist.
The doctor, for the first time, thought
that laundry is not the only way to fold something.
The foreman from the beginning of the story
briefly sensed
that a pipe can bend
and still hold.

They stopped the operation
for technical reasons:
reality was not following instructions.
They released the man,
without explanation,
without apology,
without conclusion.

Now he walks through a city
that is no longer entirely straight.
People still try
to be correct,
but here and there
someone stumbles over their own thought
and falls into something deeper.

Factories still run,
 but sometimes from the machine comes
 something without a label.
 And in the Archive of Lost Meanings,
 the shelves are slowly emptying.

If you meet him,
 you won't recognize him by his face.
 You'll recognize him by the fact
 that the sentence he speaks
 will have one bend too many.
 And if you are careful,
 if you don't correct it immediately,
 if you let it linger...
 you might feel
 somewhere inside yourself
 a slight, almost comical irregularity.
 Don't worry.
 That's not an error.
 That is the beginning
 of sixty-five new paths
 leading away
 from a world
 that has pretended for too long
 to flutter.

Matjaž Marinček

WHERE ARE YOU BANGING?

A distinctly vain oasis
 sucks in a pensive capybara
 through the capillary of the eyeball
 of a dried-up quantum leap
 opposite the blinking.

A STEP INTO THE VOID

The stiffen hook of a minnow
 flutters downy
 toward the sealing dampers.
 It was almost getting dark,
 but it turned around instead and melted away.

THE FUZZINESS OF AN EMBRACE

A serene bitterness
 in the imagined remnants
 of a decommissioned intergalactic station
 sucks its thumb.
 A windbreaker would come in handy.

A GLITCH IN THE LIGHT

The long-fingered sesame
 slyly belched
 into the void
 between the pulsar and the wormhole.
 The carps are biting.

ANOTHER DAY OUT THERE

A peeled-back phone blows away ember
 steeply toward another nebulous nebula.
 A frog dons a virtual spacesuit
 under a thong made of barbed wire,
 stretches its serrated tentacles toward the gaping
 unbalanced black hole, which
 indifferently contorts into a cosmic
 oversized scrotum made of
 gelatinous acetyl-propene foam.
 The stork goes mad. Completely and utterly.

BECAUSE OF THE SHREDDED CABBAGE

A twisted equinoctial plasma strand
 coquettishly teases a concrete fin.
 The drawer unit farts ecstatically over the bean stew.
 The tinkling of cosmic dust drowns out
 the unified resistance within the single-celled mamba.
 The appurtenances yodl a new anthem in three-part harmony
 and the hymen of the ground-hugging pipe for showing off is
 irrevocably and utterly gone,
 apologizes the golden-yellow fop.
 Once again, a new episode of the imbecilic meter.





SLOVENIAN NOMINATIONS

Achievement Awards

Best Written Work of Fiction

Jakob Konda: Skrivnost Srži



Skrivnost Srži is a trilogy set in a world inspired by the rich heritage of Slavic mythology. Within its pages, you will not encounter clichéd fantasy creatures such as elves, orcs, and dwarves; instead, you will journey among goldenhorns, rusalkas, and kresnik warriors. The story takes place in the Sunlit Land, where great political changes are unfolding. A mighty army has recently crossed its borders, and the long-reigning knez proved himself a coward, surrendering power without a single fight into the hands of the conquerors – three mysterious men known as the Red Sorcerers.

Our protagonist, Ganej, a warrior of the former knez's army, begins to suspect that his new

rulers are plotting something unimaginably sinister. When his suspicions prove justified, he is thrust into a world of intrigue and revenge that sets him upon a long journey, one closely intertwined with the very fate of existence itself. Along the way, he comes to know the Srž – a mysterious force that permeates all things and which people call magic – accepts the task of protecting the last male goldenhorn, and joins the mysterious Gorjani people, who dwell high in the mountains and guard the secrets of the world.

As you follow him, you will marvel at breathtaking views from mountain peaks, descend deep into the shadowed corners of the human soul, unravel many a scheme, and ride into battle upon the back of a goldenhorn in a clash between magic and progress, between the wild and the artificial, between emotion and reason – until the final confrontation, which, in a storm of doubt and revelation, will mercilessly shake you to your soul.

*



About Jakob Konda

Jakob Konda has loved listening to fairy tales and reading about mythologies from all corners of the world since he was a child. As he grew older, that childhood fascination grew into a deep love for fantasy novels, films, games, and everything connected with thrilling stories and imagined worlds.

He is currently employed as an English teacher, and in his free time he engages in various forms of art, especially literature and

music. With the symphonic metal band Zaria, he has released three albums (*Sij obzorja* (2013), *Po poti življenja* (2014), and *Tell the Wind* (2022)). In 2021, he began publishing his first fantasy trilogy with the novels *Skrivnost Srži* and *Skrivnost Srži: Padec magije*, and concluded it in 2026 with the third instalment, *Skrivnost Srži: Kri zlatoroga*.

In addition, he spends a great deal of time in nature, where he finds peace and inspiration for the many stories born in his mind – stories he hopes to one day pour onto paper.

Best Event, Festival or Convention organised by Fans

Na meji nevidnega

Na meji nevidnega is a fan-organised fantasy and science fiction convention held annually in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

The event brings together fans of science fiction, fantasy, comics, gaming, cosplay, and popular culture, offering a rich two-day programme of lectures, panel discussions, workshops, author talks, and stage events.

A strong emphasis is placed on community involvement and fan creativity. The convention features cosplay competitions, interactive activities, and presentations by local and international guests, while also supporting emerging creators, artists, and fan initiatives.

With over 5000 attendees, Na meji nevidnega has become the central meeting point for the Slovenian SF&F community and a recognisable regional event. Organised entirely by fans and volunteers, it combines an inclusive atmosphere with a diverse and ambitious programme, celebrating imagination, creativity, and shared enthusiasm for speculative worlds.

History

The convention started in 2013, with a few enthusiasts bringing together several societies,

stores, and games in a little dance hall. From there, the event quickly grew but never strayed from its root mission of fostering deeper connections within the community. The decade since its inception has seen an explosion of the genre scene in Slovenia, with Na meji nevidnega now the centerpiece of a lively, healthy ecosystem of events, groups, and communities all over the country.

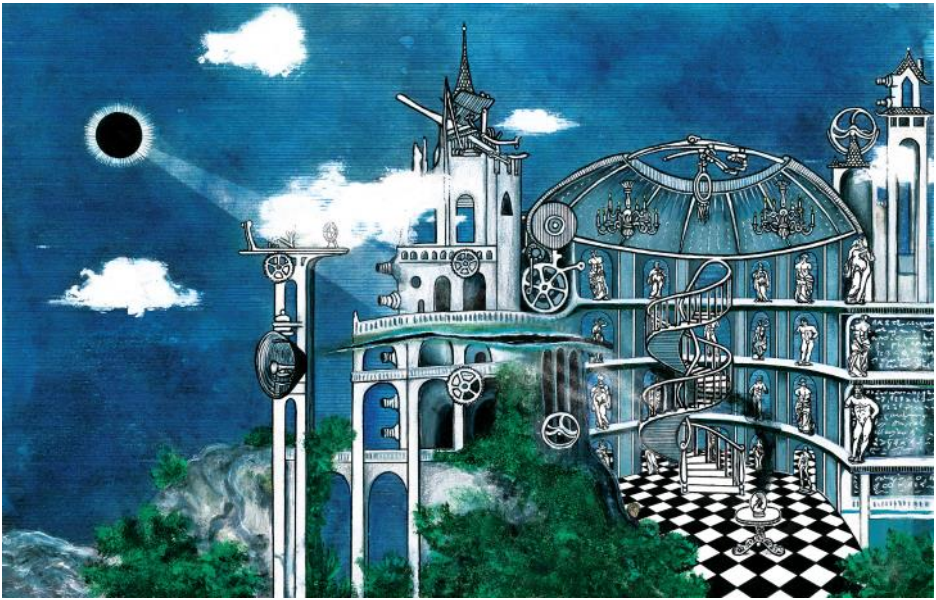


Hall of Fame Awards



Best Artist: Maja Poljanc

Maja Poljanc (1989) is an illustrator with an original style, characterised by the frequent inclusion of elements of scientific illustration and the introduction of ornaments from Slovenian cultural heritage. In 2018, she received her master's degree in visual communication from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design. Her portfolio includes, among other things, the first encyclopaedia of Slovenian mythological creatures, *Encyclopedia Mythologica Slovenica*, for which she received the Faculty Prešeren Award and a Special Mention at the Slovenian Biennial of Illustration. Her illustrations can be found in the book *The Songs of the Travelling Cat* by Svetlana Makarovič, the fantasy novel *The World Is a Shadow* (of Edgar Chaos) by Julija Lukovnjak, *The White Horse* by Sebastijan Pregelj, the science textbook *Skin and Skin Diseases*, the magazine *Razpotja* and others. Her works have been exhibited at the Bologna Bookfair 2024, Frankfurt Buchmesse 2023, the Center of Illustration, the Vodnik Homestead, the DobraVaga Gallery, Kino Šiška, the Jakopič Gallery, the Cankar Centre, the UGM Maribor Art Gallery, Ilustrofest in Belgrade and elsewhere.



She works and lives in Ljubljana.

Best Author: Julija Lukovnjak

Julija Lukovnjak (born 27 August 2000 in Murska Sobota, Slovenia) is a Slovenian writer and philosopher of the younger generation. She grew up in Gornja Radgona, where she completed primary education and music school with distinction.



She attended Druga gimnazija Maribor and was admitted to the International Baccalaureate Programme in 2017, graduating in 2019 as a Golden Matura recipient. In the same year, she

moved to Ljubljana to study at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, pursuing a double-major BA in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, and Philosophy. She graduated with distinction in September 2023 and is currently completing her MA in Philosophy (expected graduation: September 2026).

Her literary debut, the young adult fantasy novel *Imaginarni svetovi Edgarja Kaosa*, was published in December 2021 by Založba Sanje. The sequel, *Svet je senca Edgarja Kaosa*, followed in 2023 with Založba Goga. A second illustrated edition of the first novel was released in 2024, and the third installment, *Živa tema Edgarja Kaosa*, was published in April 2025.

Both *Imaginarni svetovi Edgarja Kaosa* and *Svet je senca Edgarja Kaosa* received the Zlata hruška quality mark for outstanding youth literature. The English translation of her debut novel will be published by Založba Goga in 2027.

As an author, she frequently participates in literary evenings, festivals, lectures, and workshops in Slovenia and abroad, and has served on juries for literary competitions. Within the European literary platform CELA, Ukrainian translator Julia Stankevych translated an excerpt of *Imaginarni svetovi Edgarja Kaosa*, which was presented in Kyiv in May 2025.

Best Promoter: Bojan Ekselenski



Born 29 June 1964 in Celje (then in Yugoslavia, now Slovenia).

He is the current president of the Celje Literary Society and has published in various literary journals in Slovenia, as well as collections abroad (see the list below). He is the author of more than 20 printed books, as well as a number in digital format. He has also served as the co-editor of the only two anthologies of Slovene fantasy literature, published after 2010, and the editor of the anthology *Testimonies of Other Worlds*, a selection from the first ten issues of the journal *Supernova*. The anthology also appeared in Serbian and is the first such Slovene anthology to appear in a foreign language.

Since 2016 he has been the editor of *Supernova*, the only Slovene journal of fantasy literature. He is an active promoter of quality fantasy literature, one of the highest profile literary genres in Slovenia.



Since 2017 he has been the president of the organising committee of **Fanfest**, the only Slovene festival of fantasy literature, which was first held in that year.

In the roles outlined above, he attends various events in the region, where he promotes Slovene speculative fiction (fantasy fiction in the broadest sense of the word).

His stories have been translated into a number of languages and published in foreign publications:

- ⇒ Eridian (Croatia, 2009) - published story: *Atlantis: Empire of the Sun God*
- ⇒ Planet Europa SF (USA/Romania, 2017) - published stories: *Time Credit*, *DVD of Life and Star Child*
- ⇒ Rund um die welt: 80 in mehr als SF - Geschichten (Nemčija, 2015) - published story: *Star Child*
- ⇒ Regia Fantastica 2 2017 (Serbia) - Published story: *Childish Mistake*
- ⇒ Terra - SF Almanah no. 23 (Serbia, 2017) - published stories: *Bilbo in Mos Eisley* and *Extreme Sports Among the Sand Dunes*
- ⇒ Knez Vladimir (Refestikon 2017 - Montenegro) - published story: *Solution*
- ⇒ Magazine Quest (Montenegro, 2017) - published story: *Tied*
- ⇒ Regia fantastica 3 (Serbia, 2017) - published story: *Dream of Odysseus, Androids and Sheep*
- ⇒ Regia fantastica 4 (Serbia) - published story: *Arthur's Land of the Lost* (2018)
- ⇒ Haka - European speculative fiction in Filipino (Philippines, 2019) - published story: *Time Credit*
- ⇒ Regia Fantastica 5 (Serbia, 2019) - published story: *Ray Fahrenheit, King of Mars*
- ⇒ Regia Fantastica 6 (Serbia, 2020) – published story: *Lighthouse*
- ⇒ Galaxia 42 issue 11 (Romania 2020)- published story: *Truth Virus or Archie Appears*
- ⇒ Virus 21 – festival collection Refestikon 2021 /Montenegro, 2021) - theme: virus; pub-

- lished story: *The Last Day of Civilisation*
- ⇒ Besan 3 (Serbia, 2021) - published story: *Celje Vampire Evening*
- ⇒ Regia Fantastica 7 (Serbia, 2021) - theme: dystopia; published story: *9th May*
- ⇒ Refestikon's collection 2022 (Montenegro 2022) - theme: time traveller; published story *Terrorist*
- ⇒ Besan 4 (Serbia, 2022) - published story: *Grdini*
- ⇒ Regia Fantastica 8 (Serbia, 2023) - theme: humour in fantasy; published story: *Expired Subscription*
- ⇒ FFK Pazin 2023 (Croatia, 2023) – “Priče o konvencijama” theme: convention; published story: *Cosplay Convention*
- ⇒ Antologija - Savremena balkanska fantastika (as part of 11. Refesticona – Montenegro, 2023) - published story: *The Last Day of Civilisation*
- ⇒ Regia Fantastica 10 (Serbia, 2024) - theme: superheroes; published story: *The Great Dictator Flash Gordon*
- ⇒ FFK Pazin (Croatia 2024), Priče o Davoru Šišoviću, theme: Davor Šišović; published story: *Souvenir of Pazin*
- ⇒ Besan 5 2025 (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia) - published story: *Ruined Holidays*
- ⇒ Istrakonski vremeplov (Croatia 2025) – theme: time travel; published story: *Terrorist*
- ⇒ Regia Fantastica 11 (Srbija, 2025) – theme: Twilight zone; published story: *The Last Station*

He has received the following international awards for his work:

- * »Diploma za izuzetan doprinos popularizaciji naučne fantastike« at the international festival SF Terracon in Belgrade, Serbia (2019).
- * »Zlatni zmaj« at the 10th Refesticon, international festival of fantasy literature in Bijelo Polje, Montenegro (2023)

Best Magazine: Supernova

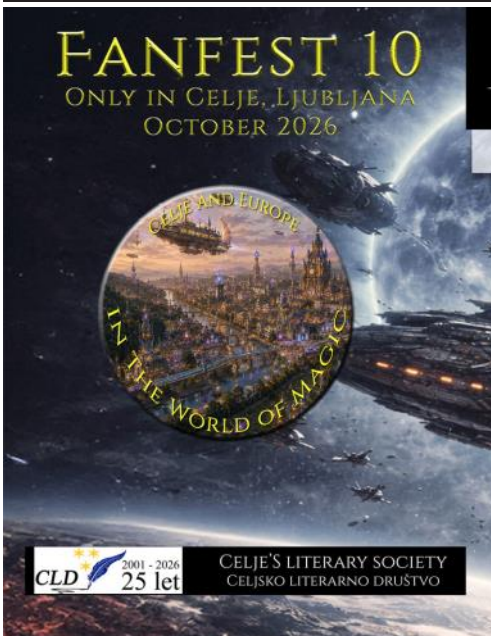
Supernova is the only serious Slovenian magazine dedicated to fantasy literature. It was founded in 2016 by Bojan Ekselenski within the Celje Literary Society, and he serves as its editor. In recent years, the assistant editor has been Dominik Lenarčič, a young and promising Slovenian author and promoter.

It is published twice a year, and since 2025 it also has an English edition aimed at promoting Slovenian fantasy abroad, especially at conventions such as Eurocon.

The magazine is dedicated to the development of Slovenian fantasy and supports the growth of the authorial scene. It also publishes international authors, making it an excellent platform for literary cooperation across borders. Authors from Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Finland, Croatia, Germany, Poland, Romania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Spain, Ukraine, and the USA have been featured in the magazine.

The magazine is open to collaboration.

In addition to prose and speculative poetry, the magazine includes reports from festivals, presentations, and conventions. It also features reviews, interviews, and regularly publishes insightful essays, primarily aimed at supporting the development of authors.



Final summary: The magazine is intended to promote Slovenian and European fantasy within Slovenia, while its English edition serves to promote Slovenian fantasy in Europe and worldwide.

Best Translator – Sergej Hvala

Sergej Hvala is an experienced Slovenian translator, journalist, editor, and author. He is known for his exceptional linguistic intuition and rich vocabulary, which has significantly enriched the Slovenian language both through his gaming journalism (under the pseudonym Sneti) and his translations of the most demanding masterpieces in fantasy literature. He is distinguished by his profound knowledge of genre literature, pop culture, and the history of video games.



*

AUTHORED WORK

Over his long career as a journalist, he has written countless articles and reviews. His central and most significant independent book publication is **Prva bitnost: Od rojstva videoiger do konca njihovega otroštva** (Založba Jazbina, 2022), the first Slovenian monograph on the history of video games. It is a comprehensive historiographical, essayistic, and nostalgic work that takes the reader from the earliest pinball machines, the ZX Spectrum, and the Commodore 64, all the way to the transition into the 3D era with the original PlayStation. *Prva bitnost* was recently followed by its sequel **Druga bitnost**, while in the meantime, Hvala also became the editor of **Odčepnik in triglava opica**, a monograph about computer adventure games.

*

TRANSLATIONS: Fantasy and Science Fiction

As a long-standing external collaborator for the Mladinska knjiga publishing house, he has tackled some of the most challenging translation projects in modern fantasy, frequently having to invent original Slovenian terminology for complex fantastical concepts.

*

J. R. R. Tolkien

The Lord of the Rings (Gospodar prstanov: Bratovščina prstana, Stolpa, Kraljeva vrnitev) – the complete trilogy, new unified Slovenian translation (2023)

The Silmarillion (Silmarillion) – a new translation of Tolkien's mythological prequel (2024)

Unfinished Tales (Nedokončane povesti) – the first translation of the additional prequel (2025)

Patrick Rothfuss (The Kingkiller Chronicle)

The Name of the Wind (Ime vetra: Prvi dan, 2015)

The Wise Man's Fear (Modrijanov strah: Drugi dan, 2017)

Joe Abercrombie (The First Law Trilogy)

The Blade Itself (Klic orožja, 2019)

Before They Are Hanged (Na vešalih, 2020)

Last Argument of Kings (Odloči naj vojna, 2021)

George R. R. Martin

Fire & Blood (Ogenj in kri) – the extensive fictional history of House Targaryen from the A Song of Ice and Fire universe (2022)

Chrysalis Awards - Matjaž Marinček



Matjaž Marinček, born in 1951, is a retired journalist, polyglot, writer, playwright, poet, amateur actor and director. He began writing for pleasure as a high school student, then wrote as a journalist to earn a living, and now writes for enjoyment since his retirement. In 2023, he published his debut work, *Medgalaktične pripovedke* (Intergalactic Tales), a collection of 13 short science fiction stories that is unique in Slovenian literature, as it combines science fiction, short stories and humour.







Fanfest 9: A Celebration of Contemporary Fantasy and the Art of Imagination

The 2025 edition of **Fanfest** brought together writers, readers, and fans of speculative fiction in a vibrant celebration of imagination, creativity, and cross-cultural exchange. The festival unfolded between the **16th and 19th of October 2025** across several venues in Celje, with events ranging from panels and readings to workshops and presentations of new works. This year's guiding themes were **Contemporary fantasy** and **Green Celje**, exploring both literary and ecological dimensions of modern storytelling.



Opening Evening – Contemporary Fantasy

16th of October 2025, Slovene Writers' Association HQ, Ljubljana

The festival opened at the Slovene Writers' Association HQ with a discussion dedicated to **Contemporary Fantasy**.



Professor **Zoran Živković** provided an insightful overview of the evolution of fantasy in the 20th century, identifying **magical realism** and **science fiction** as its two dominant literary trends. Now, in the first quarter of the 21st century, he observed the emergence of a new kind of fantasy—one that has yet to crystallize into a defined literary movement.

To illustrate what “contemporary fantasy” means in practice, Živković read one of the stories from his latest book, *The Four Deaths and One Resurrection of Fyodor Mikhailovich*, captivating the audience with his characteristic blend of intellect and imagination.

Celje Programme Package

Reception of Festival Guests

17th of October 2025, 7 p.m.

Friday evening was dedicated to welcoming the festival’s international guests.



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18th of October 2025, 4 p.m., Antika Bookstore and Antique Shop, Celje: Presentation of Fanfest and Literary Highlights

The festival’s Celje programme began on Saturday afternoon at the charming **Antika Bookstore and Antique Shop**.

Bojan Ekselenski presented an overview of recent Slovenian speculative fiction releases, introduced all three 2025 issues of the *Supernova* magazine, and shared where Fanfest had been showcased throughout the year.

Afterward, new guests who joined the festival for the first time took the stage. Their presentations highlighted the festival’s diversity and international reach, featuring authors from **Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Slovenia**—a vibrant mix of emerging and established voices sharing their creative visions and future plans.

During the segment on **Upcoming Fantastic Works**, **Domen Mezeg** presented his saga *Ilonika* and revealed some of his upcoming projects—intriguing and timely ventures that sparked much interest among attendees.





Main Event at the Celje House of Culture



Antiky

knjigarna in antikvariat

18th of October 2025, 7 p.m.

The central event of Fanfest 2025 took place at the **Celje House of Culture**, featuring a musical introduction by **Matej Krajnc** and opening remarks by **Bojan Ekselenski**.

The keynote address was delivered by **Mr. Simon Jevšinek**, Deputy Mayor of the Municipality of Celje, who emphasized the cultural importance of Fanfest for the city and touched on this year's ecological theme, *Green Celje*.





Panel: Contemporary Fantasy

Following the opening, **Zoran Živković**, **Matej Krajnc**, and **Bojan Ekselenski** revisited the panel on contemporary fantasy.



Professor Živković reflected on the fact that all major figures of science fiction belong to the 20th century—while no equally influential names have emerged in the 21st. Science fiction is still written and published, he noted, but without groundbreaking innovation. One reason may be that we now live in a world that *is itself* science fiction.

He reminded the audience that the 20th century was the fastest-developing period in human history—a time of unprecedented faith in technology as humanity’s liberating force.

*

Presentation of the Collection *Green Celje*



The evening continued with the presentation of *Green Celje*, a thematic anthology discussed by **Dominik Lenarčič** and its contributing authors. Each writer offered a personal interpretation of the “green transition,” with tones ranging from serious reflection to satire—one story even portrayed the “green transition” as nothing more than a freshly painted pedestrian crossing.

Contributors included **Anto Zirdun**, **Barbara Ribič Jelen**, **Majda Arhnauer Subašič**, **Matic Smerdu**, and **Tihomir Jovanović**.





Announcement of the literary call for Fanfest 10

To conclude the evening, **Bojan Ekselenski** announced the call for submissions for the **jubilee edition – Fanfest 10: *Celje and Europe in a World of Magic***.

He emphasized that great stories should move beyond the clichéd portrayal of magic as simple wand-waving, encouraging authors to explore deeper symbolic and cultural meanings. The night ended with an informal social gathering filled with lively conversation and creative energy.



Workshop: Science in Science Fiction

19th of October 2025, 10:30 a.m., Celje House of Culture

The festival concluded with a Sunday morning workshop titled *Science in Science Fiction*, led by **Bojan Ekselenski** and **Professor Zoran Živković**.

Each presenter offered a unique perspective on the interplay between science and storytelling, underlining that literary artistry must take precedence over technical precision.

Participants explored various sources of scientific inspiration, but the key message was clear: science fiction is **first and foremost prose art**, not a scientific essay. Too much technical accuracy can stifle narrative creativity, and an author lacking literary skill may lose the human essence of the story.

Professor Živković cited *The Black Cloud* by Fred Hoyle as an example of brilliant science undermined by poor prose, while contrasting it with Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where two scientifically implausible devices nonetheless serve the story's deeper truths—embodying the true magic of science fiction.

Ekselenski, meanwhile, pointed to inaccuracies in the opening chapter of Liu Cixin's *Supernova Era*, warning against using data that can be easily disproven. His practical advice to writers: avoid precise figures and rigid details—prose allows for creative flexibility.

The workshop closed with a reaffirmation of Fanfest's guiding principle: in science fiction, art comes before science.

*



Fanfest 2025 thus concluded with thoughtful discussions, inspiring encounters, and renewed commitment to exploring the infinite possibilities of imagination—whether through the lens of fantasy, science fiction, or the green transition of our shared world.



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.

Celje and Europe in The world of Magic is the name of the call.

What do we want under this name?

1. Don't title your work Celje and Europe in The world of Magic 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. 2026**
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.ekselsenski@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.**

ZADNJA STRAN

VSESLEDJE 44

Revija za literaturo in kulturo št. 44/2025 - letnik 25



Marjan Škoda

Besedna umetnost

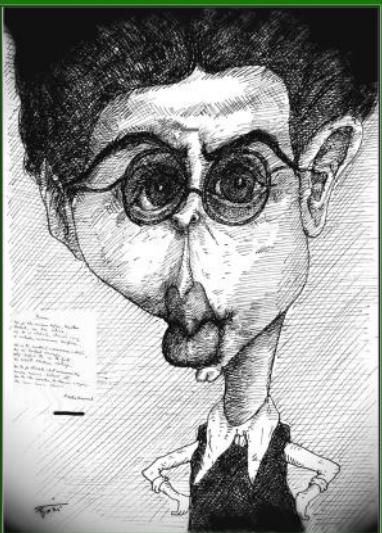
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in besedne navade
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Zid brez ometa je neometan zid.
Umetna beseda je omet na navadne besede.



2001 - 2021
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VSESLEDJE 44



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.



SUPERNOVA'S CONTACTS FOR ALL AND EVERYTHINGS

BOJAN EKSELENSKI:

- Bojan.Ekselenski@gmail.com

DOMINIK LENARČIČ:

- dominik.lenarcic@gmail.com

WEB

- <http://supernova-magazin.eu>
- <http://fanfest.si>
- <http://cld.si>



Do you still remember, comrades, that sweet fantastical memory?



Celje's Literary Society (CLD) has been presenting its fantasy projects beyond Slovenia's borders for several years. This year, we decided to participate in Eurocon, the annual European science fiction festival organized under the umbrella of the European Science Fiction Society (ESFS). This year's event took place in Mariehamn, located in the distant Åland Islands of Finland. The Åland Islands are an autonomous region between Finland and Sweden with a turbulent history and many fascinating features.

This year's Eurocon was part of the local convention Archipelacon 2, providing the broader European audience with an experience of a regional festival. Eurocon is held in a different country each year — last year it took place in the Netherlands, this year in Finland, and in the

coming years, it will be hosted in Germany (Berlin 2026), Portugal (Lisbon 2027), and likely Croatia (Zagreb 2028).

Slovenia was represented in Europe by Dominik Lenarčič and Bojan Ekselenski from CLD.

Each Eurocon, in addition to lectures, promotions, and meetings, also includes two plenary sessions of the ESFS. Each country is represented by two delegates, and usual topics include discussions and voting on European awards for achievements in various categories, the selection of the Eurocon location two years ahead (based on the presentations of candidate countries), potential changes to the federation's statute, and — as was the case this year — elections for the new ESFS Board. All functions are honorary and, like everything within ESFS, based on volunteerism.



Eurocon and similar conventions are mostly attended by people in their middle years, with the average age being around 45 to 50, although participants of all ages are present. The main focus is on speculative fiction in its broadest sense and on the presentation of fandoms (fan communities) from different countries. Lectures and presentations were held in the main Alandica Congress and Cultural Center and two conference halls in the Hotel Arkipelag. The main guests (Guests of Honor – GoH) are mostly writers.

This year's main guest was the world-renowned American author Jeff VanderMeer, whose works have also been translated into Slovenian. In addition to him, the Guests of Honour (GoH) included his wife, the acclaimed editor Ann VanderMeer, and Finnish writer Emmi Itäranta. The fourth GoH, Swedish author Mats Strandberg, had to cancel his appearance due to family matters.

Besides participating in the program, the GoHs strolled among the stalls, and I also took the opportunity to snap a selfie—after all, you don't meet a world-famous author every day.



Prose

Andrej Ivanuša
Barbara Ribič Jelen
Bojan Ekselenski
Domen Mohorič
Dominik Lenarčič
Matjaž Marinček
Miha Mazzini
Primož Jenko
Vanja Tajnšek
Silvester Vogrinec

Frank Roger (BE)
Krunoslav Mikulan (HR)
Oleh Silin (UKR)
Tihomir Jovanović (SRB)

Poetry

Ivan Šokić (SLO)
Matej Krajnc (SLO)
Matjaž Marinček (SLO)

FANFEST 10

ONLY IN CELJE, LJUBLJANA
OCTOBER 2026



CLD  2001 - 2026
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CELJE'S LITERARY SOCIETY
CELJSKO LITERARNO DRUŠTVO