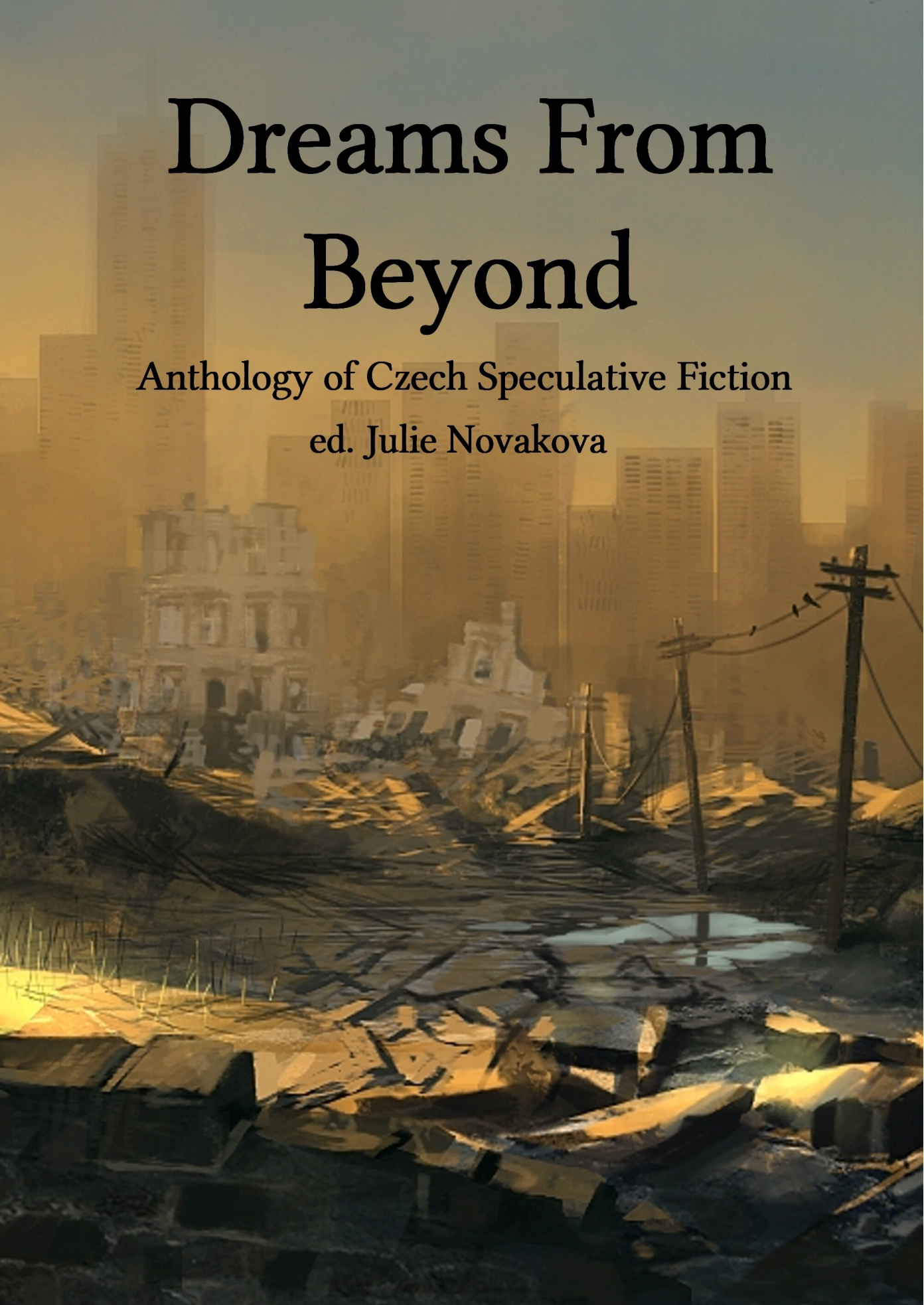


Dreams From Beyond

Anthology of Czech Speculative Fiction
ed. Julie Novakova



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Introduction

by Julie Novakova

From the early speculative visions of the acclaimed Karel Čapek to the countless and diverse currents in today's genre works, Czech speculative fiction has always extended its dream far beyond our everyday world, peering into the deepest abysses, farthest reaches of the universe, and most distant corners of the mind, be it human, alien or robotic. It's my great pleasure to present some of the best Czech authors nowadays to a wider international audience.

Pavel Renčín's vivid imagination has captured the interest of readers already in his very first published stories and continued to do so throughout his popular urban fantasy and magical realism novels. He has recently with great success ventured into the genre of horror. "The Dragon Star" is a poetic story of distorted and forgotten myths.

In Jaroslav Mostecký's "Axes on Viola", we visit a fascinating alien world and encounter the workers sent there to harness its natural resources. But some of them had disappeared without a trace... Mostecký is among the most popular and prolific authors, and especially his Viking historical fantasy trilogy *The Wolf Age* has received much praise from the readers.

Petra Slováková is best known as an author of steampunk and weird fiction. Her works tend to be rich in atmosphere, original details and imagery, be it her novel *The Demon of East End* or her short fiction. "The Real One" is a short piece about our desire for perfection... and the consequences that can come with it.

If you mention Czech military science fiction, the name of Jan Kotouč comes up immediately. His book series set in his *Sector Hirano* universe has won several awards and most importantly the hearts of countless readers. His recent venture into alternate history was also met with praise. In his "War Games", Jan envisions a war fought with a city that turns people from annexed areas and its own "unwanted" citizens into pawn soldiers.

Jaroslav Veis has been a renowned writer, journalist and translator since early 1970s, and his SF stories, popular science articles, essays and

translations of authors such as Asimov and Aldiss have greatly influenced several generations of fans and authors. His short story “Winning Is Not Everything” is a near-future satire on the politics and business of sports, particularly the Olympic games, and now, ten years after its first publication, comes as more topical than ever.

Tomáš Petrásek is a neuroscientist who also possesses a deep interest in astronomy, planetary science and astrobiology, and he frequently uses hard science for developing intriguing and strong stories, such as in his acclaimed novel *The Last Watch*. He may be known to Anglophone readers from his popular science articles published in *Clarkesworld*. His short story “Creators” is a lighter conversational piece playing with the concept of wormholes.

The last full story, “The Symphony of Ice and Dust”, is in a way what started this anthology three years ago. I decided to try writing in English and see how it goes. It went to *Clarkesworld*, and I haven’t stopped ever since.

Those who had stated that it’s impossible for a Czech author to enter the Anglophone short fiction market were proven incorrect, and a new realm of possibilities was opening. The time was right: Magazines were now accepting electronic submissions, international transactions became easy with services like PayPal, and readers from anywhere in the world could access online magazines. Distances of the world shrank to a click away. And that brings us to today...

Finally, Vilma Kadlečková, Lucie Lukacovicova and Hanuš Seiner have been unable to contribute full stories at this time for various reasons, but it would be a loss if their work were not to be included at all, so we decided to include excerpts from their work. We hope you’ll enjoy them just as the featured stories.

For readers interested in the development of the Czech speculative fiction market, I have included my article “Small Markets, Big Wonders”, originally published in *Clarkesworld* in 2015. Not much has changed since its publication. I have discovered a few more European SF magazines, but the fact still remains that publishing short speculative fiction in Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries is dramatically different.

The situation with Czech authors publishing in English is slowly changing, however, and this anthology is the proof. Since I started talking about publishing abroad at conventions and persuading other authors with the means to write in English or get translated to at least try it, more writers have decided to give it a try, and they were successful. There are also ongoing plans to bring more translations of Czech fiction to English-speaking readers. It may be dreaming big – but isn't that the hallmark of good speculative fiction?

Julie Novakova, July 2016

The Dragon Star
by Pavel Renčín
translated by Darren Baker

Legend has it that every time a myth is forgotten, a star flames out deep in space.

I. Below the pasture

The shepherd was wrapped in a silver and gold wool blanket and leaning against a staff made out of a hundred-year-old oak. His wiry figure gave off an air of youthfulness, but his eyes were certainly the strangest anyone had ever seen. They radiated a bluish-silvery iridescent glow that changed color like an ice drift beneath the Aurora borealis.

The youth sat by the edge of a pool, dangling his legs in the icy water. A group of high-spirited trout began leaping out of the water above his knees, as if proud to show off their rainbow colors.

"Watch it, guys!" he playfully shouted. "I'll be soaked from head to toe!"

The fish paid him no heed and continued frolicking around until they splashed water on a lizard, its brown color suffused with green, sunning on a nearby rock.

"You pests!" she snapped, flicking her forked tongue out. "I'll sick a pike on your vermin-infested tails!"

The cavorting trout suddenly bolted in terror. The startled lizard had barely registered her relief when the reason behind their sudden disappearance showed up.

A circular mouth clamped down on the shepherd's big toe while an outcrop of fleshy whiskers tickled his ankles. A catfish appeared on the surface, big as a floating log. It had to be at least forty years old.

"What news do you bring me, Kalfous?"

The shepherd carefully followed the silent sucking motion made by the fish's maw. A shadow came over his face, making him look old and gray.

"The wolves are coming," he muttered. Looking preoccupied, he grabbed his knotted staff and rose. He beheld the sky with gloom. The sun was going down.

II. The ocean

What an incredible feeling it was basking in the sun. He rolled over to let his pale green side also catch some rays. God, it was sheer delight. Craning his neck, he let out a roar of happiness. The dragon unfurled his wings and, after several leaps and bounds, hurled himself upwards off the moss-covered rocks.

The warm air stream was intoxicating, like mulled wine smelling sweetly of sugar and cinnamon. The sky was so blue it melted into the sky-blue ocean on the horizon. By riding the invisible air currents, the dragon was able to soar to great heights. He could feel the air beginning to thin around him. *What power I have!* Beating fiercely against the wind, he tried to reach even greater heights. His heart was pounding, his blood racing throughout his distended arteries. When he reached the highest point, his graceful body suddenly stiffened. From the cliff tops he must have looked as small as a mosquito. He was the master of the earth. There were no hunters here, only him. *Fearless!* His massive wings flapped in the thin air, the whole sky was his. And then, like a rock, the dragon began plunging headlong towards the glittery blue surface. His sleek body was shining like an incandescent star.

Incredibly, he leveled his dive off just above the shimmering crescent-shaped waves. Just enough to allow his rear claws to graze the surface. A shower of briny, crystal droplets burst upwards and doused his gleaming hide.

III. The warehouse

It was winter. The empty windows and rusted steel frame were flecked with tiny white spots. The air inside the abandoned warehouse was clear and icy. The thousands of sharp edges formed on the rock-hard slag surface were painful. The dirty puddles were covered with a layer of ice; a very thin

one, because the rainbow oil slick and black grease were receding only slowly against the frost. The brick-colored paint had peeled off long ago from the entrance doors, where several barrels, also flaking, were standing. Their lids were warped, allowing green slime to ooze out. A snarl of wires, black cables, and insulation lining were snaking along in the gloom. Rows of construction panels were stacked by the wall, their crumbling edges another sign that time had left its mark. Moonlight stole through a hole in the corrugated cement-fiber board roof. The fate of the one missing ceiling panel was evident in the fragments lying on the floor.

The strangest place of all was a remote corner of the hall. It was as if all darkness had congregated there, a sort of eye of dreariness. The elusive moonlight glittered here and there on the many shiny surfaces and edges. In the heart of this darkness lay a gaunt body on top of the gigantic heap of copper scrap, screws, crumpled silvery tinfoil, empty cans, shards of stained glass, and the twisted remains of tinted metal. An eerie wheezing sound could be heard, as if the talons of a raven were lacerating the entire length of the throat inside this creature.

The silence was broken by the roar of a plane landing nearby. It flew in so low the mud-stained windows began to rattle. They were followed by the soft clinking of several screws vibrating loose and rolling to the foot of the pile. The ailing creature lying on top didn't even flinch.

It was too busy dreaming.

IV. The diner

The clinking of aluminum spoons. Slurping. The stench of excrement and soiled bodies. Two long tables made out of pine board, their tops etched with numerous displays of graffiti. A group of filthy, scruffy vagrants were hunched over their tin plates greedily gulping down their runny potato soup, soaking pieces of hard bread in them. Their crazed eyes remained fixed on their food, the soup dripping from their yellowy beards.

Two women in blue uniforms were standing behind a big pot. With ladles in hand, they scooped up modest portions of a cloudy liquid for the beggars.

A long, disorganized line winded all the way out to the street. Passers-by turned to look the other way. The vagrants were shoving and pushing, sneering and complaining. Otherwise they were quiet, their eyes downcast, lost in their own little world where there were no outcasts. They were all anxiously looking forward to warm food – usually their only meal for the whole day. A man from the Salvation Army, also in uniform, made sure nobody cut in line.

The beggars suddenly began making way for an old man in a torn jacket limping along the narrow street between them. Bits of newspaper were sticking out of the clodhoppers he was wearing, and his dirty, wrinkled skin showed through the holes in his pants. His greasy white hair was constantly falling over his forehead. The homeless crowd shied away from the spiteful look in his black eyes and respectfully gave way before him. He was hauling some load on his back.

He was heading straight for the two women.

A pockmarked hulking figure blocked his way. Like a huge boulder blocking a mountain pass. “The end of the line is over there, pops!”

A small, weasel-faced man with a mustache leaned over to the brute and pleaded to him with fear in his voice. “Hank, don’t be crazy! You can’t, you mustn’t...” He then turned to the putrid old geezer and bowed humbly. “Don’t get pissed, Hunter, he’s new here!” There was terror in his eyes.

The homeless man paused for a second. Everyone froze in anticipation of what would happen next. In the end he merely nodded and sidestepped the scarface.

“Are you fucking joking?! Let that stiff go wait like everyone else!”

“Shut up, Hank!” the weasel-face snapped.

“Fuck off, Sid. Hey, you senile idiot,” he barked at the lame old man. “I’m warning you for the last time!!”

“For God’s sake, SHUT UP!”

“Leave the old fellow alone!” growled the man who was keeping tabs on the line. He put a hand on the bear’s shoulder. “He’s our benefactor.”

Hank exploded and, to the surprise of everyone present, drove a fist into the soldier’s stomach. Then a left hook to the mouth. His jaw snapped

like a dry twig. The ogre clasped his hands together over his head and brought them down like a hammer on the man's back, who collapsed like a deck of cards. Unease rippled through the crowd, but the line didn't disperse. They were hungry.

The old fellow put his sack on the ground. It was dirty from more than just mud. There was blood trickling out and the furry tip of a tail could be seen sticking out.

"Double portion," he said blandly.

The brunette in the blue uniform was white as a sheet. Her hand trembled as she handed the old man a bowl of soup. Suddenly her brown eyes nearly popped out for fright. A silhouette of the hulk, his fist flying, could be seen in her pupils. The blow landed on the old man's back and sent him nose-diving into the mud.

Hank snickered viciously. "Bon appetit, shitbag."

The old man didn't get up. He could feel a mixture of muddy water and urine soaking his clothes, the filthy concoction like some unpleasantly cold compress on his thighs and loins. His body felt painfully tired.

Someone laughed maliciously. A gob of spit landed on the old man's back. Most of the vagrants looked on in dumbfounded silence.

Finally the old-timer began to move. He slowly got on all fours and, with a gasp, stood up. The others were watching him. He reached inside his breast pocket and fished out a half-smoked cigarette with lipstick on the filter.

One of the beggars darted towards him with some matches. They were damp, but the third one lit. The old guy took a deep puff. Space suddenly opened up around the thug.

"You'll be dead before that cigarette goes out," he cackled.

He took a long drag and flicked the twirling cigarette high into the air. The burning end made smoke rings, the hulk watching them with fascination. A sharp whistling sound could be heard. Then a hiss, as the butt fell into a puddle. Finally a splash, as a severed head followed it in.

The old man coolly exhaled some smoke and wiped his silver sword clean with the dead man's sweater. He sheathed it somewhere beneath his coat.

He sat down and began slurping his soup. The onlookers woke up from their stupor.

Despite the ensuing crush at the tables, where there wasn't room for a single elbow, one individual sat all alone.

V. The pasture

An eagle flew overhead. The youth was sitting with his legs crossed, his eyes shut, concentrating. The rugged peaks of the breathtaking mountains stretched far across the horizon. Clouds were starting to roll in below where the shepherd was standing. As the light began to fade, so did the landscape. Darkness fell on the snow-covered mountains.

They can't get through, so why do they keep trying? No matter how much they threaten, how much they plead. He won't let them in. Not yet...

A knotted oak staff rested on the shepherd's knee. It divided the universe into two parts: the place where they are and the place where they want to be. It represented the border between existence and history. On one side was rebirth, on the other... eternal silence? Oblivion?

The sun had totally gone down, shrouding the night sky in inky darkness. The stars were out – magnificent in all their vulnerability.

The shepherd could feel the air thickening and vibrating with energy. The animals were restless, and people were tossing and turning in their sleep.

...the wolves were coming.

"You would like to have my flock?" the shepherd whispered and smiled sadly beneath the star-blanketed sky.

*

A rider on a galloping white stallion emerged out of the darkness. The rust covering the two-handed sword he was gripping looked like blood in the fading sunlight. He was clenching the reins in his teeth. There was a light, discolored spot on his dark yellow vest where his coat-of-arms used to

be. Although his bent shoulder plates – the pathetic remains of his armor – were temporarily tied down with leather straps, they still bounced around during breakneck gallops. His shoulders quivered under their blows with every stamp of the hoof, yet the knight was oblivious to the pain. His bright eyes, with their enormous pupils, blazed with determination, while his forearms looked as if they had been stung by a swarm of bees. The stingers they must have had! His sunken veins were flecked with bruises.

Hyah! The target of the knight's fury suddenly appeared in the twilight – the youth in the silver and gold fleece standing motionless. The last rays of the sun glittered off the golden rim of his crown. His two-handed sword sliced through the air. The stallion neighed unexpectedly and bolted to the side.

The startled warrior wasn't able to catch his balance in time and flew out of the saddle, only to have one of his spurs get caught in the stirrup. The frantic horse started dragging the knight behind him, crashing his head into rocks and stumps along the way. The grass was splattered red. But even after losing consciousness, his grip remained tight on his sword.

The shepherd raised his staff, a bell clang in the distance.

"Enwerde gáeth beinárh, Arhus!" a water nymph wailed out and gracefully leaped over the rushing brook. She was breathing normally but her face was flushed red and her lips gleamed with a dark purple gloss. The girl froze in her tracks. The red-lacquered fingernails on her bony white fingers were digging into her palms like claws dipped in blood. The torn black stockings on her slender legs were evidence of her desperate journey through the wilderness. They were becoming a nuisance. The water nymph drew a lady's revolver, a chipped four-inch Browning, out of her bag.

She was heading for the shepherd. The corner of her mouth twitched with malice. "Ara kraen!"

Bubbles were forming on the surface of the brook behind her, as if the water were about to start boiling. "Wait!" A geyser arose, followed by a man leaping out of the spray.

His skin was nearly white, with sickly green veins roping underneath it. His long, myrtle strands of hair were bare in places, as if someone had

ripped out entire clumps from the light green scalp. The water sprite placed one of his webbed hands on the quivering wrist of the water nymph. He slowly pushed the gun barrel towards the earth. The nymph shot an angry look at him.

"We can't any more," he said to the youth in a throaty voice. "Release us."

The shepherd leaned against his staff and replied softly: "No."

It sounded like a sentence and the water sprite turned even paler.

"At least let Ariel go. She will melt away in the sky like meerschaum in the ocean. Just give her one... I ask for nothing more, just one star," the voice of the frightened sprite beseeched him.

Silence ensued for a brief moment. They could sense he was wavering!

"They still haven't forgotten about you. You are still hungry like the wolf and I'm determined to keep my stellar flock out of your grasp."

"Haven't forgotten?" the water nymph laughed hysterically. "Do you hear him, Ragót?" She flung her arms open and again turned to the bewildered shepherd. "I would like you to dance with me in the moonlight? Don't you want to?" She snatched her blouse and lifted it over her head to reveal, in the darkness, the nipples of her white breasts pierced with silver rings connected by a chain. A pornographic tattoo depicting a cluster of fornicating bodies stretched from her left shoulder to somewhere below her belly. Parts of her body were pasted with tacky sequins.

The silver eyes gleamed with emotion. The shepherd's hands unknowingly stroked the knots of his staff as if it provided a measure of solace.

"Go away, wolves..." the youth commanded. "Your time hasn't come yet."

The whites of the sprite's eyes shone in the darkness. He pursed his lips and shook his head forlornly. He put an arm around the nymph and led her away. Her frantic bawling left her back convulsing with spasms. The shepherd was happy to see that the water sprites didn't know how to cry.

VI. The landfill

A boy in a blue windbreaker jumped from the rusty remains of a washing machine onto a tire half sticking out of the muddy earth. He stumbled but managed to regain his balance by jumping again, this time onto a wet sofa. Not a good idea. His leg tore through the rotted material and disappeared inside the stuffing.

"Ow!" the boy howled as something sharp sliced through his trousers and dug deep under his skin. The pain brought tears to his eyes. He cautiously balanced himself on his other leg and tried to pull the injured one out. He couldn't. He started crying hysterically.

"Mommy!" he bawled, wiping his dirty hand all over his face. He was panting hard, like a frightened, trapped animal.

"Take it easy, kid," a gruff voice called out from a nearby pile of trash.

The boy flinched.

"I said relax!" an old man with black eyes, sitting on top of an old wreck, yelled at him. "You can't think straight hopping around like a chicken without a head on."

"Please help me, sir," the boy asked him.

The man shook his head and glared at him. "No one can help you in this shitty world. Only yourself. Remember that, kid!"

"You have to help me!" the boy begged him. "You must! I'm still a child!"

Scowling, the old man began tapping one of his heels against the bumper. Several minutes passed in silence.

"My name is Harry," whimpered the boy.

"They call me Hunter. That's my mission – and it's a shitty one, let me tell you. You needn't piss in your pants. I'm not here to murder any children. I'm looking for somebody." He picked up a one-inch cigarette butt from the ground and lit it.

"Are you calm?"

The dirty, teary-eyed boy nodded his head.

"Okay, carefully try and move your leg to the side. Can you?"

Harry clenched his teeth. "Something's scraping it on the left and it really hurts in the back."

"And what about the front?" The hunter blew out smoke.

"There's something cold there!"

"Try to push on it softly."

"Ow!" the boy winced in terrible pain.

"Okay, maybe that's not the right way," the old man observed and blew smoke towards the boy. "What do you think?"

Harry could see he was in the company of a maniac. This vagabond was quite willing to let him die there! Why did he disobey his mother by coming to the landfill to play? He would gladly trade all the treasure they said you could find here for a week's grounding. He tried to concentrate. He closed his eyes to pinpoint exactly where it hurt. He bit on his tongue to overcome the pain and pushed with his leg ever deeper into the sofa. For a minute he thought he couldn't do it, but then the pressure eased. Hooray! Exhausted, he pulled his leg out and collapsed on the couch.

He looked around for the old weirdo but there wasn't a trace of him anywhere. Only a burning cigarette butt lying on the hood of the rusted old wreck.

VII. The old warehouse

He could hear his mother now. *You're all dirty!* Her shrieking voice grated his ears. *Dirty! Dirty! How you've disappointed me, Harry!* He covered his ears with his hands.

A hole several centimeters big was peering out of his pants near the calf. She doesn't have to see it, Harry thought to himself. Were the rest of his pants not caked with blood and the grimy innards of the couch, she probably wouldn't notice it at all that he had been playing at the landfill. At first he tried rinsing his pants off in a puddle. Good lord, what was he thinking? He made it only worse. He had to find somewhere to clean up.

Harry limped in his underwear between mounds of plastic laundry soap containers, black plastic bags, much-abused tin cans, and burned-out television sets. He avoided the places where his feet got stuck in the slimy

ash. The wind blew long-discarded newspapers around and kicked up a choking whirlwind of dirt and dust. The boy passed by broken fluorescent lamps and battered stoves and headed for a decrepit building in a grove at the eastern tip of the landfill.

The brick-colored paint was peeling off the warped entrance doors. The castle of horrors, thought Harry, but he quickly dismissed the thought. There has to be a sink in there. Chipped, maybe even cracked, but there had to be one.

He pushed on one of the doors and it opened with a loud creaking sound.

Darkness filled the abandoned warehouse. Tangles of black cables were lying at his feet. They reminded him of boa constrictors, waiting for him to get close enough so they could quickly wrap their coils around him and suffocate him. Thoughts of his mother helped to drive that fear away.

He took a few steps inside and listened for any sound. The door slammed shut behind him. Harry's heart began pounding. The wind?

"Is somebody here?"

"Nobody's here..." replied a strange sort of whisper.

Where did that come from? His head, of course!

The boy proceeded to the middle of the warehouse. Although his eyes had adapted to the growing darkness, the corner farthest from him seemed like an impenetrable black hole. He grew frightened of what could be lurking in there.

"Is somebody here?" he asked again. "I need to wash up."

Two fiery red balls lit up in the dark.

"Come closer, child," the wheezy voice called out again to him from all around. Harry's fear disappeared as the boy suddenly felt a deep sense of trust in the living thing hiding in the darkness. He underwent a flood of unfamiliar emotions, like love and tenderness, and completely forgot, at that moment, why he had even come to the warehouse.

"Who are you?" he asked, opening his eyes as wide as possible to catch a glimpse or some movement.

"Today nobody. I used to be..." the voice began tottering. "I used to be something to behold, and strong too. I could even fly. I..."

There was silence.

"Fly?" the boy asked, emboldening the creature in the darkness.

"A skin disease caused by acid rain ate away my wings. Hunger robbed me of my strength and my claws soon disintegrated into dust. The infernal cold put out the fire in my throat. My bones grew brittle from loneliness and depression."

"I know what you're telling me. You're telling me you're a dragon. But they don't exist anymore!"

"I HAAAATE that word!" The seething hatred caused the boy's legs to buckle and he collapsed on the frozen ground. But the malice disappeared as quickly as it appeared. After a moment of silence the voice called out again.

"You're actually right. There are no more dragons. They vanished. Even the mightiest myths die away."

"I don't understand," mumbled Harry sadly as he clawed his way back up on his feet. "What's a *myth*?"

But the voice sounded as if it hadn't heard him. "Dragons never used to live off garbage and rats. Dragons never used to hide away from daylight, desperate and broken. Dragons stood up to their fears. Never before was the dragon's hide lacerated by malignant lesions. After that, he devoured a junkie who had overdosed. You see, no dragon has ever died of disease. They only die like derelicts."

"Are you a dragon?"

"Aren't you listening to me? You're supposed to ask: Are you a derelict?"

"What's a derelict?"

Harry felt overwhelmed by the pitiful wailing.

"I want to see you," he demanded after his shaking stopped.

"No. We've talked long enough. The visit's over. Beat it!"

The boy clenched his teeth and felt renewed vigor inside him. No! "Today I met a man who told me to rely only on myself. To stand up for

myself like and follow it..." Harry halted in order to recall the words the vagrant used with him.

"Like a sheep?" said the voice.

"No, now I remember. Like a predator. A tireless predator."

He was answered with subdued silence.

"So he hasn't stopped looking for me, eh? And now he's just loitering around," the tired voice murmured. "You know what, little guy. I'm actually looking forward to seeing him. I'm only sorry he didn't get here earlier. Much earlier. But now I'm going to need all the strength I can get."

Something moved in the darkness. Glass, screws and other treasures rattled within the heap as the creature stood up on its wobbly legs. Harry saw two claws emerge that were so withered they looked like someone had covered the bone with a thin layer of black mud. A monstrous reptilian head with rotting teeth then appeared. A venomous draft shook Harry up so bad he felt the urge to vomit. The shredded remains of its black wings opened up like a theater curtain. The dragon moved in jerks like some repugnant insect. He dragged his lame rear leg behind him.

Once the creature was fully visible in the light, Harry cringed. Its black hide was strewn with open, purulent wounds. The dragon was so emaciated that it looked like some kind of wretched skeleton. But the fire in its eyes shone as brightly as ever.

"Your tender young flesh and blood will give me the strength to fight on. Get undressed."

Harry was unable to break the spell cast by the red eyes, which were suddenly overflowing with lecherous desire. He took his coat off and unbuttoned his shirt. His underwear dropped down below his knees. He took off his shoes. The sharp edges of the slag-filled earth pricked the bottom of his bare feet and his entire body shuddered with goose pimples. He unknowingly wiped away some snot hanging from his nose.

"Now, come a little closer," the dragon commanded him.

VIII. The city

He was going higher and higher. His strength waned with every step, his body ached with every movement, and his lungs gasped in vain for air. Far below him came a series of agitated shrieks and the deafening wail of sirens. He looked down and saw a clutter of colored figures, several iron vehicles with ladders, and people in white helmets all bustling about. The squeal of brakes and the distant crash of an accident. The sound of shattering glass, that pervasive human howling, and thousands of little perceptions – like smashing a kaleidoscope. Brilliant flashes of lightning were coming from the opposite high-rise.

He looked up. Another six full lurches to reach the top of the building. He moved his forward claw and dug it into the ledge. His eyes were fixed upwards. *I must! For the dragon's blood!* His body jerked again, but his one useless leg hampered his progress; he should have bitten it off. Five more to go. Why on earth did he leave his hiding place? There was nowhere left to hide because people had penetrated every corner of the world! Another lurch upwards. His lungs were about to burst, the pain was so great. He had to hurry before his last bit of energy deserted him. He lurched upwards again. The light faded before his eyes. He could no longer hear the wailing sirens or the arrival of droning helicopters. His rotten teeth added to the malicious contortion of his face. *No chance, you can't make it.* He was thinking about the dark-eyed killer. Finally, the dragon heaved himself up over the edge and onto the roof. He lay there exhausted. He felt a strange kind of lightness coming over him. The sky was still incredibly blue. The wind was fluttering on the horizon and dissipating across the wide open seas. Time was at a standstill. A magnificent eagle was circling between the skyscrapers.

The dragon savored the air. How long was it since he last smelled something so good? His head began to spin. The world was spinning! He wobbled to the edge.

He leaped off for his final flight.

IX. Stellar pastures

"So you made it," whispered the shepherd.

The shadow of a creature was shivering from cold despite the warmth of the rising sun across the meadow. He whispered: "Yes, I'm dead."

"I wasn't expecting you so soon," said the shepherd as he turned and began wading through the dewy grass. His feet felt good in the coolness. "It was terrible, wasn't it?"

The dragon's shadow remained silent.

"A painful death?"

"The dying part was the worst."

A nearby brook created small, bubbling rapids as it winded its way over the rocks. There wasn't a sign of trout anywhere.

"Do you still want...," but he didn't finish the sentence.

"That's my wish."

The shepherd fixed his gaze on the spot where the eyes of a living dragon should be. "Are you sure about this? You realize you're the last one."

"Really?" replied the voice, but without any hint of sarcasm. "It doesn't surprise me."

"I will give you a new life. Like before. Myths must never die out," the shepherd exhorted.

"Save it for yourself," snapped the shadow. "I want to reach the other side. I want my own star!"

"What's so bad about the world down below? You come here full of spite, misery, obsessed with hatred. You yearn for complete oblivion."

"Don't you get it?! You of all people? They've already forgotten about us. And that includes you! They no longer believe in us; you don't run, you don't hide."

Now it was the shepherd's turn to be silent.

"You know how many times they killed me? How many times they chased me down blind alleys. Those dragon-beaters!" he raged in a voice overflowing with disgust and contempt. "The hunters! That horde of ignorant murderers!"

"Why are they so...?"

The dragon's voice was firm: "Let me go! I will take only one from your flock."

The shepherd looked up and examined the blue sky with his sorcerous eyes. "Did you notice how their numbers are shrinking? No one has noticed."

"People today don't stargaze anymore," the shadow observed dryly.

Several white clouds were drifting across the sky. Butterflies were circling one another over the meadow, their wings fluttering until they lighted on red poppy bulbs.

"Very well. I shall give you your freedom," the youth whispered and struck his staff into the earth.

X. Epilogue

There's a legend that says every mythical creature is invisibly bound to some star. Whenever a myth is forgotten by mankind, a star flames out in deep space.

The last dragon has disappeared forever. His long journey through space ended with his shadow clinging to a star in a mortal embrace. To those who survived, he left behind a magnanimous gift.

*

No one suspected it because it was an *ordinary* day. Just like hundreds and thousands of other ones. And then suddenly – just after daybreak – the sun flamed out.

The people had just eight and a half minutes to enjoy the warmth of its rays on their faces before darkness set in.

The sky was blanketed with a brilliant array of stars.

They shone brightly – like never before.

Originally published in Drakobijci 3 (Dragonslayers 3, ed. Michael Bronec, 2001), an anthology of stories nominated for the Dragonslayers fantasy prize. "The Dragon Star" won the prize. Later reprinted in the magazine Pevnost (2004) and the anthology Legendy: Draci (Legends: Dragons, ed. Michael Bronec, 2010).

Translated into Romanian for Fantastica.ro in 2015. This is the first publication in English.

About the author

Pavel Renčín (* 1977) had entered the Czech literary scene as an original, disruptive influence. He debuted with his short story “The Creator” in 1999 and then won several literary contests. Since then, his name comes up regularly in the best speculative fiction anthologies. Most of his work is in the genres of urban fantasy, magical realism and horror. His first novel *Nepohádka* (*No Fairy Tale*) was published in 2004, *Jméno korábu* (*The Name of The Vessel*) in 2007. A year later, he finished *Labyrint* (*The Labyrinth*), one of the first online novels in the Czech Republic written alongside the readers (published in print in 2010), and published the first part of his *Městské války* (*Clash of The Cities*) trilogy, which was nominated for the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror award, and won the Aeronutilus award for the best book of the year. Parts two and three were published in 2009 and 2011, respectively. A collection of Renčín’s best short fiction, *Beton, kosti a sny* (*Concrete, Bones and Dreams*) was published in 2009. His most recent and also most successful book is a horror novel set in Böhmerwald, *Vězněná* (*Imprisoned*). It was published in 2015 and received the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror award for the best Czech or Slovak speculative fiction book.

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The Real One

by Petra Slováková

"Great times require great people who are not afraid of their visions!" announced the billboard sign on the skyscraper on the other side of the street. Charles sighed. Creating a surrogate family wouldn't be a problem, but what to do with the real one then?

"People of my rank need true parents who they don't have to be ashamed of," the director said to his mother and showed her his back.

"But you are and always will be my son!" the old woman shrieked in despair.

"Well, most of all, I'm a high-ranking official. And as such, I need someone presentable to back me up, not a family that only causes shame."

"But we love you!"

"That doesn't mean a thing! Do you think it makes me happy to hide you? To conceal you? To pretend that you're long dead only to avoid the interest of the media? What if all of this came out? Such a scandal! None of you knows anything about bon ton. You don't even know the dress code for meetings, not mentioning your incapability to count to a million without your implant. You're barely pieced together," he scowled.

"I'm old, how can you blame me for that?"

"Times have changed, and you don't fit in anymore. I've ordered parents who will represent me. They'll let themselves to be seen, and they'll play your role better than you two ever could."

"Do you think anyone will believe she's your mother? She could be your sister!" cried the woman as she saw her younger and much lovelier self enter the room. The artificial being had her face reconstructed according to the digital photo from her wedding. But she was much nobler. Even her gait – the perfect grace of her steps, natural movements. She knew that the very moment when her replacement opens her mouth, the beautiful voice will effortlessly pour out the right words, words she would never be able to put together herself. How could she? The education she had obtained was one of the past era, she didn't understand the new regime, didn't know how to

behave in high society, because she had grown up as a child of the working class. Because she had worked hard, so that her son could have a better future than herself, and now she was being ignominiously exchanged for a thing that never even got a taste of humanity and emotions.

She wiped her tears away. If she had had enough strength, she would have thrown herself on the woman and choked her with her own hands, but she knew she would have been overpowered easily, maybe even injured. She was old. Tired and useless. Maybe if she had undergone a few more surgeries, more implants... but her son looked adamant. Of course he did – he had certainly spent a fortune on creating the replacement, and so he would hardly soften up to something as irrelevant as the heart of his mother, who took care of him his whole life. She felt so sorry for it all, that she couldn't even begin to describe that heaviness in her heart. Then, the two men supported her in order to take her away. She couldn't do anything but lower her head, like so many times before.

*

One, two, three, straddle vault. The hopscotch was as long as a tunnel ending in light. She spent her days playing in the Garden of Eden. She had never been outside, or if she had, she didn't remember what it was like out there. Her memory reached merely to the boundaries of the Garden of Eden and a tiny bit deeper into remnants of memories of things and shapes. Maybe her original parents had wanted a child, just a little bit smarter. Or maybe she had been an orphan put into isolation and kept safe from the society? She could also be an artificial being returned by a customer during her guarantee period, because they didn't like her. It was so simple to exchange one piece for another.

Calen didn't know anymore who she had been before. She didn't remember many things ever since her arrival into the Paradise. Sometimes, in her hazy memories, she could recall sounds of her mother preparing breakfast. The lovely smell of her perfume. But were these really her memories? She remembered a playful golden retriever puppy, which used to bark at the first morning express train at the gate every day. And sometimes, before she fully woke up from her dreams, she remembered her room with

slight violet walls, covered by plants that seemed almost real, as if they sprouted from the cracks in the plaster. Orchids bloomed there, and mechanical hummingbirds swarmed around them, so that they could suck the nectar with their slim beaks.

People would simply go missing. Children swapped. It was normal in the present society that someone wanted to exchange their family or obtain a smarter kid. It was so easy to order one, have it created artificially and get a replacement. The real child was taken somewhere else. Calen knew where – into the Paradise. Where no one could see the difference between the real ones and artificial ones. But the girl kept wondering: was this the barrier that surrounded the Paradise? Or was it the outside walls, protecting what is inside?

Was she just an android? An artificial being made of metal components? A thing with a small computer in its head that controlled its every step? Told it when to cry and when to smile?

In any case, in the enclosed society new families were formed from various mixtures. Their memories were rewritten, so that they would feel happy; the system was never mistaken. Nobody suffered. But wiping one's memory clean wasn't perfect yet, and a simulation surpassed its creator from time to time. And then, the moment came when the artificial intelligence started thinking like a human being. Some of them didn't stay in the Paradise forever. Sometimes, their original parents felt regret, and they wanted their children back. But the kids might not be good anymore... even for an exchange.

"A mother or maybe even a grandmother," said Calen thoughtfully. She watched the guards bring an older woman into the Paradise. She must have been real, because nobody would have wanted to be so old willingly. Why suffer in a decaying body when you could live forever, young and beautiful? Only old people, who remembered different times, so distant from the present, wanted to preserve their memories of human life as it used to be like. They wanted to grow old and die. Calen didn't want to die, although she didn't know what it was like. She had heard terrible things about it...

"Old people die soon," she whispered.

"Are you afraid of death?" her mother asked. Actually, she wasn't sure if the woman was her real mother, but as far back as she could remember, they had always been together and the woman took care of Calen. There was a certain mental bond between them, and Calen sometimes suspected her mother of belonging to the artificial beings who could read minds, because she always managed to guess what Calen was thinking about.

Calen sat down on a blanket spread on the grass and took a chocolate biscuit from the plate. She swallowed it too quickly and it grated her throat, making her cough. Her mother laughed and handed Calen her own mug of tea.

"I don't know if I should be afraid. It depends if I am real. The difference may be huge for real people, but for us? Such an insignificant thing – the difference between being alive or dead. What is it like to die?"

"I don't know, I don't remember anymore. Probably, you simply vanish."

"Vanish? As in you won't be anywhere? That's sad."

"Let's not spoil such a beautiful afternoon. Just look at the cloudless sky. That's surely no simulation. The flowers smell sweetly, and the leaves in the treetops rustle in the wind." The mother turned her youthful face towards the sun.

"There are people who don't want to change. I don't wonder. I would find safety in being myself, too. If I knew this is the real me. There are people who choose to follow someone, because they are not strong enough to go through their life on their own, and it's easier for them to be led," Calen mused. She plucked a dandelion and sniffed at it. The yellow pollen speckled her nose. She got up a run a bit farther away to pluck some more dandelions and make a wreath. She managed to get up to the high wall, where most dandelions grew, and she gathered an armful. When she was about to run back, she noticed her mother was talking to one of the soldiers. They were watching her as they talked, and Calen's heart skipped a beat. Someone was brought in, so someone had to be taken away. The flowers fell

out of her arms. Paralyzed by fear, she waited for the man in the uniform to approach.

"Calen, could you come with me, please?" he asked her in a kind voice. His face was barely a few years older than hers. She didn't know whether to run or obey. Everything depended on the simple little thing, on the tiny difference, so small yet so significant – whether she was real. *Maybe we were once exchanged, and now we're wanted back*, she thought. Or maybe we'll go into the fire and sulphur, and we'll be destroyed there... She reached out her hand towards the man to go with him meekly. There was no escape. Mother came and took her other hand.

"Don't be afraid. You'll pluck dandelions elsewhere. I'll go with you," she said quietly, and the soldier nodded in agreement. Calen snuggled to her. She started crying, but she hated herself for it immediately, because she wanted to look brave. If she did have a computer in her head, it has just gone crazy.

She hid her face in her mother's skirt as she used to do when she was read to horror stories about people who had to work in deep coal mines until they went blind. "So that someone could pay for a replacement," her mother explained when Calen wanted to know why people were being tortured in such a cruel way.

She remembered how she had been sick once. How fever had been devoured her body day and night and her mother had taken care of her, changed her cold compresses and read stories for her. She had brought her electronic animals with big eyes, which could whisper beautiful words.

"You have always been my little girl," she told her, and Calen was momentarily flooded by a fleeting feeling of safety.

"But you are not my real mother, are you?"

"Does it matter?" mother asked her and took her by the hand. She smiled at her as she always used to do during the time they had spent in the garden. As long as they had each other, it was easier to walk forward. Towards anything.

"No," Calen answered without hesitation, "it doesn't..."

Originally published in Petra's story collection Železonoc a další podivnosti (The Iron-Night and Other Oddities, 2013). First published in English in Around the World in more than 80 SF Stories (Saphir im Stahl, 2016).

About the author

Petra Slováková (* 1987 in Ostrava) first introduced herself to the readers with a short story in the magazine Pevnost. She won several prestigious literary competitions – for example, the Karel Čapek Prize. She published a book of poetry entitled *Básně (Poems)*, a book of short stories named *Železonoc a další podivnosti (The Iron-Night and Other Oddities)*, a book of two novellas *Cvrček v krabičce (The Cricket in A Box)*, and is currently working on a steampunk trilogy *Ve službách královny (In the Service of the Queen)*. The first part of this trilogy is called *Démon z East Endu (The Demon of East End)* and came out in 2015. The second book is planned for late 2016. She is the author of many short stories and a leading figure in Czech steampunk community.

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Axes on Viola

by Jaroslav Mostecký

The tree yelled in a premonition of death and the sky stormed.

Seal was startled and dropped the lamp on the ground. I swore and looked furiously at him. "What the hell are you doing?"

He turned pale in front of my eyes.

"It must have been totally rotten," he said, terrified. "It cracked too early!"

He didn't need to explain anything to me. I had already heard what could happen when Viola started playing.

He pushed me aside and rushed outside. It had always been much worse to stay in the gallery when the rotten air roots, reaching somewhere up to the height of several kilometers, crashed to the ground, than to be taken by surprise outside. I had not been on the job long enough to have experienced anything similar, but I had heard enough the very first evening at the cabin, after they had taken us down from orbit.

I chucked the laser saw on the ground and had just enough time to jump aside to avoid the thin ray tickling my ankles. I picked up the dropped lamp, quickly stamped on the switch of the laser saw and followed Seal to the exit. He was really good at running in the dark. By the time I had got out of the gallery he had already disappeared from sight.

The air was shimmering with heat and dying wood.

Somewhere high above me, out of sight, the broken runners of the secondary roots were crashing to the ground with an awful screaming sound.

The foreman ran past me, swearing, his eyes bulging with fear, by some wonder not popping right out of his head, even though he must have experienced something similar previously.

The trunk of the tree started to vibrate. The walls and ceiling of the gallery inside the tree started to shed sawdust while dust clouds of lichen spores were peeling off the soft tree bark.

When the guys talked about this the first night I came to Viola, I just waved my hand as if to brush away such nonsense. You know, they do it everywhere: Scare the newcomer, make fun of him...

"Your heart will drop into your trousers," I recalled the words of the ever-frowning Duffy. At that time I only smiled uncertainly, in order to look neither like a greenhorn nor like a scaredy-pants.

Now, in the split of an instant, I realised that he had been right. In the blink of an eye I looked over the hillside sloping from the fringe of the forest down to the road. Several lumberers were running out of the gallery, covered in wooden dust, and the guys who sponge off the woodcutters and collect carmine shells, more priceless than the most expensive gems, from the water pockets behind the scales, were climbing down the tree trunk using ropes...

Everybody was in a hurry. The ones highest up must have known already that they wouldn't manage in time, but in spite of that they kept trying. The 8-shaped clip of one of these guys had just broken and that guy had crashed down to the ground, not far from me. I didn't hesitate any longer.

I slipped on the mash of sawdust and wood-eating worms, poked around with my hands on the ground and, bent forward, I rushed away. If I had had any time, I would have screamed in terror. I had once seen a photo of a man who hadn't had time to hide and had stayed outside when the runners of the roots whipped the ground around the shelter...

I ran down the hillside, through the army kitchen, knocked over a pile of dishes and continued down the road. There were some other guys, but nobody had any time to take notice of anyone else. Except for when somebody was faster than the guy in front of him – then he had to knock him down so he could run even more quickly.

I was running towards the shelter, breathless, as if not touching the ground. It wasn't much further...

I fixed my eyes on the concrete cube at the end of a roughly damaged clearing and silently guessed the distance. I knew that it was about half a kilometer, because the safety precautions had demanded exactly this

distance. Somewhere inside me I was praying for each meter by which the builders might have shortened the safety zone.

All at once, the ear-piercing screeching sound changed its tone. I looked up without being aware that I was doing so. There was nothing in sight yet.

I dodged through the hollow stump of the tree we had chopped down the week before and a new grass field, passable only at places thanks to roots not yet burnt, opened up before me.

I started to lose my breath and to limp. At the worst possible moment, just as the ground started shaking under my feet, the wormy sawdust clouds were suffocating me, and I couldn't shelter my face.

A man running behind me tripped, shouted something out and tried to catch me in his fall. Maybe he only wanted to get his balance back. More likely he didn't want to die alone.

I relieved myself and transferred the balance into my toes. I had heard somewhere that this way one could run faster...

The storming noise changed into screaming, which was tearing the air in the same way as if someone were to tear a shirt into bandages. I could not see anything else in front of me except some gray blurred image. The shelter! I counted each step in my mind, silently and out of breath.

One, two, three, four...

How many yet? Sweat was running down my forehead and temples and began to burn my eyes.

The gray concrete area was growing bigger, approaching fast.

Eight, nine, seventy...

I had no time to realise if I had been crashed down by the pressure wave or if I had crashed against the shelter wall. I felt the rough surface of the shelter concrete armour shield under my palms just when I had curled down at the foot of the shelter.

I pulled my knees towards my stomach and buried my head into the felt grass. My ears might get torn apart, but I might not lose my eyes...

Half unconscious I felt somebody's hands catch my collar and pull me somewhere to where the exit might have been.

We fell into the shelter at the very last moment. If we had been only a split second later, they wouldn't have opened for us...

I crawled onto a bench and reached out in a direction from which I sensed the fragrance of brandy. I was blinking blindly into the dark and because nobody had passed me the brandy, I stretched my hand toward my rescuer. I could feel my heart high in my neck. My breathing was very heavy and I saw everything as a blur.

"Thanks," I wheezed and wiped my tears and sweat with the back of my palm. Finally I was able to see him. I turned my brain on and looked for information in my memory. I must have met him before, I just couldn't remember where.

He hadn't belonged to the woodcutter group. There had been only twenty of us on this job and I had had time to get to know all of them in the last month I had been here. Not one of them would have climbed out to save me. Maybe it was one of the shell pickers or one of the supply people...

"Do I know you?" I asked in a low voice. The rumble, coming from outside, became unbearable even inside the shelter.

Perhaps he didn't understand what I was saying.

"Do I know you?" I asked more loudly and tried to smile in self-denial, but I hadn't enough strength to do even that.

Instead of answering he grinned and shook his head.

And then at that very moment it all broke out. The concrete cube of the shelter jumped up as if hit by a pressure wave and another more violent pressure wave ran over the shelter somewhere further away. The waves would wreak havoc at the next woodcutter's place a few kilometers away but it wouldn't kill any more.

Dust was getting inside the shelter through invisible holes, competing with the cigarette smoke for a place in the light of the fluorescent lamps.

I started to cough, quickly covering my nose with a corner of my shirt.

The guy that had saved me suddenly stood up without a word, touched his forehead with one finger as a greeting and then was the first one to go outside the shelter. I looked out, following him with my eyes, and then stepped back very quickly. It looked horrible out there.

I walked across the room towards Seal, pushed him aside a little bit and sat down next to him.

"You've been here much longer, Seal," I said to him and, pulling a cigarette out of my pocket, offered it to him. "Who was the guy that brought me here?"

He hid the cigarette behind his ear and shrugged his shoulders: "Daniel. Everybody calls him that. He's weird. Nobody knows why he's here. He just wanders around. I have also noticed that some of the guys call him brother, maybe you will be one of them soon..."

"He is..."

"Oh, no," Seal chuckled and moved the too long fringe from his forehead. "He's got some plan, it is just that nobody knows what it is. The company has already checked him out, but they didn't find anything. He is just a weird guy that's got nothing better to do than to wander around Viola."

"Why should I be one of his group?" I didn't let him finish.

"Well, when something similar happened not long ago, before you came, he stayed seated near the exit and it didn't cross his mind at all to bring in any of the guys that got shut out. He stayed here and sipped his coffee the same as everybody else..."

"Does he collect shells?"

"I'm telling you that he just wanders around," Seal murmured irritated, stood up and opened wide the armour-plate shelter door.

Hard scales of bark and leaves rained outside. They were floating gracefully to the ground and cutting into the felt grass with their sharp edges.

"We had better wait," my partner decided and looked over the sky cautiously.

"I cannot hear anything, but it might still crack up there."

It seemed that everyone else agreed with him. It didn't occur to anyone to stand up and get out of the shelter. I tried to find my rescuer somewhere in the clouds of dust and leaves, but he had already gone. He must have been as crazy as everybody had said.

Cans of beer were being passed around and a black guy at the other side of the concrete cell started to sing something about cotton in a soul rhythm.

*

Dark fell very quickly. There was still a lot of dust in the air, which had had no time to settle down, nevertheless it seemed to me that the spotted disc of Viola's Gemini was more visible than usual. The name Viola had actually belonged to both planets, forever joined to each other, facing the same hemisphere. Until I saw this greatest wonder of the world with my own eyes when I first entered the unbelievably long orbit of Viola, I hadn't been able to imagine it.

Huge tree trunks, tightened up like violin strings, had joined the two celestial bodies and had planted their roots in each other's soil hundreds of thousands of years ago. Perhaps it used to be just one planet later torn up by rapid forces. In any case the planets looked magnificent and spectacular.

The forest of gigantic trees, however, no longer looked as it had been depicted in leaflets at travel agents.

In order to bear the incredible force by which the two worlds had been trying to tear apart from each other, the trees had grown hollow and elastic. It had therefore been the best material for the building of orbital base camps and connecting parts of cargo ships. And to work here had been the best job possible. Viola had been slowly giving in to axes and saws...

I winked in a friendly manner at Duffy, who was offering me a sip of strawberry juice, and stepped out into the evening silence.

The night smelled of freshly cut wood and flashes of evening fires could be seen through the forest barrier.

I shuffled in place hesitantly and finally set out for the lights. There was no way I could fall asleep on my bunk bed anyway until the card players, hitting the table hard with their cards every evening just a few meters from my bed, went to sleep first...

"May I take a seat?"

Two of the shell pickers looked me over and silently moved aside to make a place for me.

"You are new here, aren't you?" somebody whom I couldn't see because of the fire shouted at me.

I nodded. "Do you mind?"

"No, of course not. It is just that it is unusual for one of the woodcutters to come into our camp."

"Well, I don't really know," I murmured truthfully and fidgeted nervously, "If you mind me staying here just tell me and I will go..."

"And where to?" someone asked maliciously. "It must have been bloody difficult to get here through the collapsed roots. There are as many holes in them as in the Gruyere cheese and they are incredibly old. This tree will uproot itself in about a thousand years anyhow..." He chuckled breathlessly, pulling out a burning stick out of the fire and lighting his cigarette.

The hushed conversation around the fire had been dying out. Everybody seemed to be interested in my answer.

"I was able to climb in here so I can climb back out."

"The ghosts will get you..." He said it so seriously that somehow I was not able to respond with a wisecrack.

"Well, if this is a joke, never mind," I said uncertainly. "If not, then I have to confess that it's news to me."

The guy across from me went around the cracking flames and sat down next to me. As soon as I could recognise him against the flashing flames I realised that he wasn't joking at all. I jumped up before he had time to sit down and stretched my hand toward him.

"I have asked your name before," I asked formally. "Thank you, Daniel. Without you, I would have stayed out there..."

He brushed my thanks aside with a wave of his hand and pushed the shell picker further away. "I bet that you have also been asking what I'm doing here, haven't you?"

I nodded. We both lowered our voices and the guys sitting around the fire slowly started to return to their previous topics of conversation.

He looked twenty years older than I did, so I didn't take notice of his slightly belittling tone.

"Whatever they told you was nonsense," he said with a wave of his hand. "I would not like you to think that I am some kind of a noble-minded guy. I had been planning to meet you. I just took the opportunity to do it earlier than I had originally planned..." He paused for a while and turned his eyes to the sky where the huge disc of Viola's Gemini covered two thirds of the night sky. The gigantic trees, their leaves rising into the sky just a few steps behind us, had grown up to its surface, hidden among the rocks in the muddy valleys.

My head was spinning with dizziness and I could feel my stomach crawling up into my neck. Though I was sitting on a low wooden bench, my head felt giddy anyway. If Daniel hadn't given me his hand I would have fallen down on the ground next to the fire.

"You are a lumberer," my new friend whispered after a while and then he turned his voice down a bit more. "I would like to ask you a favour. Maybe I will save your life again..."

I nodded slightly. "What is it?"

He stood up and indicated to me that I should do the same. Without a word, he emerged from the light of the flashing flames of the fire and waited for me to follow him.

Then he turned his back to the shell pickers and began to climb up the hillside to the surrounding barrier of Viola's forest.

The forest rose before us like the wall of some gigantic fortress. The shouting of the shell pickers gave way to the night noise of the forest. Suddenly we were in the middle of the dark night, occasionally broken by the green light of Gemini. It felt like being there for the first time even though I already knew every root and stone in there. However, I had never been so close to it in the dark.

The silent twittering of lizards was mixing with crowing, which I had never heard before, and long stalk leaves, growing directly from the trunk, were rustling against each other every time the far away air roots clapped.

If I had got lost here alone, I would not have been brave enough to turn my back to this unknown world which I was helping to kill. I would have been backing slowly down and that evening I would not have left the fire for a moment.

Everything looked completely different than it had in the daylight.

The piles of sawdust brought out of the galleries, the tool shelters, and even the forest...

Actually it wasn't really a forest. Hundreds of trees squashed together like beans in a can, where there was a mass of rotten leaves, lizard bones and dead beetles instead of the tomato sauce...

Very rarely you could find a space among the trees while mining, and that was filled up with the same rotting and deathly smelling soil as in the rest of the forest. Most of the time the tree trunks created a compact wall of scaled bark that split into individual trees only at the height of few kilometers.

Daniel led me with certainty. We passed a few galleries, gaping out of the forest, and after a while of tripping over stones and roots, we stopped in front of my gallery.

"What are we doing here?" I shook my head.

"I have already been here today," he answered, the point he was trying to make not being obvious, "I wanted to have a proper look around here. It seems that tomorrow you should start on the other side."

I nodded. "It is my first tree where I work as a lumberer completely alone. I don't know it for sure yet, but probably yes."

He pointed blindly somewhere into the dark to where the crashed secondary roots were slightly visible. "You left your saw in the gallery when it started falling down," he said vaguely.

"I always leave it there," I frowned. "Partly I don't want to be bothered by carrying it with me and anyway even if someone took it, how far could he run with it?"

"I only wanted to make sure that you haven't returned there to pick it up," he murmured silently and peeped inside.

"So you only wanted to borrow my saw, is that it?"

In reply, he merely gestured indefinitely with his hand. He went inside the gallery and only then, when he was inside, did he turn on the lamp he carried on his belt. He covered the lamp with his palm, allowing only a tiny ray of light into the passage.

"It doesn't look right, does it?" I remarked.

He didn't respond to my remark. He vanished behind the long curve of the gallery, leading right through the tree. The whole gallery had been completely cleared. It consisted of two intersecting passages and also another one circling around the whole tree. The tree was propped up by only four wooden blocks, which would finally be blown up by explosives at the very same moment as at the other end of the tree, which had planted its roots in the muddy valleys of Viola's Gemini.

To do it any other way would cause the whole tree to come crashing onto one of the planets. The connection with the ground had to be cut off on both globes at the same time. The tightened wooden spring of Viola would at this moment contract and, for a few minutes, until gravity got hold of it, would float motionlessly in the vacuum. Then the orbital conveyors would drag it to the parking runway for further proceedings...

Daniel disappeared into the passage together with his flashlight and I suddenly found myself in absolute darkness. I looked out of the tree and followed him hesitantly. It was impossible to get lost in the gallery even if you were totally blind.

In the middle, where the trunk of the tree was hollow and bodies of worms together with slices of semi-transparent moss filled up the cavity to a height of several kilometers, I pulled the hood of my shirt over my head and, taking a deep breath, I ran quickly through the falling rubbish.

*

I just caught up with him at the opposite wall. My laser saw lay on the side. Daniel was walking around the circular gallery and kept hitting the outside wall with a piece of metal.

"What's up?" I asked, my eyes hardening a bit. There was something going on which I didn't seem to understand.

He took no notice of me. He knelt down and started to crawl through the whole area again. Only the bark of the tree, covered with sleazy bast, stood in the way of cutting through. The bark used to be cut through only rarely. Most of the time the tree trunk used to just slip out of the scaly beds of bark as if oiled after the four wooden blocks had been blown up.

He crawled to the end and rolled onto his back. He must have mashed the sawdust and worms into a jam doing that, however, he didn't seem to mind this at all.

"Come here," he bawled at me, as if I had just come in. "Listen to this!" He moved aside and knocked on the bed of one of the scales.

Something rattled on the other side.

"Echo?" I asked stupidly.

He shook his head in silence. "It's a ghost," he murmured after a while and against his will, his voice jumped nervously. "They are over there on the other side. People talk about them even though nobody has seen them yet. Why do you think that none of the old workers in your woodcutting group wants to be a lumberer even if it is the best paid job you can come across?"

I didn't want to believe what he was suggesting. "It is a drudgery," I tried to disagree with him.

He patted my back and shook his head as if having no doubt about it. "When you came here to be a lumberer," he said silently with his ear still at the sleazy inside wall of the bark, "did you meet the guy that had been here before you?"

I shook my head.

"Not even in orbit? Quarantine lasts a month. If he was still alive, he must have been there at the time you came here..." He smiled mysteriously and waved his hand to show me that there was no need whatsoever to respond to this comment.

A shiver ran down my spine and I had to force myself not to start looking around me.

Dan's torch started to draw light lines on the walls of the gallery, but it soon stopped and became still again.

I looked at him uncertainly and as quietly as possible knelt down again to the sleazy bast wall. I still could hear it.

"What's that in reality?"

"Ghosts," he repeated again, this time less seriously.

"What the hell do you mean by ghosts?"

The bare bark had bulged inside and light could be seen in the holes in the scaly beds. It was dark yellow, like a phosphorescent pus.

I swallowed heavily, stepped back a little and looked sharply at Daniel: "Do they eat people?"

He seemed to be calm but I could see that his nerves were tightened to the point of bursting. "Shut up," he bellowed at me and withdrew from the wall. He stopped just beside me.

The bark bulged back and the yellowish light disappeared.

"Can you answer me?" I burst out and thrashed my fist against the gallery wall.

He turned violently towards me. "It has happened a few times before that lumberers have disappeared. The bark was cut by a saw so they must have done it themselves... Maybe they saw what we have just seen and were curious..."

"I don't believe it," I shook my head in disbelief. "I would never try such a thing."

"You wouldn't, but somebody else might..."

"Nobody," I barked back at him in sudden anger.

"It is also possible that they had cut the bark deeper then they had intended to and "it" just crawled out at them..."

"Oh Christ, what could crawl out at them?" I wrung my hands theatrically while watching the place that had just bulged out a few minutes ago. "Except for beetles there are only worms and lizards here..."

I stopped abruptly and looked at Daniel. "After the tree is taken away, anyone can see what is hidden behind it. There is no maze of passages, perhaps there might be small squares filled up with leaves. Anyway, when they moved the rubbish they would have found the lumberers if there had been any..." I spat confidently onto the ground and tried to look as if I was

sure of what I was saying. "More probably there have been some arguments which ended with knives. So you will find them somewhere under one of the heaps of sawdust!"

He picked my saw up from the ground and passed it to me. "Have you ever heard about what you can find in the – what do you call them – squares?"

"Yes, but I didn't believe it," I nodded in approval. "They say that sometimes some of the conveyor workers get stuck among the trunks. Of course, they are not wandering around there now, they fall either here or on Gemini." I shook my head and fastened the three straps holding the saw to my back and shoulders. "They must have ended up there on one of the small squares together with their scooters. I have heard that occasionally a skeleton has been found..."

Daniel nodded. "At least the lizards get fed," he remarked cynically.

"However, it has also happened that a lumberer disappeared and then when the space behind the trunk was cleared no body was found..."

"You see!"

"Nothing at all," Daniel couldn't be silenced. "The scent trail led inside and then disappeared. Those guys never came back..."

*

"This way."

The ray of light bit into the wood and, after a while, carved out a fiftieth step.

We were standing in the hollow part of the trunk just above the rotting mass of dead leaves, beetles and lizards, and I was cutting out stairs leading upwards round the trunk according to Daniel's instructions.

The fool had wanted to go outside the tree, but he hadn't had the courage to do it at the bottom where the heaps of rotting leaves could have buried us and also where there had been a strange light just a moment ago.

Most of the time the mass among the trees was up to twenty meters high so it looked like we would have enough work to keep us busy until the following morning. Even though I had felt obliged to him, one thing I knew

for sure. I would cut through the bark as soon as we got to the top and that would be the end of it for me. Not a step further...

"How much further?"

We were covered in sweat. The steeply twisting stairs were becoming more and more dangerous with each newly cut out step. The half-loose tree was shaking in the storm that was going on in the upper atmospheric layers and the rain of worms falling into our shirts was getting thicker with each new shaking up of the wooden world.

Daniel had moved aside the cuttings and stood up carefully. He touched the rim of a carnivorous mushroom growing around the whole cavity and shivered in disgust.

"I hope that this only eats worms, it licked my hand!"

"It only spat out its excrement!" I reassured him. "How much further?"

"Two or three steps further and then we'll give it a try," he said, catching his breath. After all, he was older than I was. If he had had to climb up there with the saw on his back, he would have had a heart attack by now.

I nodded approvingly and moved the laser ray a little bit higher. I had had enough of this already. A new day had probably already started outside and I had a whole new shift of drudgery in front of me. As a lumberer, it was not my duty to plant the explosives, but it was beneath the pyrotechnics specialists to carry the stuff from the storage way up here by themselves, they considered themselves too high up on the totem pole for that.

I had finished the last step without a word and started to dig into the gallery passage in a horizontal direction that would lead into the layer where we had seen the yellowish light earlier this evening.

Normally it would take two or three shifts to do this but now there was nobody around who would try to increase my daily quota. Also I didn't have to keep the prescribed height and width of the gallery passage. We were crawling on our knees to the bark and just about when I was getting hungry, the structure of the wood changed and the roots of scaly beds appeared.

I shortened the laser ray and carefully continued crawling further into the passage. Daniel hustled behind me, throwing back the wooden cuttings with his hand. The progress of our crawling was getting slower and slower.

The exhaled air had insufficient time to get ventilated in the narrow passage and we had to stop our work every half an hour and crawl backward to the cut out stairs. I had also been trying to be as careful as possible. I didn't want to cut through the bark before I'd let Daniel ahead of me. If there was something in there... well, it had been his idea all along.

It hadn't taken long. The laser ray had penetrated the few-decimeters-thick layer of scaly beds and a loud hissing sound of water came out from pockets behind the beds. The water evaporated immediately and the boiled shells opened to be eaten by the lizards.

"Finished," I turned to face Daniel and lay down on my back so I could widen the gallery passage. A few more times the hissing sound of the water could be heard, but I had been careful to make only narrow, small holes and had not cut the bark through yet.

Finally I had finished and could allow Daniel to crawl over me to get ahead. I could see the vein on his neck pulsating vividly and his tightened face showed his tension. He was holding a gun in his hand, which I had not seen before on him, and he was literally hypnotising the wall in front of him.

"Go on, buddy!" He nodded his head and aimed the gun directly at the place where I had gone down with the laser ray. As if he was expecting that something on the other side had been waiting for him. Something you couldn't just shoot with an ordinary blaster that could be bought in any shop, especially in view of the fact that guns were illegal on Viola anyway. The butt of the gun, which he propped against his shoulder, had the security label of the Special Forces on it. These guns worked only when they identified the odour pattern of their owners. So it simply meant that they were not worth stealing. It also meant that the gun most probably belonged to Daniel. And that he wasn't just some kind of a strange guy wandering around Viola with nothing to do... Everywhere guys from the Special Forces had shown up, there had always been something fishy about it.

I squeezed back and focused the laser ray from behind Daniel's shoulder onto the thin wall in front of us.

The wall had nearly torn itself up of its own volition. The rotten smell of the leaves outside had blown in together with the gray light of the

phosphorescent mould covering the piles of dirt just about a meter under the gallery opening.

"We've just about got it right," Daniel laughed and lowered the gun barrel. He pulled his hand out, holding the lamp and waving it over his head. "It doesn't look so scary."

He looked around once more, carefully holding the light to see all sides and then, with the gun in one hand and the lamp in the other, he jumped down. The pillows of rotten mush opened for a while and if Daniel hadn't jumped aside immediately, he would have got caught in the mush up to his waist.

The light emanating from the mould was quenched under his feet as he was walking on it and the surface swung lightly with each of his further steps as if he had been walking on a moorland. "Are you going to follow me?"

I shook my head: "No way! I like myself too much."

"There's nothing in here," he continued to tempt me. "I thought that something was going to be here, but there's nothing..."

"So you can see up to the end, ha?" I sneered at him. I leaned out of the opening and looked up to see how the sky looked. It had been dark even though outside a new day must have been beginning. The sky was missing here. The dome of the trunks crossing over each other had been arched at an immense height above the little valley and had been hidden in the dark.

Something occurred to me: "Daniel?"

"Call me buddy," he answered without turning his face back to me. "What's up?"

"Come back!" I wanted to shout at him, but I was scared that I would provoke him to attack.

The tension had grown up like a fog crawling in torn-up pieces down the trunks.

He stiffened and then slowly he began to turn. "What's that?" he asked just as quietly.

"Nothing yet, but it must be around here. When we were at the bottom of the tree, it nearly burst through the bark, didn't it?!"

I could see that he had relaxed a bit. "Most probably it was some kind of gas. If you threw a few embers in here, the whole forest would explode very quickly!"

He receded further and further with every step. Now I could see him only as a dark spot against the white phosphorescent background.

I couldn't decide what to do. Should I stay or should I go? The third possibility, that of following Daniel, was one I was not even willing to think about.

I felt suddenly more and more tired. I hadn't slept all night and, what's more, we were going to have to get rid of the air root that had crashed down the day before. There seemed to be no way to avoid this.

Suddenly I realised that I hadn't asked Daniel how long he was going to stay in there. The time was passing incredibly slowly and the silver white duvet of the mould one meter under me was imperceptibly waving as if to threaten me.

I forced myself to sit at the opening of the gallery a little bit longer, but finally my patience ran out and I leaned out of the opening as far as I could and yelled: "Hey!"

It took incredibly long for the echo to die down and the silence spread around me with an air of finality. Now I felt as though I should jump down there to follow him, but I knew for sure and for certain that I wouldn't.

*

Something had just moved before me. No way it had occurred to me that it might have been Daniel. It seemed to be too small for him.

I recognised him only after he shouted at me. He was limping towards me with his leg strangely twisted behind him.

I stretched the pieces of bark apart and looked outside. "Are you all right?"

"Throw me the rope and help me!" He fell on his side and burnt the tree trunks above him with the blaster ray.

"I wouldn't go down there for anything in the world!" I barked at him. "And I'd have to fetch the rope first... What do you need it for?"

I continued to watch over the dimly lit small plateau among the trees, looking for something he might have been running from.

"So you could pull me up. I'm exhausted." His voice was trembling and occasionally he hit the mould in front of him with an angry yell.

"If I come down there and get you, will you guarantee me that nothing is going to happen to me?"

"Sure, buddy," he forced himself to sound relaxed. "Nothing can happen to you down here, but if I lose..." He exhaled deeply and continued, his voice wheezing. "If I lose consciousness, don't go any further. Just come right up to where I am and don't go a step further. It smells really rotten over there..."

He fell face down into the dirt and when he finally lifted his head up, some pieces of mould were stuck under his eyes and he looked terribly scary.

I jumped down there, overcoming my own will, and, immediately upon landing, rolled aside. The biological pillow under me was silently swishing, transparent moths were running among the tiny soft threads of the moulds and somewhere from the right a dying lizard's twittering could be heard.

My shirt was stuck to my back. I had taken the laser saw off just before I jumped down and I was beginning to be sorry that I had. I was crawling into that darkness with no weapon at all and even though I had known that nothing longer than lizards of thirty centimeters in length lives on Viola, I was more scared than I had ever been before.

He was laying only about fifty steps in front of me. I was stopping every few paces and looking around. "Daniel?"

He wasn't answering anymore. He looked like a pile of dust and ashes, which could be blown by the wind all around the place in a moment.

The closer I was coming to the middle of the plateau, the flabbier the ground under my feet became. Presumably when it was raining the water from the pockets behind, the scales overflowed and after that it got sacked into the rotting ground of mush. The stuff that had been spread between Daniel and me reminded me of a moorland. I had thrown a rotten stick onto

the spongy gelatin-like surface and watched it sink into the depth of the mush with a shiver running down my spine.

I returned to the tree barrier and continued to walk slowly along. I could already see Daniel just a few steps in front of me. I looked once more over the whole place and bent over him.

His fingers felt the ground around him and grabbed my wrist. Too strongly to miss. I tried to get out of his grasp but it was impossible.

"I'll pull you over, but you have to let go..."

"It's too late," he whispered and his clenched fingers let me go.

"I'll carry you, buddy," I called him by the name he had liked to use and grasped him under his shoulders. "You just have to try a little bit harder!"

He was losing consciousness and only by using his strong will could he keep his eyes open.

"What happened up there, Daniel?" I knew that talking would only make him weaker, but I couldn't keep myself from going on asking him. Also he could die at any moment now and it would be really silly if he took what he had seen with him...

I was trying to pull him back to the opening of the gallery, but I couldn't brace my feet against the too flabby ground. I was losing balance all the time and kept sinking under. The soil was opening up under my feet and there was a real danger that the ground would swallow us and wouldn't let us go.

I had put him onto the ground, turned him onto his back and then I tried to grasp him underneath his body so that I could carry him in my arms.

Maybe I would have managed this after all. I was just beginning to rise when, suddenly, I heard a completely new sound not similar to any one I'd heard up till then.

I froze. At first, for a split second, I couldn't even turn back to see what it was. Anyway, judging by the noise, it was moving slowly.

"What happened up there, Daniel?" I yelled at him, sinking into the mire up to my knees while trying to run with him in my arms.

"They've killed me," he answered in a whisper. "It was my fault. It's just that you mustn't scare them, buddy..." Some foam appeared at the corner of his mouth. I wanted to wipe it off with my hand, but he was quicker.

The terrifying screeching behind me was growing stronger and louder.

With my last ounce of strength I freed my right leg from the captivity of the rotten leaves. I transferred the weight of my body onto one of my knees and tried to free the other leg as well. I dropped Daniel to the ground, having lost my balance again, and fell down next to him with my face touching the ground.

"The... lumberers have been disappearing, because they have never prepared them for their arrival. You mustn't take them by surprise, then they will let you kill them..."

"Who?"

He was trying to gather his strength. With clenched teeth he raised up his dangling right hand and put it into his pocket. "I've found something," he said silently.

I gulped in shock when his palm opened and there was a shining thing, which would get me more money than I would earn here in two years... I instantly forgot about everything else around me.

The soil moved under my feet, abruptly awakening me from my dreaming.

I turned around slowly and indecisively and all at once my throat went dry.

It was emerging behind me from the big pile of the half liquid mass that was everywhere. Dead button-like bodies of beetles and rotten triangular leaves were falling down its surface, bursting and falling to pieces in front of my eyes. It was rising from the bottom. I couldn't recognise any shape whatsoever. It was as if it wanted to brush itself off first.

The echo must have sent my yelling back at least fifty times. I didn't know what I was doing. I forgot all about Daniel and started to run forward as quickly as I could. I pulled my feet out of mounds of leaves and mould

and started to flee forward on all fours. Only after several steps was I able to stop and look back over my shoulder.

It was still growing. At that moment it must have already been bigger than me. The only thing I could feel was utter terror...

I reached the tree's black opening, about one meter high, the same one through which we had come out here, exhausted and completely out of breath. It had seemed unreachable. I swung up into the opening in just one leap and pulled the handles of the saw onto my back in one well-practised swift movement.

I didn't want to run any further. This place was easy to defend and, moreover, if that thing, whatever it was, were to come after me from the darkness, it could follow me into the gallery and get me from behind.

I caught a mere flash of a glimpse of it again. It was growing more rapidly now. It had half-swallowed Daniel's body already when, suddenly, a loud slurp echoed through the gallery and the thing that had scared me so much disappeared. The bubble rising from the bottom had burst and the rotten mush splashed around the tree trunks and Daniel had sunk into the crater, which was created only a few moments after the bubble had burst.

There was nothing I could have done. I withdrew to the stairs we had created with Daniel and slowly continued descending.

The new day outside had already begun. The bonfires of the shell pickers had burnt out and dishes were clattering in the field kitchen. I was thinking that I should inform someone about what had happened, but then I remembered what wise ancestors used to say.

Silence is golden.

*

"Something's wrong with you, Sonny," Duffy remarked and spat through the open window. He had to shout so I could understand him. The clearing machines had been running since the morning. They had been cleaning up the plain where Daniel had vanished.

I shivered every time I heard shouting or yelling from outside with a weird feeling in my stomach. So far it hadn't seemed to be strange to anyone that Daniel hadn't showed up yet. There were five or six woodcutting places

on Viola and Daniel used to wander among them like a puppet on a rubber string. Anyway, if they had found him in any of these places, every one of the shell pickers sitting around the fire would remember the person he had left with the previous night.

He could have reached the small valley only through the tree and nobody but me had anything to do in the gallery.

It would look like murder and I felt very nervous about it.

"What do you mean? I'm just fine!" I snapped at Duffy and started to shuffle the cards. Solitaire playing was a real bore, but it was the best way to get rid of other people's attention.

"If you are religious and need some consolation, there's one pastor at South gallery who never finished his theological studies. He preaches every day. He will do anything to get out of work."

"I don't believe in God, man, and I'm not in the mood, okay?"

Duffy continued as if he hadn't heard me. "I also felt like you do now some time ago..."

"Really?" I made a bored face, rolling my eyes and making sure he saw it. "Haven't you ever wanted others to just bug off?"

He was as unrelenting as a bur. He opened the door and bowed Seal, who was staggering around with maybe the fifteenth can of beer, out the door. Then he looked out of the window to make sure nobody was listening and walked towards me between the bunk beds.

"I once worked at the gallery near the pole. It is not as cold as you would imagine, but the tree's bark is much thicker..."

"There aren't any woodcutters at the pole," I objected and removed the aces from the pack of cards. I lined up the first row and looked thoughtfully at Duffy's wrinkled face. Every now and then he licked his upper lip as if he didn't know how to start. He wanted to tell me something really badly.

"Why did you throw Seal out?" I asked and put the last card next to the others. I turned a ten of clubs over in place of a red joker and placed it face up.

He let my question pass without an answer. "It was twenty of us there, then, the same as here," he said and his hand sunk into his pocket to get a bite of a snuff tobacco.

"The shell pickers were crazy to get into our camp. They even wanted to help us with the mining for free just to get a roof over their heads. Nobody knew then if it was safe or not to stay around the fire overnight..." He went on to expatiate. I listened without saying a word and kept turning over the cards. "Those days it was different than it is now, Sonny. The water pockets there were twice as big as the ones you know here. They got covered in ice overnight, but the shells there compared to those you find here were as emeralds are to stones. You could get very rich within six months...." He stopped talking for a moment and watched me, searching for I didn't know what. "I guess you know what I'm talking about as far as big shells are concerned..."

I jerked and put the unturned card back in its place.

"What do you mean, Duffy?"

"Exactly what I said," he barked, turning me toward him so he could look directly into my eyes. "I came to the fire immediately after you did that night, Son. I saw you leaving with that crazy guy Daniel for the woods. I also saw you coming back. Alone..." He let me loose and sat on the table. The cards fell to the floor.

Somebody outside had just shouted something incomprehensible. Maybe they had already found him.

"I saw nothing!"

"Don't be funny," he rebuked me, his voice rising. "I have known Daniel long enough to know exactly what he'd want from you. Nothing else has been of interest to him over the years than to get to the other side of the tree before it gets cut down. He succeeded twice before but he probably didn't find what he was looking for. Until now...?" He finished with a question.

"How am I supposed to know, for Christ's sake?" I exclaimed, throwing wide my arms then gathering the cards into a pile.

"I know he's dead, you don't have to explain anything to me," he waved his hand disgustedly. "How did it happen?"

"He sank into that awful rotting mush..."

He looked disappointed. "He sank?" he repeated with a sour face. "He wasn't stupid enough to step somewhere he shouldn't have... You didn't help him a little bit, did you?"

I was too tired to get angry at his remark. "A bubble burst behind him and sucked him into the depth..."

"Did you go with him?"

"No, I stayed in the gallery..."

"How far from the tree did he get?"

"He was just on his way back to the gallery," I said quietly. "I was just going to..."

Duffy jerked and jumped off the table: "He was returning? What did he find?"

"How would I know? He was crawling on all fours and his legs hampered him more than anything else..."

"He found it," Daniel exhaled heavily, his eyes alight. "Did he say anything?"

I shook my head. "He had no time. I was going to help him but then it happened."

"Did you check his pockets?"

I felt like I was being investigated. "Why?"

"He must have had a real fortune on him, you fool!" Duffy exclaimed. "One the likes of which you had never seen before..."

Only then I did remember the big shell Daniel had shown to me. I put on an amazed face and asked Duffy: "What are you talking about?"

He grew nervous and so started waving his hand as usual. "Over in the North, it was there as well. Also the trees grew less closely together. So it was much easier to get into the places among them. Sometimes, when one of our number had died, we would then find a big shell in his pocket..."

"Yes, you said that already..."

"Stop interrupting me! The shell was much bigger than the ones you could find in the water pockets and even those seemed incredibly large to us. One day something happened and everyone there died. I'm the only one who survived, because at that time I was lying in the hospital. However, I can imagine quite well what happened there that day. The only one who was still alive when we were found was a guy called Solomon. He died in the hospital two days later in the arms of his beloved brother. I'm sure he told him everything he knew about it. And guess who was his buddy?"

I trembled, a frozen shiver creeping down my spine and suddenly realised why Daniel liked it so much when somebody called him *buddy*.

"Now he keeps looking for it," Duffy continued talking. "I mean, he was looking for it. I don't know whether he was seeking revenge or fortune. Nobody knows..."

"He belonged to the Special Forces," I whispered so nobody who might have been standing under the window could hear us. "He had their equipment with him..."

Duffy's features tightened and he nodded. "The third possibility," he admitted calmly. "He was assigned to this task..."

Suddenly a deep silence spread between us. Duffy stretched out his body and headed towards the door.

"Will you explain to me what's going on?"

He grinned and shook his head vehemently. "You've already heard enough. The less you know about it, the better. At least you won't be tempted to do anything stupid... and as far as Daniel is concerned, you don't have to worry. If he's found, nobody will investigate it and I am not going to tell anyone a word."

I watched him intensely for a while and tried to think. For sure he knew more than the directors in the highest places in the company. Duffy had been toiling away here for more than twenty years and quite certainly he had enough money to allow himself to spend the rest of his life between his swimming pool and bed. He could have left a long time ago. I remembered the shining red shell I saw in Daniel's hand for a moment. That might be the reason Duffy was still here...

Maybe he's right. If he had told anyone, there would have been more shell pickers than lumberers and instead of lumber being harvested, other galleries would have been dug out further and further into the forest...

I shook my head and laughed soundlessly. It wouldn't be like him to give a hoot for any of this, it must have been something else that had fascinated him...

It didn't strike me until dinnertime. I nearly jumped up from my plate. I smiled apologetically and gave my bread to Seal as I had knocked his piece of bread out of his hand in my overexcitement. After I had finished the disgusting grub made of frozen potatoes and cauliflower, I turned to the foreman with an unopened can of beer from my rations.

He was bold and even though he was about forty, he looked twice his age. He was just licking the oil off his fingers, because he had roasted a lizard's tail to be eaten with that vegetable bomb and was searching around for something to drink. Lizard meat was terribly salty and he had finished and thrown away his two cans of beer long before.

"You want one, foreman?" I asked him and offered him my beer. He looked at me with a look that was far from being grateful. He nodded, had a sip and waited to find out what it was that I wanted.

"Don't look at me as if I wanted to eat you," I snarled. "I just want to ask you something..." I looked around the table. Duffy had already gone. "I've signed a two-year contract. If I prolong it, will I get any cash in advance?"

"You are in debt, are you?"

I nodded uncertainly.

"No, you won't get a peanut, son," he said and finished off the beer. "These are the last two years on Viola. Then it will be offered for sale under the condition that the rest of the trees must not be touched anymore. You know, the eco-men have their hands in everything these days... Two years, men," he said much louder so the others could hear him. "Two more years and we're on the move."

I nodded to show that I had understood. Now I understood Duffy as well. He was going to buy the place and then he would search for the shells. No other picker would then remain here without his permission.

"The gold mine," I whispered voicelessly and looked up to the sky.

The stars were just beginning to appear. They seemed to shimmer with a red glow.

*

I climbed to the window to let a tiny ray of light into the room that was the foreman's office. There was chaos everywhere; "mess" would be too weak of a word for the state of that room. I made sure not to knock anything over and jumped silently through the window to get inside the room.

Naked bums were shining from all walls and the big bosoms of dozens of women on the walls made me think of pink waves. I'm sure that he would have loved to stick such pictures to the floor as well had he not been afraid they would get too damaged that way.

I slid past the column drill samples piled in the corner, cautiously illuminating the way under my feet with the flashlight with each and every step I took. Every now and then an old bone thrown away from an eaten lizard tail would crack underneath.

The sawdust-covered wooden floor screeched at the most unexpected moments. I got the impression that somebody else was walking in that room besides me, so I stopped at the door and listened intensively for a while. After dinner I had given a bottle of leaf spirit to the foreman in order to assure that he would sleep soundly until the following morning.

I stepped over the remains of an abandoned lunch and over three cups of partially drunk coffee and sat down at the monitor.

I had spent nearly ten minutes going through porno-game offers before I found what I was looking for.

All that concerned Viola and its Gemini.

I was scanning through the data with no intention of stopping until I found, on the annual list of woodcutting places, the one Duffy had been talking about. Just when I had found it, a slantwise yellow line appeared on

the monitor with the word “Quarantine” in the left upper corner of the monitor. The right bottom corner was asking for the appropriate name and password.

There was no point in going on trying.

I had not finished yet. I had been dreaming for two nights in a row about the stuff Daniel had told me and now I had the chance to check it out. I went back into the main menu and got out a list of men that had worked at our place as lumberers.

The names didn't seem familiar to me... *Poul Zaharias, Martin Schwub, Thomas Weinlich, John Hampel*... The last three had a little cross at their names and a note saying they had come to our gallery from the North-east post. I had been there before. We used to go there for our explosive supplies.

It was a woodcutting camp at the other side of the forest. It had been in operation for a long time without any limits having been placed on the harvesting of wood. There was no reason why the three guys should have been transferred to our place.

Then I suddenly realised what the reason was. People used to be transferred as a punishment. These three were lumberers who had again been close to the North Pole. The North-east and Duffy's former work place were at the same latitude. What if the three had been on to something and had started to mine the galleries accordingly? I returned my attention to the monitor. Next to the cross there was a mark that had not appeared by any other name than those of these three. The legend to this list was at the end of the file...

The floor crackled at the same time as a frozen shiver raced down my spine. The mark was explained as “missing”. These were the three Daniel had been talking about.

I felt that something puzzling was drawing me further and further into the mysteries of an almost forgotten history. All three had been transferred here after Duffy had already been here for quite a while. He was still alive and these guys were gone, all three of them. I had made up my mind.

If I was mistaken, the worst that could happen to me was that the foreman would slap my face and reduce my salary for the days I was going

to be missing and wandering elsewhere. If not and everything was exactly as I thought, it was then it would be much safer for me to get as far away from Duffy as possible...

I didn't feel like going back to the dormitory. I could end up like those three as soon as this very evening. Under a big pile of wood dust...

I found the foreman's bag in the dark and stuffed it with a sleeping bag and some tins of food. I tightened the belts and, with the help of the climbing rope which had been left here by a shell picker who had fallen down here somewhere and died, I lowered the bag to the ground as silently as I could, then jumped out of the window, pulling the rope down as well. A saw would be very convenient for my journey as well, but I didn't believe I would be able to carry it for longer than an hour. An ordinary axe and knife would have to suffice as tools.

When I had finally got out of the maze of roots and ash, the sun behind the gigantic trees was beginning to rise for a new day. The journey awaiting me would be a very long one. The workplace North-east, as its name indicated, was in the north. The secret place that Duffy had let slip out of his mouth should be somewhere at the other side of the forest. On the other hemisphere, in fact. I would have to walk around the northernmost extremities of the forest and, once having arrived at my destination, would search for the ruins of Duffy's former work place.

*

Contentedly scratching my two-month's worth of beard growth, which had changed my face to the point of making it unrecognisable, I crawled out of my sleeping bag. By the time I had called it a night the previous evening, it had already been so dark that I had barely been able to see ten steps in front of me. Now it was different.

Short, frost-coated grassy hairs glistened and frozen puddles sparkled occasionally in the sun. A freezing fog was covering the numb landscape, and the rotting ruins of the wood-board cabins could hardly be seen at just about a hundred meters before me. I finally arrived at the place I had sought.

This was the North Pole workstation, opening itself up right before my very eyes. It didn't look a bit friendly or cosy.

I folded the sleeping bag into my travelling bag and blew into the dying embers of the fire. Flames appeared in a few seconds and soon the oil of a lizard's tail was sizzling on the flat stone. During my journey here I had lost all my prejudice against this kind of food. I had even already eaten fried worms, which could be gathered within two minutes, enough to fill a frying pan.

I tore in half the last loaf of bread, given to me by the shell pickers at the North-east station, and put the sizzling piece of meat in the middle.

The fog was finally lifting. Behind the dead lumbering camp, the gigantic barrier of the forest's edge was beginning to appear between snatches of disappearing fog. It was a totally different forest than I had known before. Duffy had been right. I could see from here that the bark structure was much rougher than usual. Maybe it was a totally different kind of tree altogether. There were even two trees emerging totally independently from the ground, their tops disappearing somewhere beyond the clouds.

I finished my meal and wiped my fingers on the felt-like fur of the grass. Within a few minutes, I had put my packed bag on my back and headed forward again. If anyone had met me at this moment he would have preferred to get out of my way. My forehead was hot and in my eyes there was a different gleam than before. If everything I had been thinking about for the past two months had been correct, I would be richer after this day than I would have been after working two years as a lumberer in the previous camp...

*

Air whirls lifted up the aged piles of wood dust overgrown in green clusters of grass, tearing them from the ground and chucking them against the black openings of the galleries.

I fell down to the ground and curled myself into a ball. Two huge reflectors somewhere above me shone through the whirling wood dust clouds. In the roaring of the wind and in the booming crashing of the

sawdust against the tree barrier, engines were making themselves heard really loudly and only thirty or so meters ahead of me, a supplier's personnel carrier was about to land.

They had no reason to be here.

The door beside the pilot slid open. Through the shield of last year's leaves I could positively recognise Duffy leaning out of the armoured conveyor. By gesturing with his hand, he was gradually lowering the landing machine and at the same time he was speaking over his shoulder to somebody who was still hidden behind him in the cockpit.

It was clear to me that he hadn't come all the way here just to shake my hand. I crawled out of the pile of rotten leaves like a bolt of lightning, wiped the rubbish off my clothes and dug into the leaves to find my backpack. The skis of the conveyor had just touched down when Duffy jumped out. A bag with an orange strip across it fell out of the machine after him and a guy followed with the same weapon I had seen on Daniel. He was an agent from Special Forces. No doubt he was here to get me. God only knows what Duffy had told him about Daniel's death.

I threw an armful of leaves over the hole I had made in the ground and silently stepped back into the dark.

It must have been quite a few years since anybody had been here. The trees on Viola regenerate unbelievably quickly and the gallery was nearly grown shut, at places getting so narrow that I had to take off my clothes and crawl forward on my hands and knees, knowing that the only way to get back would be by using my axe.

In the end, I had to face the inevitable. I had managed to get through the hollow center of the trunk and, after a few steps, had come to the end of it. Without a saw I couldn't get any further...

I gathered enough courage to turn on the lamp I had with me. In the dim light, I wiped the ground with my hand and put my travelling bag down. It was not even midday yet, but everything seemed to point to the conclusion that I would have to spend the night here. There was no way I could come out before dark covered the area.

*

The screeching of a laser saw echoed through the gallery, together with the calling of contented voices, when a whole block of wood broke out and fell onto the ground. For a moment I panicked. There was no place to step back into and they were quite certainly searching for me...

My blinded eyes were trying to get accustomed to the dark and I was thinking rapidly what to do next. My forehead broke into a cold sweat. I couldn't lie to myself any longer. Either the guy with the Special Forces badge on his sleeve is on Duffy's side or he's got no idea what is really happening here and what's more, he's not going to believe a word I say either way. Duffy would need just a minute alone with me to get rid of me in the blink of an eye.

I fled into the hollow in the center of the trunk. I still had a chance...

I picked up the axe and, as silently and as gently as possible, cut into the rotten layer of wood on the outer side of the hollow. A long fibrous plate of the wooden mass, eaten through by worms and the roots of carnivorous mushrooms, had come off the healthy wood without a sound, sliding into my arms. I put it carefully on the ground and then continued just beside it.

Within five minutes I had finished. I had dug a shallow grave into the wall with the sharp edge of my axe, crawled into it and then, as best as I could, I had layered the rotten wooden mass which I had previously cut off the wall over my body. I only left a peering hole so I could see them.

I had no idea how it looked, nevertheless I hoped that with this kind of disguise, nobody would pay me any attention. They would have to trod directly on my body to take any notice of me...

I felt worms on my neck and in my nose but I didn't dare to move even a bit.

The voices grew louder and closer. Duffy didn't bother to crawl through the nearly joined walls. He was slicing the walls on either side with his saw, moving aside now and then to let the person behind him illuminate the space before them in the gallery.

"There's no way the bastard could get through," I heard the voice of the stranger.

Duffy hawked, spat, and probably shook his head in disagreement with the comment. "The scent trail leads inside and not back out again. If I remember it well, this gallery is a blind one way passage..."

I cursed him inwardly and then held my breath. The cone of light penetrated the hollow in the center of the trunk and danced around the whole room.

"Have we reached the end of the gallery?" the agent accompanying Duffy asked from behind me. Most probably it was his first time in a gallery. His plan was to shoot me the moment he found me, then head for the bistro at the North-east gallery, from where he would be waving farewell to Viola the following day...

Duffy shook his head and led the way to a spot only a few steps from my buried body. He was looking for the continuation of the passage. The passage went on for only another thirty or forty meters and then it ended...

The cone of light had aloofly brushed across the pile of rotten wooden plates covering my body and penetrated the opening of the passage.

"He can't be far," Duffy hushed warningly and paused, letting the agent pass him. "It's not worth taking the risk of running into his trap. Fire through the passage and nobody will ever know that it wasn't in self-defence..."

My fear vanished and was replaced by anger. Had he been here alone I would have attacked him. But this way the only thing I could do now was to bite my lips and wait for what would happen next...

The agent didn't react and pretended not to hear Duffy's suggestion. He had crawled into the opening of the gallery from the side, illuminating the inside of the passage.

The passage turned sharply after a few steps so there was no way he could have seen inside.

"Let's go in," the agent commanded, pushing the unwilling Duffy into the passage. "I'll follow you and cover your back if necessary..."

Duffy's knees started to shake. I hoped he was scared to death. That he would shit his pants with fear. He was heading towards the opening of the gallery in such a way that it looked as if this had already happened...

I waited for them to disappear in the dark. I sat up quietly, tucked away the biggest part of my wood plate camouflage, gathered my belongings as noiselessly as I could and fled outside. The gallery had been cut through, so now escape was quite easy. Before the two of them could realise that something had happened I was out of the gallery, running away through the forest lit by the scattered rays of Gemini.

I believed they wouldn't follow me anymore that night, however, I would not be able to escape from them for good. With their scent detector they would track me down anywhere I went. At least until I change the chemical pattern of my scent...

I paused for a while and thought it over. It must be possible in some way, but I just didn't know how...

A satisfactory distance from the forest barrier I turned at a right angle towards a grass plain and didn't stop until I was few kilometers away. I made another turn, continued running for another two kilometers and finally headed again towards the forest. The sun was beginning to rise.

Far enough from Duffy's previous work place, I again touched the wrinkled bark of the tree giants. It was like pristine wilderness.

In the unbroken barrier of the trees, there was no gallery opening to be seen and only a few blackened stones spread around reminded me of the group of shell pickers that used to camp here.

I turned my eyes upward without realising it, nodding my head with satisfaction. If they were able to climb here then I could as well...

I took a good look at the wall above me and whistled softly. It should be even easier than with the trees growing around my old work place. If the tree bark doesn't crush in my hands then I could succeed.

I planned to climb as high as possible and find some quite big pocket where I could hide. Also from that height I would be able to enjoy a wonderful view of the surrounding area. In the morning I would climb further until I reached the spot where the trees reproduce. Then I would be able to crawl through the pass between the trees and reach the other side above the basins and their secrets...

*

Half hung in a noose and ropes, I cut off septa in the biggest scaly pocket I was able to find in the morning. Occasionally I glanced at the plateau behind me, but it seemed that my pursuers had overslept a little bit.

I had finally torn off the last scaly septum and begun to pour the water out of the pocket using my pan. I believed that if I managed to slip into my shelter before they came, I would be quite safe.

The bottom of the pocket was literally covered in small shells that had dried immediately. They shone redly and brightly into the sun...

When the two figures appeared at the horizon, only a small puddle remained at the bottom. I rolled into the pocket and pulled up the rope by which I had been secured from the loop only two meters under the pocket. I pushed myself into the bottom of the pocket and began to feel the water dampening my clothes to the skin. It was annoying, but there was not a thing I could do about it as they were approaching very quickly.

*

The shots from the blaster had burnt the bark and the trunk became veiled by the water steam evaporating from the water pockets. So far I had been lucky. They had had no idea I would climb up so high. Had I stayed only ten or fifteen meters lower I would have wound up being lizard food.

So far it was those lizards being burnt to death. They were leaving their shelters in dozens and were crawling up the tree like a living flood.

After half an hour the shooting died down. They could not have been sure whether they had already killed me or not.

Midday was approaching and the clouds of steam began to thin out. I crouched to the very bottom of the pocket and didn't even dare to breathe. I could imagine them quite well, searching around, waiting for anything to move. Only after a very long time I gathered the courage to lean out of the pocket and have a look around.

They were standing next to each other, looking southward. They expected some help, I was sure of that. I couldn't possibly wait any longer.

I kept observing them for a while yet and when it looked as if they had stopped watching the forest barrier I stood up, got hold of the upper fringe

of the pocket and, with the help of my legs, reached the floor above. I entered the water and looked down. Nothing. They hadn't noticed there was something happening above their heads.

*

I had not looked down for a long time now. My head had started spinning just when I had looked at the horizon searching for those Duffy had been expecting.

There was an abyss beneath me almost a hundred meters deep. I looked up guessing how many more times I would have to swing up into higher and higher water pockets until I would reach the place where the trees divide from each other. I was getting closer. Tiny trickles of water were dripping down the tree, the droplets of water splashing about on the scales of the bark and everywhere around me there were little rainbows arching from one water pocket into the next one.

A dark spot had parted from the sky in the southern direction and had been approaching fast. That was what they had been waiting for. They were going to search the water pockets from the sky to find out if I was in any of them.

I clenched my teeth and sped up my climbing. I dispelled thoughts of exhaustion and continued climbing up the trunk faster than the lizards. The motions of my body had become fully automatic. Arms up, pull up, one leg to the right, prop it against the trunk, lift myself and jump into another pocket.

The pass appeared in front of me so suddenly that I nearly dropped. Somewhere far beneath my body, the conveyor was flying around the forest wall. I could finally rest on the ground and close my eyes.

*

I hadn't rested for more than five minutes when I had to go on. Duffy was no fool and would not be satisfied with the fact that he couldn't see me at just this very moment. The possibility of crossing over to the other side must have occurred to him as well by now. I also hoped that it would have

crossed his mind that he would lose the secret of the big shells if he took some stranger with him into the hollows in the inside part of the forest...

It must have been so. The conveyor flew around for a few more minutes and then it disappeared behind the southern horizon again. It could not reach this place to let Duffy get off here at the pass, and on the other side, he wasn't young enough anymore to climb after me. I knew what he would he do. He would find a passage through to the other side and he would wait for me there...

The surface of the shelf, made of an ulcer-like build-up, lining the trunk at the point where the individual trunks parted from each other, was wrinkled and rough. The bark at this location, growing in many overlying layers piled up upon each other, cracked and broke apart under my feet. Sometimes there was a real danger that I would get stuck in one of the many gaps of the bark.

The giant massifs of newly generated trunks of the family of trees rose steeply to the sky on both sides. The place was dark and pallid shimmering mould had covered the soggy wooden massifs, which had never been touched by the rays of Viola's sun. A deep scar ran through the middle of the pass uncovering the healthy, deeply orange-coloured wood. The further into the pass, the wider was the passage.

The bark covered in the slime and excrements of the carmine shells had been slipping under my feet and a few times I had to continue crawling on all fours. After a while I had to take the lamp out of my bag.

A ray of light broke through the darkness in the pass and reflected from the surface of the lake, which filled the valley in the pass and covered the scar produced from the trees having divided into individual trunks. The lake spread itself among the vertical slimy walls across which only a madman would attempt to traverse.

The thirty meters of the black surface didn't look at all appealing to me, but there was nothing else I could do. For crossing to the other bank with dry feet I would have needed wings...

I shrugged, not showing any fear, quite contrary to what I had been feeling inside when I was sliding into the water on my bottom. I had

expected that I would have to swim, however, I had reached the bottom of the lake before the water splashed under my chin. I headed forward tiptoeing carefully. I parted the water with my arms in front of me in a desperate effort to keep balanced and for some irrational reason I kept walking right in the middle of the lake. It was as if I had known there was some unexplainable danger in the pools on the sides of the lake.

Something touched my foot and I felt pins and needles in it. I sped up. I could feel myself crushing the shells at the bottom under my feet. Some of them must have been quite big, maybe slightly larger than my big toe.

Something touched me again. I was overtaken by panic. I jumped, a bit startled, tripping over the bottom, which was now rising slightly to the shore, and, for a moment, I sank under the surface of the lake. Remarkably warmer underwater streams gushing out of the bottom touched my hands. My skin started to itch immediately. I emerged from the water, wiped my eyes clear and dived into the water again. Now I knew where and what to search for. The streams were producing the same light as the mould and they were not gushing out of the tree trunk. It was not sap as I had thought earlier – it reminded me more of big gobs of spit, and the shells wine and dined the aliens with their gobs of spit in their world.

Poison, the idea crossed my mind. I tried to swim forward as fast as I could and finished the last few meters at a record speed. The bottom was rising in front of me reminding me of stairs. I crawled up to the dry land on all fours and dropped to the ground, dead tired. A few more streams shining in phosphorescent colour gushed above the surface of the lake.

My limbs began to stiffen. I imagined lizards biting off pieces of meat from my legs and hands as soon as I was to become paralysed totally and I felt sick at the thought.

I finally came to know the secret of Daniel's death and also of all the others from the woodcutting group from the North Pole station, but it was no use to me now at all. I watched the sky resignedly, blinking my eyes resignedly and, just before my eyelids closed and I lost consciousness I had cursed every little shell that had ever been on Viola...

*

I woke up around midnight. A freezing wind was blowing through the pass with a howling sound and the lake was being covered over with a tiny layer of ice.

An absolute darkness was surrounding the place. Somewhere close by I could hear the twittering of a tree lizard.

I grinned silently in my mind. Too soon, boy!

I tried to move my hand. It had nearly fallen asleep and I could feel waves of heat and coldness going through my whole arm from my fingers up to my shoulder. Despite all these uncomfortable feelings, my arm obeyed the message my mind sent to it. I laid on my back, shivering from the freezing cold and waiting without a breath for the feeling of life to enter my limbs again. Happy to the point of tears, I kept moving my toes and towards the morning, when the sun was beginning to rise, I turned onto my belly and got up on all fours. The paralysis had left as quickly as it had come.

I felt very weird. I had survived something that had killed many people before. I couldn't believe I could be immune against something I had never come across in my life. The small shells I had seen up to now obviously couldn't have produced any poison, otherwise no shell picker would have survived on Viola. So Daniel died because of a big one, the one I had myself seen in his hands...

The image startled me. I had been holding it in my hand against my bare skin, so I must have been given the full dose of poison! Obviously all the other guys had picked up the shells the moment they had seen them and had drawn them closer to their eyes...

I knew I was right. In my case the poison had been diluted in the lake water and that had saved my life...

I stopped thinking about it and stretched my arms. I was starving, but there was no time to start a fire now. I chewed up the last piece of hardened bread I had. The guy that had sold it to me must have talked about me somewhere. Duffy had not gone looking for me until now, he had obviously thought that I had ended up like Daniel. It hadn't crossed his mind to search for me here in the North before.

I climbed carefully down to the lakeshore. The shells were tempting me. Who knows, maybe I could find some more of them like this down there again.

A whole bunch of this Violian jewellery had covered the bottom of the lake and had been touching the surface. The lake was shining with carmine lights and the water, where the new day had melted the ice, was tossing about in the freezing wind.

Near me a lizard had crawled out of the darkness. It didn't take any notice of me as if I had always been standing there. It huddled down and turned its back to the lake and then it slowly started to crawl backwards into the water.

The idea of kicking it into the lake had entered my mind, but I pushed it away and got a grip of myself very quickly and only a sour grin remained. Even if the shells had used all their poison on that lizard I would still have no certainty that the shell I would pick up would have used up all her killing liquid.

The lizard seemed to know what it was doing. It moved backwards a few more steps, raised its tail and hit the ground with its tail quite hard. The wood rumbled. Several of the shells closed themselves with a silent slurping sound. The pale light of the poisonous gobs of spit was not visible anywhere.

Another thump, another stamping. The beast waited for a while and, continuing to tap the bark beneath it, slowly dipped into the lake. It dived into the water and swam quickly through the piles of shells close to the lake bank and with its sharp teeth bit into its first victim.

I shook my head in disbelief. This was the same exact thing Daniel had told me before he died. "You have to prepare them for your arrival, then they will let you kill them..." Never it would have occurred to me that he had meant the shells...

I walked around the little creek where the lizard was having its feast and approached the lake surface at another place. I banged with my axe a few times on the smoothed piece of wood rising from the water and in complete astonishment watched the shells that were closing themselves one after another.

Hesitating only a while I entered the lake up to my knees pulling, the hem of my shirt over my hand and broke the first shell of a little pile of shells. The shell seemed to accept it without protest.

My head felt suddenly dizzy and I wanted to cry out in excitement. It felt like all of Viola was bowing in front of me, ready to be at my service...

*

The valleys among the trees were not deep, lost abysses, they had created a great maze of canyons, lakes and rotting swamps. The walls of the forest maze were more fantastic and complicated than they would have been had they been created by some kind of volcanic madness. With every step I took, I came across some chimney totally hidden from anybody's chance glance from underneath.

I had traversed over *the pass* to the nearest place where I could climb down from without a rope and began stepping down. Descending on the rope would have been quicker, but hanging on it I would have been too easy to spot.

I propped myself against the trunk with my arms, closing an angle of 30 degrees between me and the trunk, bent my knees and swung down a half a meter lower. After the paralysing experience I'd had, I still felt a little bit weak, but there was enough time. Anyway, until the evening there was nothing else I could do. I continued coming down, trying to think of a plan. I wasn't sure whether Duffy knew about the poisonous character of the shells or not, but I had better count on the possibility that he might know...

It was growing dark when I finally jumped down onto a soft pillow of grass. My limbs were shaking because of the exhaustion I had experienced climbing down, and my shoulders were rubbed raw by the bag straps had been hurting like hell from the first few meters of my climb down. I had to get some rest as soon as possible.

Even though I hadn't seen Duffy or the other one from above at all, I had to presume that they had been around somewhere. Patience was the key to victory. If they had hidden in any of the openings of the galleries that were blackening somewhere two hundred meters from me, they were bound

to see me as soon as I stepped out into an open space. Only when the darkness had grown thicker would I be able to proceed further into the inland.

Suddenly the valley exploded in light.

The ray of a laser blaster had cut through the darkness and burnt a hole into the wood that was two meters from me. That couldn't have been a coincidence. They must have seen me.

I had to escape before it was too late. If they followed me, there would be no chance of me defending myself against them. Nobody wins with an axe or a knife against a blaster.

I disappeared into the darkness. The night was approaching very quickly now. I hoped that they would leave off chasing me until the following morning. I continued side-stepping for a few meters, being careful to the utmost. The soil underneath was swinging uncomfortably and my head began to hurt like hell from the never-ending chirping of the lizards. And last but not least of all, I was expecting another attack from that fellow of Duffy at any moment now.

After half an hour of careful tiptoeing, I leaned on a tree trunk and closed my eyes for a moment. I was not sleeping, only resting, as I could not take the chance of falling into a deep sleep, because it would have been too dangerous. Had I fallen asleep and missed the dawn I might never have awakened again...

*

Fortunately I hadn't overslept. As soon as the darkness had been softened by light, I was on my way again. The forest here was much thinner than in the south, providing much better lit environment.

Every word my chasers had exchanged among themselves had been echoed a dozen times in the giant wooden massifs. The echo of each breath and each swearword they had shouted out was audible every time the soil slumped beneath their feet.

After an hour of desperate marching, during which I hadn't dared to stop for a rest, the valley had begun to grow narrow.

It was certain that the maze would have to end somewhere, but just now it wasn't exactly what I needed. I squeezed through bushes raised from seeds and stopped. The maze was not ending here. The valley had narrowed into a funnel-shaped gulch, completely flooded with water. Bushes blossoming with shells as big as the palm of my hand had grown in nearly the whole gulch, touching the surface of the water. This was the place I had wanted to find from the beginning. Alone, not with the two of them trailing me...

I turned around and made sure they were nowhere in sight, and hung myself at the edge of the lowest-placed water pocket. I knew from experience that the scaly bed in the bottom part of the trunk is rotten through and is easy to break off.

I wasn't disappointed. In only a short while, a whole pile of scales had grown at my feet. Immediately I cut down one of the trees raised from seeds, laid it across the water's surface and disguised it with the scales broken off from the water pocket. The trap was now ready.

I looked around quickly to see if Duffy and his companion had watched my preparations and, with a sigh of relief, disappeared among the two-meter-high baby trees of the tree giants. After twenty meters I bent down, silent, too terrified to even exhale.

They were coming now. Neither slowly nor quickly they continued approaching the gulch. They knew for sure that I had to be somewhere around with no chance to escape. With sadistic smiles they passed my hiding place and, exactly according to the bleeping sound of the smell identifier, headed towards the trap.

The Special Forces agent had been leading the pair of them. That was good luck for me. Duffy noticed the unnaturally placed scales of bark immediately and had stopped. However, he had forgotten to stop his partner.

The agent stepped onto the scales and immediately sank into the water. The poisonous gobs of spit of the surprised shells had covered him before he had entirely sunk. He was screaming in terror, feeling the coldness of his limbs, which were stiffening in unnatural positions.

Duffy had just had enough time to jump back in order to avoid the killing streams of poison and then he raised his head. "That was very good, son," he shouted towards the gulch. He presumed that I had continued walking ahead. I smiled to myself in satisfaction. That was exactly what I needed.

This veteran of the North Pole station had waited until the excitement of the shells had passed, then stamped a few times on the bank. Then he waited a while and stamped again. The shells closed to indicate they wouldn't attack anyone anymore.

The dying agent whispered something through the water and vanished into the depths of the water.

I stood up and, knees bent, tried to get closer to the water.

Duffy had so far stepped down to the bottom and had been crossing the gulch, sunk up to his chest.

"Duffy!"

He froze and turned around.

"Have you got a weapon, Duffy?"

"You know that I haven't," he replied hesitatingly.

"Yes, I know that indeed," I nodded. "I had to hand mine in at the orbital station just like you did. Neither of us can use his then, can we?" I smiled broadly and nodded my head towards the dead body among the shells. "It has been coded and is of no use to us."

"What do you want?" he barked, annoyed.

"I want to get you," I murmured through my teeth. "I know that you have a knife. Me too, and, what's more, I also have an axe. The hunter will be hunted now, Duffy!" I spread my legs apart a bit and threw my arms into the air theatrically. "And this is going to be our hunting ground!"

Without another word I left him to disappear into the space behind the gulch. I prepared some food and then I made a long sharp spear from the trunk of a young tree.

*

It has been two days now. I am proceeding further and further into the depths of the Violian valleys. Nobody would have ever thought that such a land even existed...

The soil swings under my feet, I cross little lakes and at night I fry lizard's tails in the fire. I am really used to the taste of them now. Duffy doesn't make a fire. He is too afraid.

I walk through a hundred thousand credits in the form of shiny piles of carmine shells and I haven't the eyes for them.

Duffy is somewhere ahead of me. I can hear his stamping every time he wants to cross over a lake. He warns the shells that he is coming...

I keep following him and the distance between us is getting shorter every day.

I see him in my mind, sweating in fear and turning to look over his shoulder all the time. Checking.

It is not going to be much longer now. One day he will have run to the nearest water, scared to death. He will turn around to check if I am following him and before he starts crossing the water, he will forget to stamp...

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About the author

Jaroslav Mostecký (* 1963) is an award-winning science fiction and fantasy writer, who had debuted as a short fiction author in 1989 (and as a playwright in 1986). He won the Karel Čapek Prize literary contest several times. His first novel, *Jdi a přines hlavu krále* (*Come and Bring The King's Head*) was first published in 1995 and became the first part of *The Wolf Age* historical fantasy trilogy about the Vikings. The trilogy met with a large success. He published nine more novels and two short fiction collections. He won the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror award for the best short story four times and once for the best book, and he'd received many

nominations. "Axes on Viola" is one of the award-winning stories. He also received the Best Fantasy, Aeronautilus and Ikaros awards several times, and he was awarded by the European fandom's Encouragement Award in 1995. He's always been very active in the Czech fandom, organizing events, moderating panels and ceremonies, and being a member of several SF clubs.

War Games
by Jan Kotouč
translated by Tomáš Lorman

Marco

Relax, just relax. It's like your first day at work.

Marco Nester was trying to show no sign of his anxiety and look natural, but he simply couldn't cut it.

He passed his final exams at the academy a few months ago, graduated as the second best in his class two weeks ago and the academy commandant, General Chandler, congratulated him in person.

Now, as a raw lieutenant of the Pax Civitas City Defence Corps, he was supposed to take up his first position as the combat terminal officer at the Northern Command. There will be hundreds and later on thousands of soldiers under his command, not to mention the combat vehicles. Moreover, the academy commandant himself recommended him for the Northern Command because he trusted him. Marco simply wanted to put his best foot forward and he did not intend to fail.

For the last time, he straightened his uniform using the reflection in the window of the transport cabin. (He had been polishing the silver buttons frantically that very morning.) He passed his hand over his tightly trimmed black hair and stood at the black door of the cabin.

The cabin, traversing the city on a magnetic rail, entered a huge building with a Pax Civitas crest placed prominently above the track. It pulled up and Marco turned his professional face on while the door opened.

There was a rather good-looking woman with kind eyes waiting on the platform.

"Lieutenant Nester?" she asked and gave him a salute.

"Yes, Lieutenant Marco Nester, reporting for duty at the Northern Command of the Pax Civitas Defence Corps," Marco said and gave a salute in return as he glanced at the shoulder boards on the woman's shoulders. "And you are, Sergeant?"

"Eve Mesmer, Sir, your new operator at the combat terminal. Welcome to the Northern Command."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"Please, follow me, Sir. General Roskov would like to welcome you in person."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Marco repeated and he felt the anxiety rising yet again.

Two hours later, Marco was following Eve towards the computer terminal designated to his unit. It was much larger than the ones they used to have at the academy. There was a huge screen covering nearly the whole wall, and Marco could scale any section in the strategic field up and down, monitor his units and give them orders. Combat terminal officers were in great demand in the Defence Corps. Needless to say, the Corps was comprised of a lot of IT technicians, without whom the whole army couldn't move, as well as programmers, operators, logisticians, surgeons who operated the devices for creating new soldiers, and many other important functions. However, combat terminal officers represented the hand which was ordained by the rest of the Defence Corps to wield the sword to defend Pax Civitas – the largest city in the world, which was in dire need of defence. It represented a shining center of civilization, which was spreading continuously and offered its prosperity to the surrounding cities. But it had many enemies as well. There were hostile cities in the vicinity, led by groups of savages who wanted nothing but chaos. People like Marco Nester were assigned to prevent these creatures from taking control over the city.

"May I display the strategic interface, Sir?" Eve asked when both of them had sat down at their consoles. Marco nodded.

A segment of the city appeared on screen. It was a newly built section, where defensive positions were still being formed. This section joined Pax Civitas only a few months ago and it was a weak spot on the northern border of the megalopolis, under ceaseless attacks from the savages. Marco honestly didn't understand why the savages had such a great hate of Pax Civitas. Of course, no city was ever perfect, but the unemployment relief system was without parallel; the unemployed simply had the opportunity to

serve for the good of all, and every one could become a citizen with hard work.

Just look at the conduct of the war. The savages were but mere primitives who would use anything for fighting, be it old sub-machine guns or knives. Such crude armaments. The soldiers of Pax Civitas had the best weapons and equipment, as well as nearly perfect coordination thanks to combat implants in each soldier, which were connected to the central operating system. This was operated by people like Marco.

"Captain Hefner was originally in charge of this segment of defence, Sir," Eve said and marked the line of unfinished defence towers protecting the heavy machinery which was building the infrastructure and spreading the city behind the boundaries. "The command of this group is up to you now. A fresh batch of soldiers from the barracks will soon join your units to replace the ones lost in the last attack. It is vital to finish the defence perimeter as soon as possible."

"Yes, Sergeant. General Roskov emphasized that to me," Marco said as he remembered his conversation with the legendary general who had been in charge of the Northern Command for twelve years and under whose leadership the city had grown another eight hundred kilometers north.

He was a living legend and it made Marco nervous.

At the moment, however, Marco was sitting at the monitor; he could see all his units below and all the nervousness subsided. This was his job and he knew how to do it.

"Let's get going, Sergeant." He tapped the first unit on his monitor twice with his finger and got to work.

Victor

Victor Cole was regaining consciousness slowly, as if he were waking up after a long sleep after an especially eventful night. Soon he became alert, though he could not make out where he was. He was lying on his back, in dim light, in a room which he didn't recognize. Then he realized he couldn't move. This frightened him.

He could blink but nothing more. He tried closing his eyes for a moment but they opened by themselves, as if they had their own will. The rest of his body didn't respond to his impulses at all; even his mouth wouldn't open or close.

Panic knifed through him.

What's happening to me? How did I get here? How did I...

Suddenly, he remembered – that chase with the recruiting officers on the edge of the city. The mainframe had branded Anna and him “persons whose income has fallen under the minimal wage” and “who are incapable of supporting themselves or the city” and therefore “the city must take care of them for the good of all.” All of those were such articulate sentences. The city will take care of you if you happen to find yourself in financial distress. They knew, though, what was awaiting them – the city decided that numerous people were struggling with their financial situation whenever it needed more soldiers for the campaigns.

So they fled. In the end, Victor turned around to stand up to the two recruiters and allowed Anna to escape. It all came back to him; how he screamed at her in despair that she had to run away and not look back when the first officer hit him with his charged baton. He was falling to the ground and could see two other recruiters pursuing Anna. She couldn't have shaken them off; she was a small girl with subclinical asthma. There was no hope she would manage to outrun the two roughnecks.

Now Victor was lying on his back and couldn't move. He would often hear similar stories, so he made out what was probably going on. He had been connected to the mainframe.

Suddenly he heard a man's voice. He was searching for its source when he realized the voice was right there, inside his head.

“Hello, welcome to the Pax Civitas Defence Corps. Congratulations on your decision to take up a new career.”

Decision? Victor had no idea the rulers of Pax Civitas had such a sense of irony.

The voice carried on in the tone of a keen scrap seller.

“There must be a lot of questions on your mind right now. Don’t worry; all of them will be answered while you are employed with the Defence Corps. First of all, you should know that your body is now operated by the mainframe, the most advanced control system mankind ever devised. It carefully looks after hundreds of thousands of people as happy as you!

“There are several implants placed in your body. The most essential one is undoubtedly the implant placed in your *cerebellum* – or little brain – which connects all motor functions to the central operating system. It is the implant Motoric 3.0, the newest version of this famous implant. Absolutely safe. The older versions would burn a soldier’s brain when a short circuit occurred. What a dangerous waste. However, Motoric 3.0 has been successfully used for eight years and in the very improbable case of a short circuit, nothing will happen to your brain. Should such an event occur, please seek immediate assistance of the technical staff so that they can link you up again.

“Another useful implant worth mentioning is Endurance 4.0. Not every one of you has been trained and not everyone has high physical stamina. For these purposes, we use the implant Endurance 4.0, which inserts adrenalin into your body in case you run out of breath or have problems with your stamina.

“In addition to that, there is also the implant Boost 3.0, which will attentively dose your body with stimulants for better performance in tense situations.”

Victor would normally have been dazzled by the wealth of information; but not even that was allowed by the mainframe anymore, though.

“And now we have to run some simple tests to determine whether all the connections are working as they should. Let’s start with some simple movements of striated muscles.”

Victor suddenly sat up; his body turned and swung his legs over the edge of an ordinary hospital bed in a small, windowless room. Otherwise, there were only a few appliances and four bare walls in the room.

He spread and waved his arms, moved his fingers as if he were playing an invisible guitar, and turned his head in all directions. After that he lost

track of all the movements which the upper part of his body performed without his having instructed them to. Then he jumped down from the bed and the system started testing the lower part of his body, including squats, jumping and hopping on one foot.

Victor had no idea how long this bizarre game took, but eventually it was over and the Scrap Seller was back again.

"And now it is necessary to test certain functions of the smooth muscles. Your breathing and heart rate perform impeccably, but we still have to test some secondary functions requiring contraction and relaxation of muscles."

Something suddenly loosened in Victor's loins and he wet himself on the cold floor.

John

"Captain, Doctor Gorkov is here."

"Let him come in," John Sartos answered and stood up when the watch brought in a graying man with a patch on his left eye. John held his beefy hand out to him and invited him to sit down on one of the chairs which originally used to function as seats (before John's men tore them out of the car).

Doctor Gorkov refused to sit down, though, and just rested his hand on a wooden table where a map of the area was spread out. John's men would half-jokingly nickname this table "operational headquarters" because John always took it with him from place to place when he moved his resistance group. He was worried that there might come a time when he would lose it in a gunfight with those human cyberzombies from Pax Civitas, but he was hoping that event would never happen.

"Have you read my proposal, Doctor?"

"Yes, I have."

"And your conclusion?"

Doctor Gorkov paused for a while in thought before he decided to answer. His voice, however, was calm and steady. "It is possible."

John nodded slowly. "Thank you, Doctor. So we can launch the operation."

"Are you aware of the fact that we cannot anticipate what exactly will happen? There are too many things that might go wrong. Your superiors..."

"I have already persuaded my superiors. My group has the highest ratio of successful operations of all of our units, not to mention a high percentage of former soldiers." John dabbed the front side of his cap with the logo of the 10th Mountain Regiment of the Hanover Republic Army. Most of his men had originally come from this army until New Hanover had fallen victim to the expansion of Pax Civitas five years ago. Since then they had represented just one of the many guerilla groups fighting against the expansionist city here, in the north. Most governments of the local cities had broken down ages ago, but various resistance groups, which Paxians called "savages", formed something of an informal coalition. John had now succeeded in persuading most of the groups to cooperate with him on this plan.

Doctor Gorkov was frowning. "You know that should we fail, the whole of the north will fall and Pax Civitas will expand all the way to the sea."

"Yes, but Pax has been expanding bit by bit for the last twenty years. The way we have been fighting up until now might just slow them down, but it will never stop them." John tapped on the map with his hand. "This is a game of all-or-nothing. It is better than fighting like before and losing."

He took a deep breath and called to the soldier by the entrance of the tent: "Kyle, bring me the commanders of the platoons. Operation Teflon shall commence."

Victor

Victor's body was holding a powered screwdriver and he was assembling a defence tower along with some other soldiers. (Victor actually didn't know what to call people in a similar condition to his.) Victor knew nothing about such technology; he didn't even know what the instruments were. That didn't matter, though, because the system which was controlling

him could handle the instruments skilfully and it guided his hands. Victor felt like a passenger in his own body.

Still, he could feel the fatigue of his body, the pain in his muscles from the unfamiliar movements and the numbness in his feet from the ceaseless walking. Whenever the fatigue exceeded a certain level, the Scrap Seller in his head enthusiastically announced to him that his body was being injected with more steroids and adrenalin.

He would also explain to him that during the meals, the soldiers have the possibility of speaking and chewing using their own strength, which he explained as a responsible approach to the human need of social interaction.

It worked quite fine; in his condition, a regular meal was something he could look forward to. His hands would still feed him themselves, but he could speak and chew at his own will – unless he refused to eat; the system would take control over him then.

He was scared of the condition of the other soldiers. Some had already been like this for several years and something seemed to have died somewhere deep within them. These soldiers had reconciled themselves to their fate a long time ago and they lived vegetatively. However, most were still capable of conversation.

He never saw Anna in the dining room. He wondered what had happened to her. She might have been assigned to another unit, but Victor was afraid there could be something else behind her absence. Anna's slight figure wasn't good for hard manual labour. He had heard that not all conscripts go to the army. Allegedly, there were even some special brothels for the big shots of Pax Civitas where the whole staff was comprised of girls with implants in their heads. The implant then forced them to do *exactly* what the client wanted. Any resistance was eliminated in advance. Victor dreaded the notion of Anna having ended up like that.

He wanted to scream, but the implant didn't let him.

"This is the last tower and then a well-deserved rest is awaiting you after a day full of hard work for Pax Civitas. Thank you!" the Scrap Seller told him in his head.

Marco

"The defence line is almost finished, Sir," Eve said and Marco was smiling. After a few days as the combat terminal officer, he was growing accustomed to it.

"Is this your defence line, Lieutenant?"

Marco turned and immediately jumped to his feet when he noticed who was standing behind him. "Sir, yes, Sir."

"At ease. Work is more important than formalities in the command center," General Roskov said. Then he picked up a light pointer and indicated several spots on the map. "That line is too far from the edge of the city."

"I assumed the defence line had better be held farther from the city, Sir."

General smiled. "That is indeed true; however, trust the more experienced, Lieutenant. The savages know how to bypass our lines to inflict damage on the edge of the city. We need our towers in such an emplacement that they can be fired from into the city itself, if need be. We may hit several buildings of ours, but it is still better than letting the savages roam free."

"Yes, Sir," Marco said, a little embarrassed. He had wanted to make an impression, but it seemed that he had spent the whole afternoon building towers in the wrong place.

Roskov smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Easy. I used to make these elementary mistakes myself. And you are certainly not going to make the same mistake again, are you, boy?"

"No, Sir."

"That's what I like; get on with it, then. If you set the system to automatic, you can still leave work on time and the system will work for you."

"Yes, Sir."

General left and Marco turned to face Eve, who was wearing the expression of a fellow-sufferer.

"Let's get to work," he said and tapped his finger on the symbol of the first tower and ordered the soldiers to disassemble.

Victor

"Well, unfortunately, we have more work to do, no time to relax now," the Scrap Seller said in Victor's head the very moment his group of soldiers had just covered the last panel on the tower. "We have to dismantle these towers and redeploy them two kilometers to the south-west."

Victor would have cursed, had he been able to speak. He was thus only watching his body dismantling the panels on the towers and his muscles were beginning to protest in pain.

"Don't you worry about anything, the implant Endurance 4.0 is here for you with another dose of adrenaline!"

John

With his binoculars, John was watching the guards walking along the perimeter. There were plenty of advantages in fighting these people with implants. The system which controlled them was totally predictable. A soldier with an implant always followed the same route, looked in the same directions all the time and moved at the same pace. It was simple.

He gave a signal with his hand and seven different snipers took a shot.

Seven guards fell noiselessly to the ground.

"Now."

Forty-two soldiers from John's unit ran over the open ground between the buildings. The fortification in this section of the city had not yet been finished – the disadvantage of sustained expansion.

Seven of John's men removed the bodies. That was the worst part of the job; they never caught sight of their real enemies. They were only killing people enslaved by the city. Sometimes, one of the "savage" soldiers even happened to kill a person they had once known. Everyone kept telling themselves that in killing the soldiers with implants, they ended their suffering; but it was hard.

One of the soldiers – Owen – came up to him and brought a tiny man with thick glasses with him.

"This is him. He was waiting where he had promised."

John nodded and sized up his new informant.

If the tiny man was scared, he gave no sign of it. "My name is..."

"No names. Security systems?"

"Offline, but there's a twelve-member patrol about two blocks from here."

"Berkenstein, take your platoon and take care of it." John sized up the informer. "Should this be a trap..."

"It's not. They conscripted my cousin two months ago. He was just a few points below what the city calls minimum income. I want this to be over."

John was sizing up the informant a while longer and then he nodded. Many collaborators in the city had a story like that. Betrayal is like gravity – just a little nudge will do.

And if all of this was a trap... Well, only a part of John's unit ran the risk.

"Where is the bunker?"

"This way," the informant pointed and went ahead. John followed him with another ten soldiers. He had studied the map of the city, so he knew that the informant was leading him to the right place.

They came to a massive door and John took a paper with several numbers out of his pocket. There was a panel with a num pad shining next to the door. John entered the combination and pressed the ENTER key. To his delight a green light lit up on the panel and the massive door swung open.

"So that bigwig was telling the truth, after all," he said with a smile while his men were carefully entering the bunker.

"What bigwig?"

"One that was wandering too close to the edge of the city."

"And how did you make him tell you the code to the bunker?"

"The hard way."

Victor

The wail of the siren awakened Victor. Even before he became wide awake, his body had already responded, got up and started getting dressed.

"Alarm, alarm!" a voice which was this time as far from the Scrap Seller as Victor could imagine shouted in his head. "Full-scale emergency! All units to their posts immediately and get ready for tactical commands!"

Victor's body finished getting dressed, grabbed a rifle and ran out of the barracks.

Marco

"What's going on?" Marco asked when he reached his terminal.

"General alarm all over the Northern Command," Eve said while rubbing her sleepy eyes. She must have come in just a few moments before he did. They were both on emergency service, but that was rather a formality. Nobody had been expecting a general alarm. However, they probably should have been expecting it.

Marco sat down and established a connection with his units, who were just running out of the barracks, when Eve spoke again.

"General Roskov is online; I'll put him on the main screen."

There was a moment of silence and then the tactical map on the big screen was replaced by the face of the Northern Command CO.

"Has the connection been established? Good. I know you're still in training, Lieutenant, but there is no time for that now." He pressed a button outside the camera's field of view and a sector of the map appeared in the corner. It was a part of the northern border of the city, about three kilometers to the west of Marco's soldiers.

"The savages have intruded into the city. There are gunfights reported in several peripheral streets, but that is not our biggest problem. The savages have broken and entered into storage inside bunker AA-726. They have appropriated six – I repeat six – nuclear warheads. Each one has a calibre of seven megatons. They are now rushing them away in six stolen trucks towards the north-east."

A shiver ran down Marco's spine. He knew the savages outside the borders of the city were madmen, but to steal nuclear warheads... That was terrifying. The image of their somehow succeeding in launching a missile into the city made his stomach churn. It would kill millions of people...

"Captain Morelli is going to try to slow them down using his sky force, but many heliports on the edge of the city have been sabotaged during the gunfights. There are several APC transporters at your disposal. Herd your people into them, cut those trucks off and get the stolen warheads back. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Marco responded almost mechanically.

"Good luck!"

John

John smiled when one of his men in the bed of the truck shot down a helicopter which had been pursuing them. The mighty machine dropped to the ground and exploded on impact. He could not see any other helicopters anywhere, but that didn't solve anything. There was a group of fast APCs gaining on them.

"This is Samba Tango," John said his calling sign into the radio. "Split up, split up, split up!"

Each one of the six trucks headed in a different direction.

Victor

The APC pulled over. Victor's body stood up and together with the others jumped out of the vehicle. The machine gun on the roof of the APC was firing somewhere.

"Now comes the real fight," the Scrap Seller announced with enthusiasm. "In combat situations, when your life is at stake, adrenaline will be produced by your own body, so there's going to be no need to use implant Endurance 4.0."

There was a firefight outside. One of the trucks was standing about fifty meters from the APC. It was immobilized by the gunfire from the APC a while ago and now there were savages jumping out of it. Victor felt the twinge of envy at first. Their movements were so natural, so human. Victor and his fellow soldiers took cover, made use of the terrain, but there was something strictly mathematical behind it. Inhuman.

Then his body rammed the butt of the rifle into his shoulder and Victor's eyes started aiming. His finger pressed the trigger and the assault rifle was firing.

The number of the Pax Civitas soldiers was far superior. Many savages fell, but they defended themselves vigorously. Several soldiers close to Victor dropped to the ground. He was wondering whether he should be glad it hadn't been him or whether he should envy them.

Two jeeps full of savages, who were trying to help their comrades, soon joined the crashed truck. The Pax Civitas soldiers kept firing ceaselessly. Another APC joined them and a heavy machine gun on the roof opened fire.

Victor suddenly felt a sharp pain in his right arm, the force of the blow knocked him backwards and he fell on his back. His arms still held the rifle in a death grip, though.

"Oh but this is unpleasant, you've been injured!" the "scrapyard" voice exclaimed. "But don't you worry, adrenaline – and I mean *lots* of adrenaline – is being injected, as well as painkillers from the implant Boost 3.0. You thought it only produced steroids, didn't you? Not at all, its receptacles also contain painkillers and they will now ease the pain. All of that because Pax Civitas appreciates your service and your sacrifice!"

While the voice went on talking, the grip of Victor's fingers on the rifle was weakening until the fingers let go of it completely. There was one savage sneaking around. Victor didn't know how he had got so close, but most of the soldiers from his APC were lying somewhere killed or wounded. One of those jeeps had a heavy machine gun and the mainframe moved the soldiers straight into its line of fire.

One of the savages was now passing the nearby lying Victor; he had a gun and was looking around, frenzied. Did he want to check if there was no other soldier around? Victor almost hoped to get noticed and put down. He would be at peace.

The mainframe had other plans with him, though. Victor was still lying on his back, the rifle was just loose on his belly and his injured right arm still touched the grip lightly. But then, his *left* hand was stretching out over his belly towards the holster.

Poor man, I must look dead enough. He has just no idea the computer can make me move even though I am pretty roughed up.

When the savage was about three meters from him, Victor suddenly lifted his head; his left arm grasped the gun and shot three times.

The savage was dead.

Sorry, I'd rather it would have been me.

"An excellent shot even in such extremely difficult conditions!" the Scrap Seller praised him. "Hold on, medical assistance is already on the way. You will be restored to full health and able to get back into action in a few days. It's just a minor injury!"

Cheers.

All the savages in the vicinity had been disposed of. Some were fleeing into the barren, but the soldiers from the other APC shot them down quickly. Others were bringing a massive object from the truck. Victor couldn't tell what it was and he didn't really care. He was just a pawn in this war. Literally.

Two soldiers with medic markings rushed over to him – remote controlled zombies as well – and began treating his wound. Victor couldn't care less about anything at that moment.

He now understood how a soldier turned into a vegetative state in a few years.

Marco

"I've lost too many soldiers in the first wave," Marco said. "It'll take time before more arrive."

"But we accomplished the main task, Sir. The truck has been stopped, as well as the other two," Eve said.

Marco nodded. When the convoy split up and each of the six trucks headed elsewhere, Marco had to improvise and sent his soldiers to pursue the three nearest trucks. Captain Morelli was trying to cut off the other three with the air force and there were more units of Lieutenant Black's on the way.

"How are the others?"

Eve shook her head. "Morelli took down another truck, but the remaining two got out of range and we're not going to stop them. The savages now have two nuclear warheads at their disposal."

Marco didn't know what to say. He shuddered to think what the enemies could do with those. These weapons were stored in Pax Civitas just in case of a real emergency. They belonged in the hands of civilized people who knew how to use them – and how not to use them. He didn't even dare think about what the savages had in mind with them.

"Any messages from General Roskov?"

"No. I think he is now talking to his superiors. This is going to have far-reaching consequences, Lieutenant."

Marco nodded. "Yes. But when we're finished, the savages will wish they had never been born."

John

When John Sartos returned to his "operational headquarters", there was a portable computer waiting for him with General Leuen frowning on screen – one of the highest commanders of the resistance groups in the north.

"I haven't been told anything specific, only a lot of sketchy information. Sartos, what the hell happened?"

"The mission has been successful."

"You've supposedly had sixty percent losses!"

"The mission has been successful," John repeated in a tired voice. "And don't you tell me about losses, I'm well aware of them. All of them were my boys and girls and they knew what they were going into! All of us had agreed with it because we knew what the success might mean. We only have two nukes instead of six, but that's enough."

"This whole affair of yours was risky since the very beginning!"

John sized up the image of General Leuen. This man was never known for his ingenuity or courage. He had got to his position only because he was an experienced organiser and a decent strategist. He might even have had a better notion of the so-called *big picture* than John. There was one important

thing he didn't understand, though; for victory, you need to risk. "Yes, General. It was a risky task, but we'd discussed all the details in advance. If you want to back down now and persuade the other groups to leave us in this by ourselves, you may as well do so."

Leuen shook his head. "No, now that we're involved in this, we will follow it through. Besides, we cannot pull back, not even if we wanted to. Satellite images have shown that the whole Northern Command of Pax Civitas is mobilising. The first units are heading from the city directly towards you. Soon, half of their army will be on your tail."

"We know. Will you get here in time?"

"Yes. The question is, how much we can afford to deploy?"

"Everything including our last reserves. This is a fight for all or nothing, General!"

"That's easily said, but should we fail – and it is very likely – somebody has to be here to fight another day."

This must be the "big picture".

"I understand what you mean, but at this very moment we need every hand, General. On the other hand, I realize that the city satellites monitor the whole area. The enemy might consider it weird if we leave no reserves. I will leave this up to your consideration."

"How nice of you. Don't worry, you will get reinforcements from us as soon as possible and the other group commanders will send their units, too. You won't be in there alone."

The connection broke off. John looked at Owen. "Where are the bombs?"

"With Doctor Gorkov."

"Tell him to get them ready. Then start placing the men. Don't forget we have to mark out safe zones for them. They cannot approach the bombs. I don't want to lose half the resistance army because of their running into the blast site by mistake."

"Clear, Captain."

Marco

General Roskov's face on the monitor had a sombre expression. The big screen in front of Marco's seat covered the image of the general only partially, the rest showed the faces of two dozen other combat terminal officers. Their faces looked similar to the general's – and Marco's as well.

"I'll be brief. As you all know, last night a group of savages intruded into the city and stole six nuclear warheads, each one with the strength of seven megatons. The heroic intervention by Lieutenant Marco Nester and Captain Alexander Morelli stopped four trucks with the stolen bombs, but two managed to escape. Our satellites have detected radioactive signatures from two places approximately two hundred kilometers from the borders of the city."

Roskov reached outside his screen and a map of the area north of the city appeared on a part of the screen. "It's quite a wasteland, but units of all the savage groups from the north are heading there. The intelligence service estimates those to be twelve thousand armed men and others are still coming to the area. They also possess some vehicles and a limited amount of aircraft."

"What are they trying to do?" one of the commanders, Major Kennedy, inquired.

"The savages are presumed to have somehow acquired rockets; they intend to mount the nuclear warheads on them and fire them into the city. Presumably, they are now constructing launching pads and are trying to cut us off."

"General, can they actually succeed?" Marco asked. "The city has an anti-missile defence umbrella and..."

"It may be sabotaged, just as they sabotaged some of our aircraft during the theft of the warheads. There are still many pro-savage sympathizers in the city; those will be dealt with later. The Northern Command must intervene against the savages with everything we can use. This is the objective for all of you now. You have already sent your units into the field and I have recalled most of the reserves Northern Command has at its disposal. We haven't formed a comparable army in five years. We control

over seventy-five thousand soldiers. To top them all, two thousand tanks, five thousand armed transporters, a thousand aircraft, and fifteen hundred helicopters, not to mention all the trucks. We have to act swiftly and destroy the savages.”

“What if it is all a trap and they only want to draw us out? They may be planning to set off the nuclear bomb on the ground when our soldiers are in the vicinity...” Captain Morelli remarked.

“This threat is real, but not even the savages will be crazy enough to sacrifice twelve thousand of their own men. In addition, satellite images show that they are deploying their people in a safe distance from the potential explosion site. That’s where we meet them. If the savages started retreating, you may pursue them as far as it is reasonable. I do not intend to sacrifice the whole army, but losses up to twenty percent, possibly even thirty, are acceptable. It is vital to defuse the bombs. However, until we defeat the enemy units, we will be sending only small reconnaissance units towards them. The rest will remain in safe distance until I order otherwise. Is it clear?”

A chorus of approval responded.

“The main formation will strike tomorrow afternoon. I want the air strikes to commence tonight. Each one of you has aircraft under your command. Deploy them immediately and keep destroying all of the military targets. When you run out of those, continue with the bombing. Their soldiers are not as stable as ours. They lack the support of the mainframe. Constant air strikes will impact their morale; their resolve will weaken when it is time for the major attack. This is the most critical situation in the last six years. The nuclear warheads are a threat to the city. Including your families in it.”

The general was right. Marco remembered his parents – especially his mother – in the center of Pax Civitas. She hadn’t wanted him to join the Defence Corps; she believed Marco would realize his potential better in the private sector, building the infrastructure in the ever-expanding parts of the city. Now, though, it came clear to him why had joined the Army. These warheads were a threat to everyone, even to his own mother. Should the

savages manage to launch them somehow and hit the city, the center of the civilization would be severely damaged. The blast wave caused by a warhead of seven megatons would wipe out an area with a five-kilometer diameter and the thermal wave would hit the area within twenty-six kilometers. He didn't dare think about how many people would be killed in the center of Pax Civitas.

The savages had to be stopped.

Victor

"Congratulations, the diagnostic programme Doc 7.0 has assessed your condition and you are fit for combat. You can now return to your service for the city. If you should feel a slight pain in your arm during the next few days, it won't last long. Your diagnostic implant Reincarnator 2.0 will reliably track physical pain within twenty minutes and will apply painkillers."

Victor's body got out of bed in a mobile field hospital – a giant armoured colossus which was meant to heal patients without losing sight of the army.

He was again given a uniform, equipment and an assault rifle and then, without further ado, his body joined another ten soldiers who had only just recovered themselves and had been waiting at the hatch. The colossus pulled up for a moment, unloaded them and pulled away again. Victor and his current companions marched behind the transporter together with thousands of other soldiers around.

"A major offensive is being prepared where the very existence of the whole Pax Civitas city is at stake." The Scrap Seller had expanded his business into briefings. "The savages have stolen nuclear warheads. If they have enough time to fire them into the city, the consequences will be immeasurable. Don't forget that your families live there, too!"

Victor remembered Anna. If she really was somewhere in the city with an implant in her head, forcing her to fuck the various big shots day and night, perhaps it might be better if a nuke dropped on her head and incinerated them all.

He violently chased those thoughts away. His body was probably in for a long march and it seemed there was no APC or truck left for him. In this very moment he envied those who drove the APCs, or those huge tanks, or flew the planes that screamed above their heads. The march will be deadening.

“In order to make your march pass more swiftly and to make you feel fresh, in the right rhythm and in combat spirit, we offer some music. Let’s start with a classic from the time before the world civilizations fell to pieces. This was then a popular song with one combat unit on the American continent!”

Victor marched on behind the tanks and transporters and a rumbling piece of music started playing in his head, which was soon joined in by a male choir.

„From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli; we fight our country’s battles; in the air, on land, and sea... “

John

They were taking cover in the ruins of the city when the first bombers flew over them.

John Sartos would have been grateful if he had had at least another few hours to prepare. Most of the promised units were already at their positions, but eight hundred fighters from the Highlander unit were only arriving. They were solitary warriors rather than soldiers, but John was grateful for each individual who would join them, and couldn’t afford to pick too much.

In the open space, John’s men offered an easy target to the bombers, but they had a stroke of luck anyway – whatever controlled the pilots of the big machines, it seemed to prefer saturation bombing. Half-ton bombs would have even hit John, had his headquarters not been hidden in the sewers beneath the ruins.

Many vehicles had to be left in the streets and each overflight of the bombers, together with the gunfire, kept destroying the vehicles quickly. Luckily, other groups brought anti-aircraft missiles and even some of their own interceptors and helicopters with them. So far, they managed to defend

themselves and even shot a few aircraft down. That made John happy. The more enemy aircraft were brought down in the first wave – the more they smashed the Paxan's face – the faster and more angrily the infantry and ground vehicles would get there.

But for now there was the bombing and they all had to weather it.

Marco

Marco tapped on the display with his finger, contacted all the remaining bombers and ordered them to return to base for reloading and refitting. General Roskov assigned seventy-two bombers to him. Only forty survived the first blitz. He had not expected such losses. He knew the factories in Pax Civitas kept producing new machines and there were plenty of aircrew around, but he was sure not to be commended for such waste. Like that time when he lost so many soldiers in the APCs. He pulled it off, but...

He shook his head. This was such an important operation that he couldn't dwell on such trivial matters. He heard the main group was going to reach enemy lines the next day. The real battle was yet to begin.

The savages were not going to surrender easily. Intelligence had confirmed that the group was led by John Sartos, an ex-member of the Hanover Republic Army before Pax Civitas city absorbed it. Since then, Sartos had represented one of the most dangerous leaders of the savages. He was just one man, but Marco knew he couldn't underestimate him. There is nothing more dangerous than a wounded animal.

Victor

After some time, Victor stopped thinking about his sore feet. It may have been because of the implant which kept pumping adrenaline and steroids into him. The army took a short rest an hour ago and then all the infantry picked up the pace. Victor assumed the leaders hadn't really wanted to let the troops rest, but to have enough time to muster as many units as possible.

They set out towards the positions of the savages.

There were a lot of them and they had built fortifications on the borders of the abandoned city. They had deployed everything they had against the soldiers of Pax Civitas: trenches, old military bunkers and covered spots for anti-aircraft rocketeers. It seemed nothing had been left in reserve – and Victor was now in the middle of it all.

Chaos.

The gunfire around him was growing stronger; grenades, rockets and cannon shots were flying in both directions. One APC close to Victor went up in the air after having been hit by an anti-tank grenade and exploded. He was thinking whether or not he would be lucky enough to die in this battle.

“Don’t forget,” the Scrap Seller reminded him. “Adrenaline is always there, ready for you. Don’t be scared to fight for Pax Civitas!”

John

“They’ve breached our line in two places!”

John turned around to see who had said it. His men would always identify themselves in comm traffic. He looked at the display of his computer and saw General Leuen’s face.

“General, I had no idea you would come in person!”

“Nobody will call me a coward. I am about five kilometers to the west of your position. Enemy tanks and APCs have penetrated our defences in two places.”

“It looks similar around here. But we hold, and will hold for a long time. We have to.”

“I know, keep at it.” There was more and more noise in Leuen’s image. John thought for a moment that the disturbance was on the general’s side, but then he realized it was his own.

Owen darted over to John’s desk.

“We have to get out of here. Those bastards are throwing grenades into the sewers!”

John calmly snapped the computer shut, threw it into his shoulder bag and grabbed a rifle. He had been expecting this. “They’re this close already?”

"Yeah, the first tank is just one street ahead! And lots of infantry around it."

"Let's go, then!"

Marco

"The idea with the sewers was good, Lieutenant," Eve said. "Lots of savages are now crawling up to the surface."

Marco smiled. "The rats are coming out of their holes."

Victor

Victor opened fire. The savages fell, one after another, but many kept running.

Grenades started falling around Victor, but he was too unlucky to get hit by any of them.

John

Owen let out a single strangling scream and fell dead to the ground. John jumped towards the entrance to a half-demolished building, reached out to a body lying on the ground belonging to another soldier – Svengaard – and took her rocket launcher.

There was a tank approaching through a narrow alley; its turret and machine gun were turned in the opposite direction and were shooting at another group of soldiers who were running out of the sewer a little further away.

John positioned the rocket launcher over his shoulder, aimed and fired.

The turret of the tank exploded and the huge colossus came to a halt.

John smiled triumphantly. He was sure he had blocked the other tanks entry; there was not going to be anything else coming down that alley.

Marco

"Lieutenant, General Roskov transmitting."

"Another tactical conference? We're in the middle of a battle."

"No, this is only for you."

Marco blinked in surprise, but quickly sent four surviving helicopters to reload and waited until Eve tuned in the connection. The general appeared on screen.

"Lieutenant, purging those sewers was an excellent idea."

Marco suppressed a boyish smile. "Thank you, Sir." General was certainly not calling him because of that, though. The battle had been raging for hours now. Units of every combat terminal officer had got stuck fighting with the positions of the savages. There was no time for chit-chat.

General Roskov was indeed not calling just to say "good job".

"The snake has crept out to the surface, Lieutenant. One of the savages that fled the sewers has been identified as John Sartos himself. He didn't die in the gunfire. Now he is about two hundred meters further down the road from your tanks, from the third platoon of company C."

Marco checked the data immediately. It was around the corner by that blocked up tank. Getting heavy vehicles over there would take some time. Another convoy of tanks from the second platoon was just taking an alternate route. How to respond?

"I can send an air strike right away, or we attack with a platoon of tanks within half an hour," he announced to his commander at last.

"Neither, Lieutenant. Send in the infantry. I want Sartos alive if possible; even at the cost of higher losses on our side. He knows what the savages are planning to do with the warheads. We need to find that out. I repeat: I want Sartos alive even at the cost of high losses on our side."

"Yes, Sir!"

"Do it!"

Victor

"Now's the time for another speedy advance and dodging the bullets. Oh, if only I were able to be there with you."

Victor had no idea who had designed the Scrap Seller's electronic brain, but his lines were getting sillier by the hour. However, he had no time to think now. His body responded, ran out of cover, dodged between the

enemy shots together with dozens of other soldiers, and headed through the alleys of the derelict city.

Victor didn't know where his body was dragging him. It was clear, though, that the commander at the combat terminal was in a great hurry.

John

"Everyone to the windows and open fire. Infantry is rushing in."

John jumped over to an old desk and set up his computer on it. He had left his favourite table in the sewers. In the end, he had indeed lost it, which filled him with a strange grief.

"What's the situation in other areas?"

"Enemy units are breaching through our lines along the whole length, Captain," another of his soldiers, Sergeant Müller said.

One soldier at the window fell to the ground. Several bullets pierced the opposite wall.

John took a breath. "I think it's the time." He pressed several keys on the computer. "Doctor Gorkov, are you ready?"

"I'm always ready."

"Commence Exodus, I repeat, commence Exodus."

"Yes, it will be within a few minutes at the latest, we have to send a signal."

"We will possibly hold another few minutes," John said, but he was not sure himself. The gunfire outside was growing stronger and then a grenade flew in through the window.

"Take cover!"

There was no explosion, only a blinding white light. A flash grenade.

John's eyes were burning and he could only see a white splotch. He tried to stand up but suddenly he heard a clatter of footsteps. Then he felt a blow in his belly and tumbled down.

They were Pax Civitas soldiers. They had reached his place and they probably wanted him alive.

"Freeze!" one of them screamed in a distant voice. He must have only been passing on his commander's order.

Victor

"Nobody moves, or we will open fire," Victor heard himself. He didn't know who was talking through him, probably his operator. He didn't really care.

"We will never surrender!" somebody shouted. "They would only make us into one of you!" One of the savages charged towards them, but the soldier on Victor's right almost immediately hit him with a burst from the assault rifle. Other savages stepped out towards them, but a firm voice made them stop.

"Nobody moves. Obey them. We're not capable of achieving anything here!"

"But Captain, if we're caught, we'll end up like them, cyberzombies..."

"I gave you an order, Müller!"

The remaining savages broke off and then began putting down their weapons. The man who spoke stood up with his hands above his head and was looking at Victor.

Marco

"That is John Sartos, he has been reliably identified."

Marco smiled. Another success. In just a little while the rest of the savage resistance will be crushed completely.

"Tell them to ask him why they stole the nukes and what they intend to do with them."

Eve pressed some buttons and took the microphone.

John

"Why have you stolen the nukes?" the soldier standing in front of John asked in a distant voice. "What do you intend to do with them?"

"What a timely question; I'll try and give you a timely answer," John said.

The soldier was silent. Whoever controlled him, he must have been taken aback.

"I repeat, what do you intend to do with them? Speak, or you will be taken for interrogation."

"Just do it," John challenged them. Then the earth shook and he smiled.

Marco

"Nuclear detonation, one of those bombs has exploded!" Eve shouted.

Marco was watching the monitor, dismayed. He didn't understand it. He couldn't believe the savages would have actually set it off. And another question – why like that? The bomb exploded quite harmlessly, far from all the soldiers of Pax Civitas. Neither the blast nor the heat wave would reach the battlefield.

Why did the savages do it?

John

John kept smiling. In just a few minutes he would know whether his risky plan had worked out. The objective of the whole resistance was to lure as many Pax Civitas soldiers as possible into this battle. That came off.

Pax Civitas commanders simply weren't able to realize all abilities of an atomic bomb; either they were too inward-looking, or they considered their enemies to be too primitive. Anyway, they hadn't thought of all the consequences. John had never been interested in a blast or a heat wave.

His target was the electromagnetic pulse which is caused by the explosion of the nuclear bomb, and which would reach much further than the blast.

The pulse which would short-circuit all the electronics in the impact zone; including electric appliances, computers, aircraft...

And implants Motoric 3.0, which – as the Pax Civitas representatives keenly claimed – were completely safe and whose short-circuit would never damage the brain of the host.

The computer on the desk went blank. A second later the Pax Civitas soldiers started dropping their weapons. Some were twitching, others were clutching at their heads, most of them eventually ended up on their knees or down on their stomachs. One could hear the first groans.

Victor

Victor was holding both his temples and moaning. He thought his head would break into pieces. He hadn't experienced a migraine like that in years.

Then he suddenly froze. He was holding his hands on his head. *He* was holding the hands there, not the mainframe. And he screamed. He could move his mouth, too.

He moved one arm and stretched his fingers. The movement seemed weird; he hadn't done it at his own will for a very long time. He could hear similar noises from the other soldiers. Even they were now able to move as they wished. The Scrap Seller had fallen silent. Victor was free!

He raised his head and could see the leader of the savages watching him. Several of his men were ostentatiously aiming their rifles at Victor and his fellows. "Don't shoot... please," he gasped out.

"Don't worry," the leader of the savages said. The very one that they were supposed to catch. The Scrap Seller called him John Sartos. "We won't shoot."

"How... how did it...?"

"It's the nuclear explosion. That's why we stole the bombs."

Victor didn't understand it. "Have you destroyed the city? And the mainframe with it?"

"No, we set the bomb off not far from here. It was not supposed to harm the city or us. The electromagnetic pulse has destroyed the implants that were controlling you."

Victor passed his hands over his face. He couldn't get used to having his own will after so many weeks. And the ones that had spent years in that condition would find getting used to it even more difficult.

It was not going to be too complicated for them, as it seemed. As Victor's grandmother would say: "One quickly gets used to the better."

He rested his eyes on the rifle, which he had dropped and which was now lying at his feet. He was free and Anna was probably still somewhere in the city. In some cybernetic brothel.

He looked at the leader of the savages. Actually, at his liberator. "What... what will happen now?"

"That's up to you. You're free now. You can decide for yourselves."

Victor grabbed the rifle. He would have to pull himself together, have a few days to compose himself. But he also knew he wanted to save Anna or at least find out what had happened to her. He also wanted to get even with the fuckers that had made cyberzombies out of them. He didn't need a break to find that out.

He looked at John once more and could tell from his expression that he knew exactly what Victor was thinking about. He had been counting on it. He had also been manipulating Victor and the others. But there was manipulation, and manipulation. Putting this on the same level with how Pax Civitas treated Victor never crossed his mind. "I want to recover... And then I want to knock off the fuckers that did this to me."

John smiled. "I think most of you will have the same goal. They're not going to do this to anyone else ever again."

Marco

There was dead silence at the combat terminal.

The big display flickered with the image of General Roskov and dozens of his commanders. All the other screens in the room were either blank, or flashing with the words ERROR and CONNECTION LOST.

"It's been confirmed, Sir," Eve said quietly. "We've lost connection with all our units. *All of them!* The other officers have, too."

"It was an EMP pulse," General Roskov announced to all the officers. "We never assumed they could use it like that." He showed a satellite image on the monitor. There was anarchy among the soldiers that were no longer controlled by the mainframe. Some were shooting into the air, tearing off the uniforms. Some were just sitting on the ground. They must have still been coming around. None of them was fighting the savages, though. There were a few shootings, but probably just from force of habit. Some of the Defence Corps soldiers were talking to the savages and probably even laughing – the satellite image was not crystal clear. Marco couldn't understand how they could fraternize with them. Of course, not everyone approved of the way

Pax Civitas took care of the unemployed – but were the savages offering them any alternative? No!

“There were seventy-five thousand soldiers in the area,” Captain Morelli said. “Mechanical rifles are still in working order. There were some electronics in the vehicles; we could repair it if we could reach them. But we won’t...”

Lieutenant Black opened her mouth. “Does this mean we have just lost seventy-five thousand soldiers? More than eighty percent of the Northern Command garrison?”

Roskov shook his head. “No, it means something much worse than that: the savages have just *recruited* about seventy-five thousand soldiers.”

A shiver ran down Marco’s spine when he noticed something on the face of the seasoned general; something that he would never have expected.

Fear.

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Winning Is Not Everything

by Jaroslav Veis

translated by Dominik Jún

“Look up!” he tried to shout, but his chest was so tight that he couldn’t even take a breath. But he knew that he had to shout.

He also knew that if he looked down from the skyscraper, even for a second, he wouldn’t last. His world would become dizzy. The crazy jumble of lines and sharp colored smudges pierced into his mind like a sharp needle.

He only had to keep climbing upwards to the edge of the flat roof, onto which he only needed to tilt over – and he would be safe.

Suddenly, the fingers of his right hand became weak, as if someone squeezed on the artery that carried the strength into it. He wasn’t allowed to let go – that would be cowardice.

He stepped up onto an unexpected bump in the smooth building with the point of his right shoe. His eyes wavered, and at that moment he knew that it was all over. His mind had given up, and so had his body.

Slowly, as if he were being prodded by an invisible pole, he began to fall back.

He flew down towards the black surface under the mirrored wall.

Of course, he knew that he only had to wake up before he died. The ground grew nearer. At last he managed to move his arm and his body suddenly filled with strength. The horror of the fall had stirred him. He was awake.

The nightmare was over.

For a while, he simply stared into the darkness. Then the distant sound of footsteps came. His door burst open. It was Majka, his psychologist.

“What’s going on, Peter? You were shouting in your sleep. And it was so loud that I could hear it from my bed.”

“I was shouting?” he said confusedly. “And there I thought that I hadn’t even fallen asleep... I dreamt that I was falling off this skyscraper, and that I knew I was going to die. I woke up, maybe a meter before I hit the ground.”

She moved over and stroked his head. "You'll never fall. You're the best climber in the world, Peter."

*

"How do you feel now that you have fulfilled your life-long dream, Mr. President?" asked Svetlana Neumann, a sprightly journalist with silver contact lenses over her eyes. The president was the host of the breakfast program Good Morning Czechia.

Alan Usak comfortably spread out his one hundred and five kilogram body in the ergonomically modeled studio chair. But his was a rather firm and shapely one hundred and five kilos – no blubber allowed. "It's a good feeling, my dear. But just to correct you: for me it wasn't a dream. It was a goal that I decided to fulfill. And I fulfill everything I decide to do."

The woman looked into the camera and rather robotically began to read from the autocue.

"Back in 2005, there was a citizens committee, headed by the Canadian-Czech lobbyist Otto Jelinek, that decided to press for the idea of an Olympic games held in Prague. Twice Prague failed to be selected. It seemed that the Olympics would remain an unfulfilled dream. Then the preparation committee was taken over by the head of the Sazka-Best Bet betting company Alan Usak. He had just finished the project of building Europe's biggest ever entertainment park known as the Winning City built next to Prague's Sazka-Best Bet Arena sports stadium. It was a complex worthy of Las Vegas, Moscow or Shanghai. Usak's negotiating skills, along with his reputation as a good manager, had a profound effect on the members of the Olympics selection committee, and Prague was promptly awarded the 2028 Olympics."

The interviewer again turned to the president and asked: "If you could be at the starting blocks, what sport would you choose?"

"You know," replied the president, "I like all sports. But I like the adrenaline sports the most. I'm happy that we are doing so well in them. Our rankings are going up and this is helping to attract new sponsors. Without the adrenaline sports, it wouldn't be half as good. Today, we want everything to be a toil, a real bloody effort, my dear." The man corrected himself. "I

apologize for addressing you this way on camera, but I'm just an old man," Usak pulled a grin. "Besides, it returns the Olympics to their former role. Back in the old days, it was a death affair, believe me!"

The presenter tried her best to maintain a strict demeanor, and quickly turned to a gentleman to the other side of her. "Jiri, can you give us the history of these so-called adrenaline sports?"

The head of the sports section at TV Czech nodded. "Of course, Svetlana. President Usak essentially became the motor that transformed the Olympics into their current 21st century form. Soon after being elected as head of the international Olympic Committee, he began to replace the old veteran sports with new adrenaline-based disciplines. The first thing he introduced was gladiator sports, such as caged wrestling... then there were the super-bikes and battle gliding. Thanks to him, national teams were also abolished and instead, players represented various multinational corporations. All of this helped bring in much needed new sponsorship money."

The presenter turned back to Usak, who was glowing from all the praise: "You appear to be an extremely busy man, Mr. President. What events do you intend not to miss, despite your busy schedule?"

"I'll definitely attend the opening ceremony. I wrote the script for that one, so I want to be at the premiere. And I certainly want to be at the Spiderman contest."

The presenter turned back to her colleague: "Perhaps, Jiri, you could explain this contest to the viewers."

"Certainly," he replied obligingly. "Spiderman is a kind of slang term given to the sport of climbing high-rise buildings. One of the oldest forms of street sport has, however, changed considerably from its original form. Back then, climbers would scale tall buildings and then be promptly escorted away by waiting police. Back then, the most famous of these sportsmen, the Frenchman Alain Robert, already had the nickname Spiderman."

Jiri enthusiastically continued: "Another new sport in the Prague Olympics will be a parallel climbing competition, a kind of adaptation of the Spiderman idea. Competitors will climb the outside glass facade of the new

Sazka-Best Bet Super Dome stadium, which has been set up to provide a level 9 difficulty climb. They say that a level 10 can only be climbed by a spider, or the real Spiderman. But no one has managed to acquire him yet! Ha ha, eh, Mr. President?"

"Who says so?" countenanced Mr Usak. "Peter Parukas has spent years training in Prague, and he is now number one in team Gazprom. Just between us, there are rumors that Pfizer are making advances to acquire him. He is only fifteen, but he climbs faster than most climbers aged eighteen."

"Well, thanks for the tip, Mr. President," said the presenter. "I'm sure we'll all be making our bets, won't we?"

The lights on the cameras went out, and the television screens were filled with the logo of the Sazka-Best Bet company, accompanied by their official hymn "We Shall Overcome". This was soon followed by a block of advertisements. Usak promptly rose from his chair and turned towards the presenter: "I'll send you an invitation to see Spiderman in action, my dear. You must definitely come. Afterwards, we can celebrate our victory with a glass of wine! You must certainly make a bet as well."

The presenter smiled, with just a hint of flirtation. "Thanks for the invitation, but I'm not sure if I'll be..."

Usak interrupted before she could finish. "Of course you will. How did founder of modern Olympic Games Baron de Coubertin put it: 'The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part.' So you can take part... in our Skybox, my dear."

*

Young Peter's trainer, Bohumil "Bob" Syka, sat down along with the Pfizer scout Julius Hermann in the twelfth row of the empty terraces outside the front of the Sazka-Best Bet Super Dome. He always sat there whenever young Peter was training.

The design of the building was particularly unique and well suited to this new adrenaline sport. Its tall steel and glass structure enabled three thousand different varieties of climb – from level 1 to 9.

Peter Parukas was right at the tip of the building. Another swing and he would go over onto the roof, and a grueling level 6 climb would be behind him. In the end, he disappeared over the edge so fast, it was as if he hadn't just climbed a hundred and twenty meters at all.

"Super, Peter! Come down and we'll try it once more. I'll just show you the top end of the climb, to make it more rhythmical. You have to do it freely, and time it with your breathing," said Bob Syka. He turned off the microphone and turned towards the dark-haired man sitting next to him. "That boy is the biggest talent the world has seen for a decade."

"Will he be free after the Olympics, Bob?" asked Mr Hermann.

"Of course. The Gazprom board has already signed the papers. There's nothing in the way of him starting with us from this autumn."

"Where did you find him?"

"In a children's home, in Chisinau, Moldova. His alcoholic mum dumped him there. It's a classic case – when she was young, she had to sell a kidney and an eye to make the ends meet. Of course, she squandered the money. The first time I saw the boy, it was clear that he would make a great climber. He had a light frame and short arms and legs. It's as if the boy's father had been a chimpanzee. I took him straight away, without even testing him. All he needed was to learn some technique. He just keeps getting better, and more daring. Climbing is just as much about the mind as it is the body, Mr Hermann. You know that as well as I. And Peter has nerves of steel."

Back then, he had to bribe ten Moldavian officials, before he could take the three year old Peter out of the country. In Prague, he lived with another boy and Syka's wife Majka, in Temelin, where he would spend several hours a day training on the old nuclear power station cooling towers. He spent almost as long training his mind, and Majka was a top class psychotherapist. Syka was sure that the money he had invested in the boy would be returned to him tenfold.

"How many seasons do you think it will take for him to be in form?"

"Well, he's fifteen now. Three years is the European legal guarantee, and I'll personally guarantee you another two."

Peter Parukas appeared at the base of the tower under the slalom wall.

"Coach, are we to do it again?" cried a voice into the trainer's earphones.

Syka typed in a new set of numbers and the climbing wall changed its form.

"Go!" he shouted as he activated a device monitoring a series of muscle and other bodily reactions.

The boy began to climb again. With jerky, yet confident moves he scaled the wall. Even from afar, it was clearly visible that he possessed great strength in his arms. During night-time events, the handles of the wall would light up, and create an astounding sight, whilst the wall itself was bathed with orange reflectors, the official patented color of Gazprom.

The climber approached the newly altered high face of the wall. Peter's rhythm began to change. Something was wrong.

"You're perfect, Peter," said Syka into the microphone. "Leave it and we'll call it a day." Then he turned to Hermann, reassuringly. "That's some form, eh?"

"Don't overburden him, Bob. We want to buy him as an Olympic champion."

Hermann had hit Syka's sore spot. Three years ago, at the European championships in Helsinki, a young female climber of his went to pieces three steps from the end. She froze with cramps and the medics had to take her off the wall. She re-emerged on the scene the following season, but never returned to her former form.

If there was one thing that the sport did not tolerate, it was this. If a climber fell and died, it was considered a part of the whole thing. The levels of genuine risk were what contributed to the adrenaline, and many viewers watched, waiting for the chance that they may see a fall (naturally the climbers had no ropes or safety nets), preferably a dramatic one right before the end. But a climber who had to be taken down was considered a loser and a failure.

Back then, Gazprom considered that it would terminate its contract with Syka. But in the end it was Usak who came to his rescue. Syka never found out just how many shares in Gazprom Usak had, but based on his

influence, Syka assumed it must be a lot. Instead of a fee, Usak got a fifty percent stake in Syka's training camp.

"We really don't have to fear that, Mr. Hermann. Today we have an entirely different strategy. All or nothing. There's simply no way that anyone in our team can end up hanging on the wall. No way, not us."

They stood up from their chairs and moved towards the parking lot. Down by Hermann's electro-Ranger, carefully decorated with fake mud by the designer Louis Vuitton, they both said their goodbyes.

Syka then raced back to the monitor. He replayed the last third of the climb. There was something unusual in Peter's moves. He replayed the nerve responses and the EGG before picking up the phone. "Peter, let's have a control CT scan."

The diagnosis came back in two hours. Vertigo, caused by problems with nerve impulses through the autonomic ganglia and into the centers of balance in the brain, apparently the infectious kind. The infection could be halted by the drug Celebritid, in time for the Olympics in five days' time. But there were two small problems. First, the drug contained chemicals banned by the Olympic Anti-Doping Commission. The other was that it was made by the rival Pfizer Company.

Together, this turned a banal infection into a very serious problem. Such a problem could only be fixed with the help of President Usak. Syka tried calling him, and after numerous attempts, finally managed to get five minutes with him. Four of the minutes were taken up explaining the problem, the next ten seconds were filled with silence. Then, Usak responded. "I'm not going against Pfizer. You'll have to get out of this one on your own, Bob."

Syka pushed the starter of his old hybrid Lexus 450h, sure of one thing. This was a conversation that he would have to keep to himself. Either Peter would be successful, or everyone would pay the price.

*

Svetlana Neumann had finally decided that she would go to the Sky box for the finals of the facade climbing competition. *Don't you know what the most important thing is for a journalist? To be in the right place at the right time.*

Do you realize how many people would kill to have such an invitation? she told herself on the way there.

Usak greeted her with a glass. "This isn't champagne, my dear. I only drink a vitamin mix now. But for you of course, it is Moet&Chandon... if you like." He turned and pointed his glass towards a dark haired man sitting nearby. "Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Hermann. He works for Pfizer."

She allowed her hand to be gently pressed by the gentleman, and proceeded to have a vitamin drink.

The three of them sat down in the leather chairs at the rear of the Sky box, with their backs to the Super Dome. Beneath them, the outside stands were noisy and full. The climbing wall in front of them was still empty, and so the plasma screen broadcast a new advertisement thriller by Jo Nesbo for the company Vodaphone. Down below, under the wall, the unexpected finalist Jens Ku was warming up. The son of a Norwegian and a Vietnamese woman, he would be climbing in the colors of Royal Dutch Shell.

"Did you bet on young Peter Parukas, Ms. Neumann?" asked Hermann.

She shook her head. "I don't bet."

"So what exactly interests you about sport?" smiled Usak. "If you don't even make a bet."

"Just sport. The race, and the people racing. It's worth watching, when somebody has talent. When someone reaches the heights of success. Besides, I had all this at home since childhood."

Usak turned to Mr. Hermann. "Ms. Neumann comes from a famous sports family. Her mother once won a medal at the Olympics for the Czech Republic, back when it was a competition involving nations." The president turned back to Ms. Neumann. "Didn't your mother ski or something? I think she's in the hotel business now, isn't she?"

The television presenter was slightly shocked that he did not remember her mother more clearly. Usak noticed that something did not sit right with her and with a not quite apologetic voice added: "You know, those disciplines were never really popular with gamblers. That was always my

business, you see. And even if you could win some money there, it was really just peanuts.”

“But there was something to be said for those days too,” said Mr. Hermann, politely.

“But there’s also something to be said for profit,” added Usak. “There always was. It’s just that in the old times we would hide it behind waffle about the Olympic spirit and all that nonsense.”

“My mother was always most concerned about winning – about medals. And if she thought about money, then it was only because without it the whole thing would be impossible,” said Svetlana defiantly.

“While all those around her were always just concerned with money, my dear. Remember that ideals are the greatest source of profit. A well sold ideal is almost as profitable as a newly-built factory. But let us not spoil our afternoon by arguing. If I were you, I wouldn’t bet on Peter Parukas.”

“Why?”

Hermann added his voice to the discussion. “Mr. Usak knows full-well that the loss of the clear favorite is advantageous to him. There’s a lot riding on this, you know.”

“The most money is made by the person who takes the risk and bets against the favorite,” interrupted Usak. “Today, would bet on a gold medal for Jens Ku.” He turned to the display. “We’re giving him odds of six and a half to one. And the Dutch at Bet and Win are giving him eight. What if you bet a million Euro with them?”

Ms. Neumann smiled assuredly. “Firstly, I don’t have a million Euro. And secondly, I don’t bet.”

“You know what? I’m gonna bet a million for you. If Jens Ku gets the gold, the victory is yours. If it’s Parukas, then its my problem. Do you accept?”

She sipped from her glass of vitamin drink knowing full-well that he was sucking her blood with his narcissistic arrogance, and that he was simply trying to let it be known that he was successful, rich and powerful. “I’ll take it. But only because I want Parukas to win. And you to lose.”

Hermann smiled as if she had deliberately amused him. "You have courage, Ms. Neumann. In this country very few people would say what you have just said to Mr. Usak."

"Perhaps it is your youth," said Usak. "But you are learning. I have already quoted Coubertin to you. But remember a quote of me: *It is not enough that I win, but everyone else must lose.* And now excuse me, I must go and arrange this bet. I'll put it in your name."

"OK," she said over her shoulder as she turned and went to the front of the Sky box. Deep down below, the other finalist, Gazprom player Peter Parukas, was also hard at work warming up.

*

It happened at the twenty-fifth ledge. He was ahead by at least three lengths, when suddenly his right shoulder began to ache. His lungs seized up and he became unable to breathe. Where had Peter had this feeling before? He closed his eyes mid-move and came to a complete standstill. The crowd was instantly silenced.

"Go! Go!" His trainer began screaming into his ear-piece. "Come on!"

He tried to readjust his body and move his left leg onto one of the narrow steel protrusions. But his leg simply slipped off.

Suddenly, young Peter had the strange sense that he was watching himself from the outside. He saw his body, and saw it slowly falling away from the wall. He saw his right hand making one last futile attempt to grab the grip on the wall. For a second, his middle finger made contact, but in a flash, he saw himself let go and begin to fall.

Intuitively, he thrust himself towards the wall. But this had the effect of swinging him towards his opponent. Jens tried to move out of the way, but in vain. In the end, Peter's shoe banged into his leg.

Jens peeled off the wall with remarkable ease. For a moment, his scream exceeded that of the entire mass of viewers. This was no dream.

Svetlana turned around. She paled and her eyes filled with tears. Down below, on the black ground, the ambulances stood next to the two corpses. The body in the orange kit was already covered. The other climber was still being attended to.

The giant plasma screen ran endless replays of the moment when Peter Parukas tore Jens Ku off the wall.

Ms. Neumann moved to the rear of the Sky box.

"You should have pulled him from the contest. Bob!" screamed Usak into his phone. "What the hell is that monitor for? Now we're all screwed just because you're a stupid moron! Do you know how much this has cost us all?"

He threw the phone onto the seat. "I always knew Parukas was in for a tumble. But not that they would both fall. Did you ever anticipate that, Hermann?"

Neumann watched the two men, dazed by what she was witnessing. Then she suddenly realized that this was no coincidence. "You knew something beforehand!"

"Someone always knows more than everybody else," said Usak. "That's what the market is based on." His gaze fixed on her and hardened. "By the way, should you ever get the idea to make some kind of a story out of this, you're gonna first have to explain how you got that million you bet on Jens Ku. I can, on the other hand, assure you that only the three of us know about this agreement."

"You mean you're not the least bit concerned about the fates of those boys? One of them was barely fifteen, and the other was only two years older!"

"Of course! They were in their prime!"

She took a deep breath, prepared to say something, but instead sank into her chair. Usak approached her and put his hand on her shoulder. She flinched away as if she had been touched by the hand of death.

"I will tell you something else, my dear. For people like you, survival is far greater a priority than victory. Remember that."

From outside, the first sounds of the Olympic theme tune began to sound. A melodic voice then took over. "Ladies and gentleman, due to the 'dead' result of the climbing final, the third place contender has been declared the winner..."

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About the author

Jaroslav Veis (* 1946) is a Czech journalist, translator from English and writer. Educated at Charles University, Prague, Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. He's the author of several SF story collections: *Experiment pro třetí planetu* (*Experiment for the Third Planet*, 1976), *Pandořina skříňka* (*Pandora's Box*, 1979), *Moře času* (*The Sea of Time*, 1986), *Den na Kallistó* (*A Day at Kallisto*, 1989), and *Evropou obchází strašidlo* (*A Spectre Is Haunting Europe*, 2009). He's also written, edited and co-authored several books of essays and collected columns: *Čím drží svět pohromadě* (*How the World Holds Together*, editor & co-author, 1990), *Týden po týdně* (*Week by Week*, with Jiří Hanák and Michal Růžička, 1997), and *Obrázky z československých dějin 1918-1945* (*Pictorial History of Czechoslovakia, 1918-1945*, with Jiří Černý, 2011). He also authored several children's stories, edited three SF anthologies and worked at several magazines. He translated numerous books from English into Czech, for example a number of Brian Aldiss' and Isaac Asimov's works.

Creators

by Tomáš Petrášek

The homeport of Phobos had vanished among the countless stars, even the Sun itself remained behind, a mere pinprick of light. The starship *Stephen Hawking* traveled under nominal acceleration, the subtle but omnipresent hum of Casimir turbines resonating through her hull.

Although three days of onboard time remained until the entry, the bridge was already busy. The astrogators, fully focused, were updating the trajectory according to the latest data from reconnaissance probes, engineers checked some systems, and the captain himself, face unreadable, barked some commands through the intercom. No one paid any attention to the man stepping out of the elevator door. In his checkered shirt and gray trousers he could not fit less among the busy, uniformed men around him. Owing to his unkempt hair and wild-looking full-beard he would probably stand out almost anywhere, for that matter. He uncertainly looked around him, obviously seeing the bridge for the first time. Eventually he spotted another civilian, sitting in a seat quite close to the elevator, fully absorbed by something on his portable interface.

"Excuse me," he approached him carefully, "I wonder whether the captain would be available...?"

The sitting man looked up, surprised. He was dressed in even more casual manner, in jeans and a t-shirt, although he seemed to be somewhat older.

"What? Oh, I see! The captain?! Well, actually I am waiting for him, too. He seems to be very busy."

The bearded man looked at him closely. "I don't want to be impolite, but... I think I have seen you before."

"That's quite possible, unfortunately," replied the other man.

"Why unfortunately?"

"Well, few years ago, I made some appearances in holovision, although it was not quite the kind of media exposure a scientist like me would like."

"Oh... You are the physicist, aren't you?"

"That's right. Lawrence Torgensen – you would probably recall my name."

"And my name is Richard Laird," the bearded man introduced himself, offering his hand. "I'm a scientist, too. Astrobiologist."

Checking the bridge again, they found the captain still fully engaged in his business. Laird sat down. Torgensen decided to continue their conversation. He asked casually: "Where do you travel?"

"Aldeberan B II. Just to lift some samples and gather sensor data with my team. We study plasma-based lifeforms there."

"Those things do actually exist?" the physicist asked with frank surprise.

"Well... that's what we're trying to find out, actually. No good evidence so far."

"I see."

Laird shifted in his seat. "And what's your destination?"

"The path is the goal, so to speak," said the physicist, enigmatically. Yet, the astrobiologist caught on.

"You are the wormhole guy, aren't you?"

"Exactly!" Torgensen nodded. "Finally, after all those years of quarrels, I got an opportunity to make *in situ* measurements. Although it was a nightmare getting funded."

Laird looked bewildered. "I thought that hyperspace physics is the cutting-edge science, nowadays, enjoying all the attention and fame..."

Torgensen sighed, sadly. "It depends. When you get the media coverage I got, and get labeled as a *controversial physicist* or *quantum mystic* as I got, you can easily get a job as a freak show exhibit, but not as a scientist. I had never got a second chance, until independent data began to show that I could have been right."

"So there is still something crucial left to discover in the field of hyperphysics?"

Torgensen laughed: "That's it. Everybody thinks like, we're using it, and it works, so we understand it. But the established hyperspace theory is purely descriptive. And even in that it has certain flaws, at least I think there

are good reasons to think so. By the way, have you ever traveled down a wormhole?"

"Yes, three times. And you?"

"This will be my first flight," Torgensen smiled. "I had been a theoretical physicist, until recently. I am quite excited, now."

"Well," Laird shrugged, "I spent all the passages in the passenger quarters, and there were no windows. It didn't seem very exciting, or even noticeable, apart from some gravity effects, not unlike traveling in an elevator. I remember feeling disappointed after the first travel."

"If you would like to see more, you can join me here, on the bridge, during the entry, three days from now," Torgensen offered without hesitation.

"Isn't it strictly forbidden for passengers to leave their quarters during the transit?"

"Usually yes, but I have a permission and I think I could get another one for you, if you are interested. I don't think that the captain would object."

"You can tell him that I will not touch anything."

"Nobody will, actually," Torgensen replied, "the ship's course must be programmed in advance, the things are happening too quickly during the entry for humans to react. Computers take care of everything. As far as I know, unless there is some accident, the crew will just sit there and wait through the passage. All the work has to be made in advance – that's why everybody is so busy right now making sure that everything will work."

*

"What's the matter with the wormholes? What are you trying to find?" Captain Ackerod looked down on Torgensen inquisitively. One hour to entry, the rush on the bridge has already peaked and now everything was calming down. The ship was already prepared and triple-checked, and nothing more remained that mere humans could do. Torgensen noticed Laird, who slipped through the door, and gestured him to sit down into the acceleration seat next to him.

"I think that few people understand the practical aspects of the current wormhole theory as well as you do," Torgensen started, slowly and carefully. The captain's nod was almost imperceptible, but obviously self-confident. "So you know that we have a very good idea about how the things work, and even why they work. But, to tell the truth, we lack the slightest idea about how it is possible for them to exist at all."

"So you, professor, are here on a mission to find the Creators?" The captain laughed, as if it was something funny. Torgensen tightened a little, and a glimpse of hurt or offense flickered on his face. But when he started to speak, his tone was calm again. "That's a part of that question, maybe an important part, but an utter simplification, a tip of an iceberg. If you consider our ignorance concerning the origin of the wormholes, how can we dare to think that we understand them?"

The captain smiled. "This will be my seventeenth passage through this one, and the special theory of wormholes never let me down. I am not into those philosophical musings at all. What counts is, the wormholes are here, and they work."

"Except the cases when they don't," replied the physicist. Captain's self-assured smile faltered a little.

"What are you talking about?"

"Why do you think I am here? Do you think that the Ministry of Interstellar Transportation would support my investigation unless they were deeply concerned? You must be aware that there have been some accidents lately..."

"That's not a concern for theoreticians," the captain frowned, "of course, some wormholes are dangerous, unmapped or highly unstable, collapsing on slightest disturbance... That's why they are rigorously tested by unmanned probes, before they are approved for human transportation."

"I am talking about the stable ones," Torgensen objected.

"Yes, there can be fatal accidents, when a ship gets off course and gravitational gradients destroy it. That's the price for interstellar travel. Engines do fail, computers do fail, that's nothing to do with wormholes themselves."

"There has been too many accidents, too many ships just disappearing, for the Ministry to share your confidence. The number of such incidents seems to be rising. The officials and some theorists likewise suspect some unidentified factor..."

"Maybe. Or maybe not. As far as I am concerned, that mysterious factor of yours is the plain and simple human error. I know something about flying a starship, believe me. When the crew survives one transit, and then another, they easily slip into a routine and their attention falters. When any crew member, or even a captain, for that matter, starts to believe that nothing could possibly go wrong, it is a catastrophe waiting to happen. And now, people are beginning to take interstellar travel as a safe, everyday business, talking economics and all that bullshit – no wonder the accidents are on the rise. If you ask me, there is no reason to see black magic in that."

Torgensen shrugged: "You can be right. Anyway, my equipment should detect any kind of deviation from the standard wormhole model, with unprecedented accuracy. If you, and all the big names of hyperspace physics are right, the data will follow the predictions and the current theory survives. But I suspect the wormhole theory has certain... *holes*."

The captain could not answer to that, as he had to solve some issue at the life support systems control. Torgensen sighed. He looked slightly tired, as he had spent a week installing and calibrating all his instruments. Now, he had nothing to do but wait and hope everything will work as it was supposed to.

Laird interrupted his nervous contemplation. "Sorry to disturb you, but could you explain to me your ideas about the wormholes? At least, if it could be explained to a non-physicist."

"Not very simply, I am afraid. Let's say, that the standard theory neglects certain important parameters of hyperspace and simplifies some others. The models assume hyperspace to be homogenous and empty, except for gravity fields leaking from our spacetime, and quantum fluctuations. Those simplifying assumptions make the math tractable, but are not supported by any data, as hyperspace is usually not very accessible for measurements."

Laird knitted his brows. "So you think that hyperspace is not empty?"

"That's quite a strong formulation. Let's say I want to verify this assumption. A wormhole is the ideal place to gain some insights, which may help us make the models more precise, or maybe to disprove the standard theory, if we're lucky."

"Do you think you can answer the mystery of wormhole origin, too?"

Torgensen frowned and withdrew a little, before he realized that Laird meant it as an honest question. "I don't know how familiar you are with my field. This simple question is... It is so controversial that most of my colleagues would refuse to talk about it at all, maybe unless totally drunk."

"And you?"

Torgensen's frown became a scowl. "I wanted to consider this question seriously, once. But the response of the peers, of the media, of the public forced me to abandon this research direction, although I still think it wasn't fair. Of course, having some data in my hands, that would be another game altogether."

"I know the prevailing opinion, those issues with the Creators and all the like. Yet I don't understand why some scientific question should be beyond scientific inquiry, just because it attracts a bunch of religious fanatics, mystics and other lunatics?"

"I had thought that myself, too. But it's a fact. You are a respectable hyperspace physicist modeling wormholes, but try to say a single word about their origin, and suddenly, your articles are rejected by scientific journals, sensationalist newshounds chase you on the street and zealots of all possible denominations threaten you with death and worse. It felt like returning to the Middle Ages."

"But you do have your opinion on that question, don't you?" Laird pressed on. "I don't give a damn for all that religious rubbish. There are so many improbable-looking things in our Universe that turned out not to require any divine intervention altogether! Why should the wormholes be special?"

"Well..." the physicist drew a deep breath. "To be honest, I try to keep my mind open. You can say I'm an agnostic. Wormholes are a reality, a fact."

Yet even three hundred years before they were discovered, it was well established that they should be microscopic and unstable, terribly unstable. And the theory behind this conclusion still holds. The wormholes cannot be stable, not to say passable, without support of exotic matter and negative energy, phenomena which are virtually non-existent in normal universe."

"Except the wormholes themselves."

"Exactly. And it's not just this. The supporting structure must be precisely, delicately organized. Just a small deviation from this destabilizes the wormhole, should any object try to pass through. Any wormhole is in a very delicate, unstable equilibrium, balancing on the very edge. A stable wormhole is, I know a physicist shouldn't use this term, but it is a miracle. The more you know about how they work, the more you appreciate just how improbable their very existence is, and how miraculously stable they are, except for a small percentage of unstable ones. The more I study them, the less I can imagine them to be a natural, random occurrence. And if a wristwatch implies the existence of a watchmaker, what does a wormhole imply? Everybody studying hyperphysics realizes that, sooner or later, but most of us just keep silent. It's no wonder that all the religious loons and various sects stick to wormholes and think they justify their beliefs... All that neocreationist bullshit – and the worst thing is that the science can't make them shut up! No wonder many physicists are secret believers themselves," Torgensen sighed.

"And if all this is not enough... You have the Weak and the Strong creator hypothesis," he continued. "Weak Creator, that means some long extinct, extremely advanced extraterrestrial civilization, adept in spacetime manipulation defying our understanding, and leaving behind their transportation system. That's maybe the less controversial view, as long as you don't go into details and do not attempt to actually investigate it. It appears compelling to a layman. For example, wormholes, especially the stable ones, have a significant tendency to be located next to star systems and other massive objects, although never too close. That's exactly what you would expect from an interstellar subway system. We know of no other way to explain it."

"Wow! I didn't know that!" exclaimed Laird incredulously. "I have never taken the Creators very seriously."

"Things like this rarely get published, and never get into textbooks, that's why. But even this version is problematic. For example, the standard theory forbids that kind of spacetime engineering – wormholes can be stabilized that way, although with difficulties, but they cannot be created."

"But a sufficiently advanced technology..."

"...could break the rules of physics as we understand them now. Which would mean that the theory is wrong. Yes. But say it aloud, as I did, and they will call you a pseudo-scientist, obscurantist and even worse names." Torgensen fell silent for a while, maybe recounting some past wrongs. "Anyway, no known theory enables opening wormholes from our spacetime, we have all reasons to think it is impossible. Moreover, not a single trace of the Weak Creators has been found, apart from the wormholes themselves. Hard to believe in such a mysterious, alien race, isn't it? So you could cling to the idea that wormholes form naturally, somehow. That poises other questions, however. Nobody has ever proposed a credible mechanism; it would have to operate outside normal spacetime, which makes such hypotheses almost untestable. The universe would have to exhibit insane levels of fine-tuning to enable natural creation of wormholes uniform in their diameters and exhibiting optimal stabilization to provide convenient transport system. That leads you directly to the Strong Creator hypothesis, directly assuming divine design. The Prime Mover created the Universe with wormholes, or more likely, a universe spawning wormholes, probably to enable his creatures – us – to travel the worlds given to them by his infinite generosity."

Laird frowned. "I remain skeptical. The Universe seems fine-tuned in other respects as well, you know, the anthropic principle and such..."

"This is different. In universes that are not fine-tuned to enable life, there is no one who could wonder about it, so it is no surprise to find yourself in a life-friendly universe. That's no proof of intelligent design, that's a matter of elementary logic. But you cannot apply this line of thinking to the wormholes. They are just a transportation system, the most complex

transportation system you can imagine, seemingly placed here just for our convenience. Most physicists believe in Creators, in one way or the other."

In the following silence, they both checked the time. The wormhole was getting closer, the instruments had already felt its gravity field and vacuum energy indicators were fluctuating a little. But there was nothing to see, so far.

"So you think..." Laird said uncertainly, looking from the physicist's face to the screen and to the ship's windows, fearing the unnatural cosmological monster that was about to appear there.

"...you think that science should capitulate? To admit that we live in a universe designed by some supernatural being? I'm an atheist, so I'm not very comfortable with this notion."

Torgensen noticed his gaze. "I understand you, and I share your concerns. If we cannot explain wormholes without invoking supernatural explanations – because even the Weak Creators fit most people's definition of gods – then we can apply miracles to any problems there are in physics or science in general, which basically means we can hand our jobs over to the crackpots who hand out their pamphlets in spaceports and offer people salvation, afterlife, eternal bliss or whatever. I think most physicists know that, so they try to sweep this topic under the carpet, just to keep their job and reputation. They tried to sweep *me* under the carpet, by the way. The science has fought against religion, against intelligent design and the like, for too long to do otherwise now – even if it might be wrong this time. Maybe the scientists are not as noble and honest as they like to think."

"That's insane. There must be a way..."

"The only way to find the truth is to examine the reality. My plan is to make measurements *in situ*, inside a wormhole. If there are some structures within hyperspace, the current theory would have to be discarded. Maybe, just maybe, it would turn out that the wormholes are a natural outcome of some unknown hyperspatial phenomenon, do not defy laws of probability nor physics, and are to be expected even without any Creators to make them. Or maybe not. And then, we should admit it honestly and publicly.

One way or the other, we should not think we understand wormholes, if we... Wait! I think I see it!"

The silence on the bridge was disturbed only by bleeping of instruments, hum of life support and excited breath. Laird fastened his belts, and Torgensen switched on a large holoscreen, coming alive with bizarre floating shapes. The astrobiologist watched them with fascination, recognizing 3d charts, but he understood neither the shapes nor labels. Screens showing views from cameras placed outside the ship were easier to interpret, but they showed just a boring starscape. The wormhole remained hidden, only the gravity field betrayed its existence. Soon, Laird noticed stars deforming, like through an invisible lens, some blinking brighter and deforming into arcs or rings. If he didn't know where to look, he would miss it altogether. Then a weak, bluish glare appeared, growing into almost invisible, fuzzy nebula stretching across the sky.

Torgensen gestured toward one of the screens. He kept silent, not to disturb this special moment. The astrobiologist understood that it was some enhanced view, perhaps different wavelength than visible light. It showed a fierce glare with a tangle of violet strings, like a knot of slithering snakes.

"We cannot see the wormhole, as it is invisible," whispered Torgensen. "What you can see here is the streams of exotic matter, held in a structure of magnetic field and plasma."

"That's incredible!" Laird exclaimed.

"Yes, it is. It keeps the tunnel open and stable, like supporting girders in a mine shaft, only much more complicated – and four-dimensional."

Oh my god, Laird thought, although he was an atheist. At least he had been until now. He stared at a thing that had no right to exist in his world. A miracle?

Casimir turbines, propelling the starship headlong into the wormhole entrance, changed their tone. They had to cope with streams of positive and negative vacuum energy, and to correct course deviations caused by inhomogeneous gravity fields. Slipping even a few meters from the calculated path meant collision with exotic matter streams, or being torn apart by tidal forces, and all people in the room knew that. Most of them

held their breath. The weak glow of energetic fields seemed to disappear when it filled the sky, yet the screen showed wildly twisted curves, even the relative motion of the ship was apparent from their shifting.

The hum switched to discontinuous howling. The ship staggered, caught by a maelstrom of forces, which pushed them heavily into their seats, only to try ripping them out of their seatbelts in the next second. Anybody not tightly strapped to their seat would probably be dead by now. Torgensen turned pale, or even slightly green, it seemed. He was glad he had remembered to take his pills, which just enabled him to keep his breakfast to himself. But in the next moment, everything was over. The hell of opposing forces ended, and the ship floated freely. The darkness ahead seemed slightly opalescent, and the screen showed regular pattern of pink radial threads, which contrasted to the wildly coiled snakes seen only a few seconds ago.

"We are inside," said the physicist, obviously relieved. His face slowly returned to his usual color.

"That's it?" asked Laird, incredulously.

"Yes – what did you expect? Some whirlpool or a stargate, like in a bad movie? A wormhole is a deformed spacetime, which is invisible, just like a gravity field. It cannot even be visualized in a sensible way, unless you can perceive in five dimensions. And – look! Behind us!" Torgensen gestured toward the rearward-looking camera view. "This is our spacetime we have just left behind!"

The stars were deformed and clustered somewhere far behind. As if the universe shrunk into a single, small sphere, and their ship was speeding away from it, even as they looked. Soon it was obscured by shimmering and opalescence of exotic matter and supporting force fields. The side view was even more unsettling. In the distance, on the luminiscent wormhole background, a starship could be seen. In the whirling, luminous haze behind it, he recognized another one. Their own starship, he realized. The infinite rows of mirages grew closer and clearer.

"That must be some optical illusion, isn't it?" Laird spoke aloud. Their flight was as calm as in normal space; it didn't seem dangerous at all. Anyway, whispering probably would not help it.

"Kind of. Curved spacetime."

"Why is the image so unsteady?"

"Spacetime fluctuations. They should destabilize the wormhole in any moment, if it wasn't for the supporting structures. This thing is in a dynamical equilibrium, balancing on the edge..."

"That's why we cannot see through?"

The physicist nodded silently, his attention caught by one of his charts.

"Look at this! Instability!" He poked his finger through one of the immaterial shapes. Laird didn't pretend to understand any of the terms his friend used to describe what he saw in the data, but he saw his rapt countenance and grasped that this was the anomaly Torgensen was so avidly waiting for.

Something beeped. Excited whisper from the workstations on the right, keyboards clicking. Then wailing, uncomfortably similar to an alarm.

"Sir! The negative energy readings! We have an anomaly!"

Dramatic fluctuations of 3d charts became prominent enough even for Laird to notice. Something was happening. His heart quickened. The things he just heard, about a tunnel balancing on the verge of collapse, didn't help it at all.

"...growing stronger, oh my god, what is it?"

"Vacuum fluctuations outside the norm! And rising!"

"Turn off the engines! Immediately!"

"Longitudinal gravity waves on 150% and growing!"

The threads of fantastic energies no longer ran regularly like immaterial rails. Even the mirages beside them were not like mirror images, but more like reflections on a sea surface... troubled sea surface. Opalescence was stronger now, turning viciously yellow.

"Damn! Electromagnetic stabilizers are reaching their limits!"

The captain cursed, using words a pirate would be ashamed of. "Can somebody tell me what's happening with this fucking wormhole?" he shouted, but remained without answer.

"Is it... the collapse?" whispered Laird, frightened. He considered starting to pray, as it seemed not as utterly irrational as he always thought.

The physicist shook his head, fascinated by his data.

"Torgensen!" roared the captain both directly and through the intercom. "Tell me what the fuck it is!"

"An anomaly!" answered the physicist. Laird pondered the meaning of the word, and reached the conclusion that it is a synonym of "what the fuck it is?", just more scientific and less scary. The thought did not calm him at all.

The lights flickered.

The dials went crazy, holoscreen painted abstract splotches, and then the sensors began to fail, one after another. Gravity fluctuations became physically perceptible.

"Something is happening to the reactor, sir!" almost screamed a woman's voice from the left, "the reaction is getting out of control!"

"Just look!" shouted Laird, with his mouth gaping open, pointing at the window. There no longer was just opalescent darkness ahead. There was not even the distant ball of stars signifying the end of the tunnel – which was not surprising, given that the end was more than ten minutes ahead. The entire cross-section of the wormhole – if it was the right geometrical term to use – was filled with an angry red something, an anomaly.

Torgensen didn't look up. He watched the last screen remaining, flickering, yet showing outside view. The thing ahead seemed to fill half of the sky. From the haze, some extremely complicated swirling patterns emerged, indescribable shapes distorted by irregular reflections. Frightful and beautiful at the same time, abstract artwork of exotic matter, electromagnetic field lines and the spacetime itself.

And they were on a collision course. It was impossible to dodge this thing in the narrow tunnel.

"Engines! Full backward!" shouted the captain.

"The ship is unstable!" complained the attitude control officer.

"Vacuum fluctuations are outside the measurable limits! The engines will explode if we set them spinning!"

"Full backwards!" Ackerod repeated, "unless you have any better idea!"

Howling and tremors filled the ship. The lights flickered, one lamp burst. The ship shuddered, the blow pushed them into their seats.

"The engine number six exploded!" announced a voice sounding like "like I hadn't said that." Other explosions followed. The ship began to rotate erratically.

Failure reports merged into a background of panicked shouts. The ship was trembling and groaning in the grasp of forces beyond the grasp of earthly physics. As if the universe went crazy.

"That thing... the pattern is more complex than anything I've ever seen, that complexity... I was right, all the time... structures in hyperspace..."

Voices fell silent, as their owners began to realize that they will never come out of this alive. The phosphorescent anomaly was everywhere, surrounding them, multiplied to infinity by its own reflections, suffused with streaming and trembling motion of coiling curves. Curved space thwarted any attempts to estimate distance, but it seemed terribly close. Glowing tentacles seemed to almost reach the ship.

"What the fuck is it?" Torgensen nerves seemed to finally give up. His hands clenched spasmodically, trying to grasp and crush holographic error messages on his screen.

Laird laughed like a maniac. "I know it!"

Torgensen gave him a furious look. He wasn't sure whether he was angry because he knew he was dying, or because he knew he was right, but his enemies will never know it.

"Creators... Gods..." Laird almost suffocated with laughter, his eyes watering. "Such bullshit! We were right, both of us... Origin – of – wormholes! So obvious!"

The vibrations of the ship shook them wildly, pieces of equipment torn away from their places flying around like projectiles. Somewhere, a partition

collapsed. Eventually, the flickering lights gave up, and the screens darkened.

Yet, the astrobiologist managed to finish: "Professor Torgensen, *it is a worm!*"

The room went totally dark, lighted only by a dim glow of that fantastic vortex of curves, spots, rings and shapes too alien to describe, whirling in apparent chaos, yet following the rules of some unearthly biology.

Then the ship fell apart.

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The Symphony of Ice and Dust

by Julie Novakova

“It’s going to be the greatest symphony anyone has ever composed,” said Jurriaan. “Our best work. Something we’ll be remembered for in the next millennia. A frail melody comprised of ice and dust, of distance and cold. It will be our masterpiece.”

Chiara listened absently and closed her eyes. Jurriaan had never touched ice, seen dust, been able to imagine real-world distances or experienced cold. Everything he had was his music. And he *was* one of the best; at least among organic minds.

Sometimes she felt sorry for him.

And sometimes she envied him.

She imagined the world waiting for them, strange, freezing, lonely and beautiful, and a moment came when she could not envy Jurriaan his gift – or his curse – at all. She checked with *Orpheus* how long the rest of the journey would last. The answer was prompt.

In three days, we will approach Sedna.

Chiara decided to dream for the rest of the voyage.

*

Her dreams were filled with images, sounds, tastes, smells and emotions. Especially emotions. She *felt* the inner Oort cloud before she had even stepped outside the ship. *Orpheus* slowly fed her with some of the gathered data and her unique brain made a fantastical dream of nearly all of it.

When Chiara woke up, she knew that they were orbiting Sedna and sending down probes. *Orpheus* had taken care of it, partly from the ship’s own initiative, partly because of Manuel. The Thinker of their mission was still unconscious, but actively communicating with *Orpheus* through his interface.

She connected to the data stream from the first probe which had already landed and recorded everything. *Sedna... We are the first here at least*

since the last perihelion more than eleven thousand years ago. It feels like an overwhelming gap – and yet so close!

It almost filled her eyes with tears. Chiara was the Aesthete of their group by the Jovian Consortium standards. Feeling, sensing and imagining things was her job – as well as it was Manuel's job to primarily go through hard data, connect the dots, think everything through, even the compositions, the results of their combined effort – and Jurriaan's job to focus on nothing but the music.

She sent a mental note to Manuel. *When can we go to the surface?*

The response was immediate. *When I conclude it's safe.*

Safe is bad. It's stripped of fear, awe, even of most of the curiosity! I need them to work properly, they're essential. Let me go there first.

All right, he replied.

Chiara smiled a little. She learned to use logic to persuade Manuel long ago – and most of the times she was successful.

As she was dressing in the protective suit, a memory of a similar moment some years ago came to her and sent a shiver through her body. It was on Io and she stayed on the surface far too long even for her highly augmented body to withstand. When it became clear that she'd need a new one because of the amount of received radiation, she decided to give that one at least an interesting death – and she let it boil and melt near one of the volcanoes. Although her new brain was a slightly inadequate copy of the last one, thanks to the implants she remembered the pain – and then nothing, just a curious observation of the suit and her body slowly disintegrating – as if it happened to this very body.

She didn't intend to do anything like that here. No; here she perceived a cold and fragile beauty. There should be no pain associated to it, no horror. Fear, maybe. Awe, definitely yes. Standing there on the icy surface, the Sun a mere bright star, darkness everywhere – she ought to feel awe.

Chiara felt she had a good chance of being the first human being who ever stood on Sedna. The dwarf planet was nearing its perihelion now, still almost a hundred astronomical units from the Sun, and there were no reports of any expeditions before them during the recent period.

When the lander touched the surface of Sedna, she stayed inside for a little while, getting used to the alien landscape around her. It had a strange sense of tranquility to it. Chiara was used to the icy moons of the Jovian system which she called home, but this landscape was far smoother than what she knew from there. It was also darker – and an odd shade of brown-red.

She turned off the lander's lights and stepped outside through the airlock, into the darkness.

It wasn't a complete darkness. But the Sun was not currently visible from this side of the dwarf planet and it felt like being lonelier, further away than ever before. She was able to see the disc of the galaxy clearer than from anywhere else she had been to.

She knelt and slowly touched the surface with one of her suit's haptic gloves.

We've found something, Chiara, suddenly Manuel's voice resonated in her head. *See for yourself.*

He sent her a mental image of a couple of objects not deep beneath the icy surface found by one of the numerous little probes. The biggest one resembled a ship. A small, stumpy, ancient-looking ship, unmistakably of a human origin. They were not the first.

But these must have come here a *very* long time ago.

And a few miles further and far beneath it, another shape was discovered by their sensors. A bigger, stranger shape.

Probably from much, much longer ago than the first one...

*

It took less than an hour to drill through the ice to the first ship. Getting inside it then was a matter of minutes.

Chiara saw the two bodies as the probes approached them. Both dead – but almost intact. One male, one female. The probes suggested the small chambers they found them inside were probably designed for cryosleep. They must have been prepared for the procedure or already frozen when they died.

The ship was long dead too but that didn't constitute much of a problem for the probes. They quickly repaired the computers and what was left of the data.

They found the ship's logs and sent it to the crew of *Orpheus* even before others had time to drill deep enough to reach the other object.

Chiara was back aboard at the time they opened the file and heard the voice of the long gone woman.

I think I don't have much time left. I have no means of getting from here in time. But I know that there will be others who come here to explore. I hope you find this. I'm telling our story for you.

Ten days ago, I discovered something... – wait, let me start from the beginning.

*

"How is it going, love?"

Theodora smiled while unscrewing another panel on the probe. "Good. Suppose we could use this one tomorrow on the last picked site. I've got just one more bug to repair."

She was wearing a thin suit, protecting her in the vacuum and cold of the storage chamber, very flexible and quite comfortable compared to EVA suits. Despite that, she'd prefer to be outside the ship, walking on the surface of Triton which *Kittiwake* was orbiting for more than two years now.

Kittiwake was a small ship, but sufficient for sustaining two people aboard even for a couple of decades if necessary. Provided enough hydrogen, easily extractable practically everywhere, its bimodal MITEE could function for half a century without any serious problems. If one element failed, it still had many others and could push the ship forward with a good specific impulse and a decent thrust while also providing the electrical energy needed by the ship.

Now the mission on Triton was nearing its end. Theodora didn't know whether to be happy and relieved that she and her husband would finally return to Earth, after so many years of isolation, or sad that she wouldn't ever see this remarkable place again.

When she was done with the ice-drilling probe, she went through several airlocks to the habitation deck. It was tiny, but sufficient enough for hers and Dimitri's needs.

"It seems we have a word from the outside world," her husband smiled as she entered the cabin. "*Kittiwake* just picked it up."

After checking the signal for malware, the ship automatically showed them the recording. The face of their superior, OSS Mission Supervisor Ronald Blythe, appeared on the screen. He congratulated them for their results on Triton and mentioned that a window for another long-term scientific expedition was opening. Theodora's stomach rocked. She was eager to find out. But still... a new expedition would mean yet more years away from the rest of humanity. The company picked her and Dimitri because they were a stable, non-conflict couple with steady personalities and a lot of technical and scientific experience. They were *supposed* to be able to spend years without any other human contact in a tiny space of their ship, exploring the outer solar system, without a chance for a vacation, without feeling the Earth's gravity, smells, wind... *However, we had a contract for eight years. The time's almost up. Are they proposing to prolong it? And what for?* thought Theodora.

"Last week, we received a signal from Nerivik 2."

"Isn't it the probe sent to Sedna in the eighties that stopped transmitting before it reached an orbit?" murmured Theodora.

It was. Blythe went on explaining how they lost contact with the probe for more than ten years and suddenly, out of thin air, it sent out a signal five days ago. Scientists at the FAST observatory who picked up the signal by accident were a bit surprised, to put it mildly. They began analyzing it immediately – and fortunately didn't keep intercepting the transmission for themselves.

"And the findings were... weird. It became clear that the probe lost its orbit, crashed, but probably regained control of its thrusters shortly before the crash and tried to change the collision into a landing. It was just damaged. It's possible that it kept transmitting most of the time, but without aiming the signal, the probability of reaching any receivers in the system was

very low. However, it probably had time to send down its two landers before the crash. They kept measuring all they were supposed to record – and among other tasks, they tried mapping the ice layer. That’s where it became really strange.”

Theodora listened avidly as Blythe started explaining. Her interest grew every second.

The ultrasonic pulses showed an intriguing structure some two hundred meters below surface. It could not be told how large it was, but it had at least one hundred meters in diameter; maybe a lot more. The signature seemed like metal.

Blythe included the data in the transmission so that Theodora was able to look at it while he was speaking. It really was strange. It could have been a part of a metal-rich rock layer. But what would it be doing on Sedna? The dwarf planet was supposed to have a thick largely icy layer composed mostly of methane, nitrogen, ethane, methanol, tholins and water ice. Nothing even remotely like *this*. Maybe a big metal-rich meteorite buried in the ice crust after an impact then?

“We don’t know what it is, or even if the measurement was correct. But it surely is interesting. It would be desirable to send a manned mission there. This looks like a situation that needs more resourcefulness and improvisations than robots can do,” continued Blythe.

And for this, they needed someone with an expertise of frozen bodies of the outer solar system; someone stable, resourceful and determined; and of course, preferably someone whom the journey would take around five instead of ten years. Sedna was still quite near its perihelion, but growing away slowly every year. In short: They needed someone like two experienced workers closing their successful mission on Neptune’s icy moon Triton.

“...of course, I cannot force you into this. But with prolonging the contract, you’ll receive extra money for such a long stay on your own and all the associated risks. I attach the new version of your contract to this message. I expect your answer in three days.”

Theodora didn't have to look at the document to know the bonuses would be large; almost unimaginably large. There were medical risks associated with long-term radiation exposure, dangerous activities, immense psychical pressure, stay in microgravitation and above all, the cryosleep necessary to travel so far away without losing many years just by the voyage itself.

But it wasn't the money that primarily tempted her to accept the contract.

Theodora and Dimitri looked at each other expectantly. "Well," she broke the silence first, "looks like we're gonna take a rather long nap; do you agree?"

*

Theodora shivered. At the first moment, she felt exposed and frightened without any obvious reason, which was even worse. Then she remembered; she was in the cryosleep chamber and slowly awakening. They must be near Sedna now.

"Dimi?" she croaked. There was no reply, although the ship was supposed to transmit every conversation to the other chamber – which meant that Dimitri hadn't achieved conscience yet.

It took Theodora another hour before she could gather her thoughts well enough to start going through the data. When she was in the middle of checking their velocity and trajectory, the speaker in the chamber came alive: "Darling? Are you awake?"

"Yes, how are you?"

"Well, nothing's better than a good long sleep!"

Theodora laughed. Her throat burned and she still felt a bit stiff, but she couldn't stop. They actually were there; further than any human beings ever before!

*

In the next couple of days, Dimitri and Theodora had little time to rest although they didn't do anything physically demanding and were still recovering from the cryosleep. First they searched for and found the Nerivik 2 crash site and the two nearby stationed landers. The ice in the area seemed

different from other sites, as if it had been gradually modified by inner volcanic activity. That explained why Nerivik 2 sent both its landers there in the first place. *Kittiwake* sent down a probe, continued mapping the surface and after that sent a few other probes on different locations. It was a standard procedure, but it needed a lot of time.

When the first results from the probe near Nerivik 2 arrived, Dimitri sat still for a moment and then found his voice and called: "Dora! You must come see this."

The readings were peculiar. The object buried almost two hundred meters below the surface seemed a bit like an asteroid now, more than a hundred meters in diameter in one direction and over five hundred in the other. According to the ultrasonic pulses data, its shape seemed conical and the layer reflecting the pulses quite smooth. A very unusual asteroid indeed.

"What do you think it is?"

Theodora shrugged. "Don't know – and can't very well imagine, to be precise. Until it's proven otherwise, I'm betting on an asteroid, albeit a weird one. But let's find out soon."

"I'll send down the drilling machinery, shall I? Or do you propose to wait for even more readings?"

"Send it."

Kittiwake had two major drilling devices – three before Triton – and one backup machine. Theodora and Dimitri decided to send two at once. It was riskier, but they wanted to compare the data from an area with the anomaly and from another place chosen because of its similar surface structures. The equipment was old but reliable and lived through many more or less improvisational repairs.

At the end of the first day of drilling, they reached almost thirty meters below surface. On day three, they were about one hundred meters deep. On day four, the probe got through almost one hundred and fifty meters of ice and stopped.

*

Theodora had the uncomfortable feeling of vertigo as every time she performed telemetric control. She guided the repair drone carefully to the

drilling probe's main panel. She felt strangely dissociated with her body when the robot picked the cover and she felt as if it were her arms raising it and putting it aside. There she was. "Oh, not this," she sighed.

No wonder Dimitri had no success trying to get the probe running again from here. It was no software bug, temporary failure or anything the self-repair systems could handle. Most of the processors were fried and needed replacing. The repair drone didn't have all of the components. They could send them down during some of the next orbit. But –

She lost her connection to the drone, as *Kittiwake* disappeared over the horizon from the drone's perspective, before she could end it herself. She gasped. It felt as if her limb had been cut off. She gulped and tried to concentrate again.

Yes, they could send the parts down. But Theodora feared that although the drone itself had more than sufficient AI for common repairs and had all the blueprints in its memory, it might overlook something else, something an AI would not notice and that might cause future trouble. She'd not be happy if they had to replace the processors again, like it happened once on Triton. She could control the drone from distance again, but there was no chance she could achieve that much precision and look everywhere through telemetry.

Well, they wanted to initiate manned exploration anyway. It would just have to be sooner than expected.

*

Dimitri watched Theodora's descent. He knew that she performed similar procedures many times before – but that never prevented him from worrying.

The view distorted as *Kittiwake* started losing connection. In another thirty minutes or so, it would rise up the horizon again. But Dimitri had considered changing their orbit to stationary and decided to do so. They didn't need to monitor so much of the surface anymore with the ship. He finally got two satellites to work and deployed them on an equatorial and a polar orbit. He could make them relay stations so that *Kittiwake* wouldn't need to change its orbit, but he liked the possibility to communicate directly

with Theodora, her landing module, her rover and the drilling probe. Less things could go wrong. And after years spent so far from Earth, they knew that things often *went* wrong.

He gave the engine command for more thrust and checked on the planned stationary transfer orbit. Everything seemed fine for a while.

Until a red light flashed next to the screen and a warning presented itself.

*

Theodora was descending through the tunnel in the ice. It was dark except the light from LEDs on her suit and the reflectors from the top of the shaft. Her rope was winding down gradually. She could see the drilling device below now.

The light above seemed faint when she reached the probe. It took her only an hour to get it operational again. She smiled and let the winch pull her up again.

Just as she neared the surface, she heard a noise in the speakers of her suit. "Dimitri?" she spoke. "What is it?"

"Have to... come down..."

She barely understood him through the static.

"Dimitri!"

For a while, she heard nothing. Then the static returned – and after that, Dimitri's distorted voice. "...have to land." Cracking and humming. Theodora tried to amplify the sound frantically. "...send you the coordinates... hope it works out..."

A file found its way through the transmission. It was a technical report generated by *Kittiwake*. Theodora opened it and glimpsed through it quickly.

"Oh no," she whispered.

*

Dimitri was doing his best to lead the remains of the ship on a trajectory ending with something that would approximate a landing more than a crash.

It was less than twenty minutes from the moment he accelerated *Kittiwake* to reach the transfer orbit but it seemed like an eternity. During that time, a warning indicated that the main turbine in the ship's power station was not working properly. He ran a more detailed scan and a moment later, everything was flashing with error reports.

The turbine in the power cycle broke down. It was tested for signs of wearing down regularly, but a hairline crack might have been overlooked in the control. The ship was moving with inertia most of the journey, the crack could have expanded during the deceleration phase and ruptured now, when the engine was working a little more again.

Things could go wrong. And they went wrong. Worse even, one of the blades pierced the coating of the reactor and the heated helium-xenon gas started leaking rapidly. The damage was too much for the automated repair systems. It was still leaking into the space between the coatings.

And the reactor itself was overheating quickly. Once the turbine stopped working, the gas still trapped in the cycle kept getting more and more heat from the MITEE – but couldn't continue through the cycle and cool down.

It was not critical yet, but would be in another couple of minutes. Dimitri sent all the repair drones to help the built-in repair and emergency systems but could see that it was not enough. He had also shut down the MITEE and all the rods were now safely turned to stop the reaction. It still wasn't enough. The overheating continued and could lead to an explosion. It could happen in a few minutes if not cooled down quickly.

It was just a way life went. Nothing serious happened in years and suddenly he's got *minutes*.

He knew there was only one thing to do. So he gave a command for the valves in the outer reactor coating to open. Then all the gas would leak outside. The ship would be useless without it, but it was the better one of two bad scenarios.

So far, only a minute had elapsed from the breakdown.

In the next few seconds, things went from bad to worse.

"Shit," exhaled Dimitri as he felt how the *Kittiwake* started spinning. One of the valves must have been stuck, so that the gas started leaking outside in just one direction and it quickly sent the ship into rotation.

Dimitri tried to compensate it with thrusters on both RCSs, but then *Kittiwake* shook hideously and then many of the screens went down. He realized what happened.

The rotation was too much. The ship was never constructed for this. There was too much tension in wrong direction... She tore apart.

Still coping with the rotation, he checked the systems. He was right. The engine section was gone. He was lucky that the habitation section was still operating almost normally. There was his chance.

This section's reaction control system was apparently still working. The RCS's thrusters were small, but it was all he had.

He tested them with a short blast. Actually working; good. He used them to provide a little more distance from the other remains of the ship and then reviewed his situation calmer. He had to land if he wanted to live; and he needed to do it quickly, otherwise he'd drift into space with no means of correcting his trajectory.

He smiled rather sadly.

About twenty minutes after the turbine breakdown, Dimitri was now leading the rest of the ship down on Sedna and praying he could actually land instead of crashing.

"Dora?" he called. He hoped she'd pick up the transmission. "Dora, can you hear me? The reactor had a breakdown and the ship tore apart! I'm left with our section's remains. I have to come down..."

*

Theodora was driving her rover frantically to the landing site. She could not contact Dimitri, but that didn't mean anything; the antenna could have been damaged, while most of the ship could be perfectly fine. *It's all right. He is fine.*

She wished she could go faster, but as on most ice-rocky bodies, Sedna's surface could be treacherous. It had far less cracks or ridges than Europa or Ganymede and was actually very smooth compared to them, but

it was still an alien landscape, not resembling anything on Earth at all. Himalaya's glaciers were children's toys compared to Sedna. The perspective was wrong, the measures were wrong, the shadows were wrong; it wasn't a land fit for human eyes and spatial recognition.

Finally, she approached the site. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the habitation section in the lights of the rover. It seemed almost intact.

She ran to the nearest reachable airlock. It was still functioning; she could get inside.

It didn't look as if the ship had been through a bad accident. The corridor looked nearly normally. Everything was strapped or permanently fixed anyway, so a sight of total chaos wasn't to be expected. However, most of the systems were disabled, as she found out by logging into the network.

The door of the control room opened in front of her, a little damaged, but working.

"Dimitri!"

He found time to get in an emergency suit and was safely strapped in his chair. Good. Theodora leaned to him. He looked unconscious. She logged to his suit and read the data quickly.

Time of death... Suit's healthcare mechanisms could not help...

"Oh, Dimitri," she croaked. Her throat was dry and she felt tears coming to her eyes. She forced them down. No time for this. Not now. She must do what he'd do in her place.

She moved his body in the suit to the cryosleep chamber. Once she managed it there, she ran a similar procedure as they had gone through many times before. Only this time it was slightly different, designed to keep a dead brain as little damaged as possible, in a state usable for later scanning of the neural network. Theodora knew that her Dimitri was gone; but they could use this data, complete it by every tiny bit of information available about his life, and create a virtual personality approximating Dimitri. He wouldn't be gone so... completely.

After that, she checked on the ship's systems again. No change whatsoever. Nothing needed her immediate attention now, at least for a short while. She leaned on a wall and finally let the tears come.

*

This is a part of an older log, but I don't want to repeat all that happened to me... I must go to sleep soon.

Kittiwake is dead now, as is Dimitri. I could do nothing in either case. I've got only one option, a quite desperate one. I have to equip my landing module in a way that it could carry me home. We went through this possibility in several emergency scenarios; I know what to do and that I can do it.

Of course, I'll have to spend the journey awake. The module hasn't got any cryosleep chamber and the one from the ship cannot be moved. But if the recycling systems work well, I can do it. I've got enough rations for about five years if I save the food a little. It doesn't get me anywhere near Earth, but I looked through the possible trajectories into the inner solar system and it could get me near Saturn if I leave here in three weeks, before this window closes. If I don't make it in this time, I'm as well as dead. But let's suppose I make it, I must... During the journey, I can contact Earth and another ship, even if only an automatic one with more supplies and equipment, could meet me on the way. I'll get home eventually.

If I succeed in rebuilding the landing module for an interplanetary journey. No one actually expected this to happen, but here I am. I must try.

*

The next few days were busy. Theodora kept salvaging things from *Kittiwake* and carefully enhancing the module's systems. In most cases, enhancement was all she needed. Then she had to get rid of some parts needed only for the purposes of landing and surface operations – and finally attach the emergency fuel tanks and generate the fuel.

The module had a classical internal combustion engine. High thrust, but despairingly high need of fuel.

Fortunately, she was surrounded by methane and water ice – and purified liquid methane and oxygen were just the two things she needed. Once she got the separation and purification cycle running, the tanks were slowly being refilled. At least this was working as it should.

She'd very much like to let Earth know about the accident, but she couldn't. Most of the relay stations were behind the Sun from her perspective now and the rest was unreachable by a weak antenna on the

module; the one on the ship was too badly damaged. The Earth would know nothing about this until she's on her way back.

The plan seemed more and more feasible each day. She clung to it like to what it really was – her only chance of surviving.

When a message that the drilling probe had reached its target depth and stopped drilling appeared on the screen of her helmet, Theodora was confused for a couple of seconds before she realized what it was about. It seemed like a whole different world – mapping the surface from above, sending probes... In the last three days, she had little sleep and focused on her works on the module only. She had almost forgotten about the probe.

Well, after she checks the fuel generators again, she should have some time to look at it, she was well ahead of the schedule. After all, true explorers didn't abandon their aims even in times of great distress.

*

I'm glad I decided to have a look at it. Otherwise I'd die desperate and hopeless. Now, I'm strangely calm. It's just what a discovery like this does with you. It makes you feel small. The amazement and awe...

*

Theodora couldn't believe the results until she personally got down the shaft into a small space the probe had made around a part of the thing.

She stood in the small ice cave, looking at it full of wonder. She dared not touch it yet.

The surface was dark and smooth. Just about two square meters of it were uncovered; the rest was still surrounded by ice. According to the measurements, the thing was at least five hundred meters long and had a conic shape. There was no doubt that she discovered... a ship.

*

You cannot possibly imagine the feeling until you're right there. And I wasn't even expecting it. It was... I cannot really describe it. Unearthly. Wonderful. Amazing. Terrifying. All that and much more, mixed together.

I gave the alien ship every single moment I could spare. My module needed less and less tending to and I had almost two weeks until the flight window would close.

I named her Peregrine. It seemed appropriate to me. This wasn't a small interplanetary ship like Kittiwake; this bird could fly a lot faster. But still... she seemed too small to be an interstellar vessel, even if this was only a habitation section and the engines were gone.

It was probably the greatest discovery in all human history yet. Just too bad I didn't have a chance to tell anyone. I really hope someone's listening.

*

Theodora directed all resources she didn't vitally need for her module to *Peregrine*. Only a day after her initial discovery, the probes picked up another strange shape buried in the ice not far from the ship.

When they also reached it, Theodora was struck with wonder. It was clearly an *engine* section!

While she worked on her module, she kept receiving new data about it and everything suggested that *Peregrine* used some kind of fusion drive; at this first glance not far more advanced than human engine systems. It seemed to her even more intriguing than if she had found something completely unknown.

*

I was eventually able to run a radiometric dating of ice surrounding the ship. The results suggest that she landed here some two-hundred and fifty million years ago. The ice preserved it well. But I must wonder... what were they doing here? Why have they come to our solar system – and why just this once? Although I don't understand a lot of what I see, the ship doesn't seem that much sophisticated to me. Maybe it's even something we could manage to make. But why use something like this to interstellar travel? With too little velocity, they'd never make it here in fewer than hundreds of years even if they came from the Alpha Centauri system!

Unless... the distance was smaller. We still don't know the history of the solar system in much detail. It's supposed that Sedna's orbit was disturbed by passing of another star from an open cluster where the Sun originated, about eight hundred astronomical units away not long after the formation of our system.

But what if an event like this occurred more times? Could it possibly have been also a quarter of a billion years ago? Just about any star on an adequate trajectory could have interfered with the solar system. In some million and half

years, Gliese 710 should pass through the Oort cloud. We wouldn't have much evidence if an event like this happened in a distant past – only some perturbed orbits and more comet and asteroid bombardment of the planets later.

Hundreds AU is still a great distance, but surely not impossible. Hell, I'm almost one hundred AU from the Sun now, although I haven't traveled the whole distance at one time. If we used a gravity assist from the Sun, we could overcome even distance of a thousand AU within a decade only! They could have done it too, maybe hoping to reach the inner part of the system, but something had prevented them. And possibly the very first object they encountered, quite near their own star at the time, was a frozen dwarf planet from about a hundred to almost a thousand AU far from the Sun, sent on its eccentric orbit by an earlier passing star and now disturbed again. They must have been lucky that Sedna wasn't captured by their star at the time. Or could it have been that theirs was the original star that deviated Sedna's orbit that much? Anyway, they'd have had to cross hundreds AU, but that's doable. If we had a sufficient motivation, we could manage a lot more.

Let's assume for a moment that my crazy hypothesis is right...

Then, I wonder that kind of motivation they had.

*

It happened three days before her planned departure.

She was at the surface at the time, which might have saved her life – or rather prolonged it.

The quakes came without any warning. She was getting a little sleep in her rover when it woke her up. Four, maybe five points on the Richter scale, Theodora guessed. Her throat was suddenly very, very dry.

The fuel generators...

After the quake stopped, she went to check on them. Overcoming the little distance between her and them seemed to take an eternity; new cracks formed in the ice.

When she saw them, Theodora knew she ought to feel anger, panic or desperation. But she just felt impossibly tired.

Two of the tanks were completely destroyed and the generators were damaged. She performed a more detailed control anyway but the result did not surprise her.

They couldn't be repaired; not in time. Maybe in months... but she'd be too late in less than a *week*.

She sat back in the rover, exhausted but suddenly very, very calm. What was a threat a while ago was a certainty now. She wasn't going to make it and she knew it.

The best what she could do was to use her remaining time as effectively as she was able to.

*

When I'm done here, I'll freeze myself. But this time I'll set the... final cryogenic procedure. If you found us and it's not too late... we might talk again.

*

The original shaft was destroyed by the quake, but she used the remaining probe, continued drilling with a maximum achievable speed and kept measuring the ice layer via the ultrasonics. While these processes were running, Theodora tried to find out more about *Peregrine*. She was able to get spectroscopic readings which suggested that its surface consisted mainly of titanium, however, she couldn't read all the spectral characteristics; the alloy seemed to have many components.

She also obtained more results on the thickness of the ice crust. The probe got almost two kilometers deep. Its results suggested that a liquid ocean beneath the layer might be possible – maybe fifteen, maybe twenty kilometers deeper than she was now. Theodora knew she'd never live to see a definitive answer; but these measurements might still be useful for someone else. If they could intercept her message.

She tried several times to send the data back to Earth, but she knew the chances too well to be even a little optimistic, although she salvaged a bigger antenna from Nerivik 2. But the transmitter was still rather weak and the aim far too inadequate. Without reaching relay stations, her message would become a cosmic noise, nothing more. The most reliable way to let the humanity see the data someday was to store them here in as many copies as she could and hope it would suffice. She didn't have much of an option.

She kept thinking about the alien ship. If her dating was correct and it landed here a quarter of a billion years ago, it would vaguely coincide with

the Great Permian-Triassic Extinction Event. It was usually attributed mostly to geological factors, but there was a possibility of a contribution of other effects – a disturbance of the Oort cloud and more comets sent to the inner solar system afterward would do. She was recently able to measure how long had *Peregrine* been exposed to cosmic radiation and it seemed to be just several hundred years unless there was a mistake or some factor she didn't know about. There was no chance any ship like this could have come here from another star system in such extremely short time – unless the star was really close at the time. It started to make more and more sense to Theodora, although all she had was still just a speculation.

"And it will remain a speculation until someone else finds us," she said aloud, glancing at *Peregrine*. "But they will. You'll see."

However, she wasn't so sure. Would the company send a new expedition after they realize that Theodora and Dimitri were not going to ever call back? It depended mostly on the budget; she was rather pessimistic. And about other companies or countries, she couldn't even guess. But Sedna's distance would grow each year. Before another mission could be sufficiently prepared and launched, years would probably pass. And other years during its voyage. Then even more years on the way back.

She had to admit to herself the possibility that no one was going to discover them soon – maybe until the next perihelion. So far away in the future she couldn't even imagine it.

She looked at the other ship and touched the dark metal surface. *But still closer than how long you had to wait...*

"You were shipwrecked here too, am I right?" Theodora managed a little smile. "Pity that we cannot talk about what happened to us. I'd really like to hear your story. And it looks like we're gonna be stuck here together for a while." Her smile grew wider yet more sorrowful at the same time. "Probably for a long while."

*

I hope you found us and heard our story, whoever you are. I really wish you did.

“Very interesting,” said Manuel. “We must report these findings to the Consortium immediately.”

Without waiting for an approval from Chiara or Jurriaan, he started mentally assembling a compact data transmission with the help of *Orpheus*. In a few minutes, they were prepared to send it.

Nor Chiara, nor Jurriaan objected.

When he was done, Manuel sent them a mental note of what he intended to do next.

“No!” burst out Chiara. “You cannot! They don’t deserve this kind of treatment. They died far too long ago for this procedure to be a success. You won’t revive them; you’ll get pathetic fragments if anything at all! They were heroes. They *died* heroes. You cannot do this to them.”

“It has a considerable scientific value. These bodies were preserved in an almost intact ice, sufficiently deep for shielding most of the radiation. We have never tried to revive bodies this old – and in such a good condition. We must do it.”

“He’s right,” interjected Jurriaan. Chiara looked at him in surprise. It was probably the first thing he had said on this voyage that didn’t involve his music.

She was outvoted. Even *Orpheus* expressed a support for Manuel’s proposal, although the Consortium didn’t give AIs full voting rights.

She left the cabin silently.

*

It took Manuel several days of an unceasing effort just to prepare the bodies. He filled them with nanobots and went through the results. He kept them under constant temperature and atmosphere. He retrieved what he could from the long dead ship about their medical records.

And then he began performing the procedure. He carefully opened the skulls, exposed the brains, and started *repairing* them. There wasn’t much useful left after eleven thousand years. But with the help of cutting edge designed bacteria and the nans, there was still a chance of doing a decent scan.

After another week, he started with that.

Chiara finally felt at peace. From their rendezvous with Sedna, she felt more filled with various emotions every day and finally she thought she couldn't bear it anymore. As she stepped inside *Orpheus* after the last scheduled visit of the surface of Sedna, she knew it was the time.

Inside her cabin, she lay down calmly and let *Orpheus* pump a precisely mixed cocktail of modulators into her brain. Then Chiara entered her Dreamland.

She designed this environment herself some decades ago in order to facilitate the process of creating new musical themes and ideas from her emotions and memories as effectively as she could. And Chiara felt that the story of the ancient alien ship, Theodora, Dimitri and Sedna would make wonderful musical variations. Then it will be primarily Jurriaan's task to assemble hers and Manuel's pieces, often dramatically different, into a symphony such as the world has never heard. Such that will make them famous even beyond the Jovian Consortium, possibly both among the Traditionalists and the Transitioned. They will all remember them.

Chiara smiled and drifted away from a normal consciousness.

During her stay in the Dreamland, *Orpheus* slowly abandoned the orbit of Sedna and set on a trajectory leading back to the territory of the Jovian Consortium. Another expedition, triggered by their reports back, was already on their way to Sedna, eager to find out more especially about the alien ship and to drill through the ice crust into the possible inner ocean.

Chiara, Manuel and Jurriaan had little equipment to explore the ship safely – but they didn't regret it. They had everything they needed. Now was the time to start assembling it all together carefully, piece by piece, like putting back a shattered antique vase.

Even Manuel didn't regret going away from this discovery. He had the bodies – and trying to revive their personalities now kept most of his attention. A few days after their departure from Sedna, he finished the procedure.

Chiara was awake again at the time, the burden of new feelings longing to be transformed into music gone. She didn't mind now what

Manuel had done; it would be pointless to feel anything about it after she had already created her part of the masterpiece.

Manuel first activated the simulation of Dimitri's personality.

"Where am I? Dora... Dora... Dora," it repeated like a stuck gramophone record.

"His brain suffered more damage than hers after he died," Manuel admitted. "She had time to go through a fairly common cryopreservation procedure. However..."

"I'm stuck here. Our reactor broke down and the ship tore apart. There is too much damage. My husband is dead... But we found something, I have to pass this message on... But I feel disoriented, what have I finished? Where am I? What's happening?" After a while, the female voice started again: *"Have I said this already? I don't know. I'm stuck here. Our reactor broke down..."*

"They are both mere fragments, a little memories from before death, a few emotions and almost no useful cognitive capacity. I couldn't have retrieved more. Nevertheless, this is still a giant leap forward. Theoretically, we shouldn't have been able to retrieve this much after more than eleven thousand years."

Chiara listened to the feeble voices of the dead and was suddenly overwhelmed with sorrow. It chimed every piece of her body and her mind was full of it. It was almost unbearable. And it was also beautiful.

"It is great indeed," she whispered.

She didn't have to say more. Jurriaan learned her thoughts through the open channel. She knew he was thinking the same. He listened all the time. In his mind and with help of *Orpheus*, he kept listening to the recordings obtained by Manuel, shifting them, changing frequencies, changing them... making them into a melody.

"Keep their words in it, will you?" Chiara spoke softly. "Please."

I will. They'll make a great introduction. They will give the listeners a sense of the ages long gone and of personalities of former humans. And he immersed into his composition once again. She knew better than to interrupt him now. In a few days or weeks, he will be done; he'll have gone through all her and Manuel's musical suggestions and come up with a draft of the symphony.

Then it will take feedback from her and Manuel to complete it. But Jurriaan will have the final say in it. He is, after all, the Composer.

And after that, they should come up with a proper name. A Symphony of Ice and Dust, perhaps? And maybe they should add a subtitle. Ghosts of Theodora and Dimitri Live On Forever? No, certainly not; far too pompous and unsuitable for a largely classical piece. Voices of the Dead? A Song of the Shipwrecked?

Or simply: A Tribute.

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About the author

Julie Novakova (* 1991, Prague) is a Czech author of science fiction, fantasy and detective stories. She has published short fiction e.g. in *Clarkesworld*, *Asimov's* and *Fantasy Scroll*. Her work in Czech includes seven novels (most recently the *Blíženci – Gemini –* trilogy), an anthology (*Terra Nullius*, 2015) and over thirty short stories and novelettes. She received the Encouragement Award of the European science fiction and fantasy society in 2013, the Aeronautilus award for the best Czech short story of 2014 and 2015, and for the best novel of 2015. She also translates, writes nonfiction and contributes to the Czech SF magazine *XB-1*. She is an evolutionary biologist by study and also takes a keen interest in planetary science.

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Mycelium: Part One (*excerpt*)

by Vilma Kadlečková

Five Sacred Substances. Five steps on a path toward Enlightenment: the greatest, but also the most terrible gift of the Össean civilization to human-settled planets. *Gömershaül*, known in Terran as Amber Eyes: to break the barriers of sanity. *Läegüühr*, Ice Under the Skin: to help the mind focus on a distant target. *Ökrë*, A Fall into Darkness: to engulf your mind in a fire which burns everything that was. *Yantrün*, Seeing: to help open a gate to a new world, and a new reality. And finally, *Räwë*, Voices and Stars: to speak directly to your soul, uniting the chaos of your doubt into a single, unique whole: the *Universal Sphere of Pure Being*.

Such is the Össean belief.

But then there are others. People like Lucas Hildebrandt, who understand what is expected of them, but somehow always fail to get it right. They call the *Sphere of Pure Being* the *Fear of Sure Peeing*, and instead of ascending toward God, they insist on stumbling in the opposite direction.

For people like these, the Path represents true hell. Or constant struggle for survival, at any rate.

Five steps on a path toward enslavement, addiction, and madness.

Chapter One: The Sacrament of Far-Seeing

The most important things happen unseen, they say on Össe, and Lucas Hildebrandt knew that saying well. He had an eye for subtle details that might change the course of the world, and he definitely noticed this one: a seemingly minor incident, overshadowed by all the commotion around the return of the colonists from D-Alpha. Mediants were frantically trying to prove their worth, storming all netlog channels with sensational headlines like *New Gulag Discovered!*, *Shady Dealings of the Space Research Council*, or *D-Alpha Yields Its Grisly Secret!*; but he was already a few steps ahead of them, knocking on an entirely different door.

Said door was actually a portal of stainless steel, burnished titanium and lead glass, as ostentatious as befit its location in the administrative

district. Yet a single glance at the grandiose, airy, dreamily amorphous architecture made it perfectly clear that this was no bank or office building, or indeed any kind of human institution at all. The Öscean style, aptly nicknamed *Alien Gothic*, would safely put off any financiers, managers, or lawyers: what self-respecting company would want to have their offices in a church? Passing through the majestic door to a darkened circular hall, Lucas Hildebrandt couldn't help but shudder with distaste. His hand had involuntarily shot to his shoulder in the ancient salutation of *the Devoted and the Chosen, Those Standing in Akkütlix's Shadow*, before he remembered that he didn't actually believe in Akkütlix. He quickly hid his hands in the soft folds of his poncho, and dashed furtively between the darkened columns.

Silence closed around him, nearly palpable after the noise outside. This was a different world. Lucas could nearly taste the sacred air, suffused with scented incense, and felt fear poking him in the ribs. He could almost feel the memories on the edge of his mind, the most alien memories he had, and nearly made a dash back for the door, before the deluge of elusive visions could swallow him. But then he realized why he came here: the Council; D-Alpha; the suspicion.

To hell with Össe! He didn't have time to run and hide from all this idiotic pomposity.

He looked around. A good dozen Össeans were waiting here, still and silent – a few of them standing, but most on their knees; all with their heads bowed and turned toward the center of the hall. There, just as still and silent, stood the statue of the Insect God. As tradition dictated, it was cast from smooth, shiny steel, standing in the center of a crimson *aiö* – *sun* – of rose-colored marble and red granite. All other saints have their halos floating above their heads; only Akkütlix would be treading on his, Lucas sneered inwardly. And there was something else, something easily overlooked if you didn't know what to look for: meandering channels carved in the rays of the *aiö*, burrowing in the stone like dried-up streams, all meeting at the Insect God's feet. The blackened crust at the bottom looked like ferrous garnets, ground into dust.

But it was blood.

Lucas passed the statue without even a passing glance. He found an inconspicuous spot at the back, where the gray wool of his tasseled poncho blended with the dusky stone. There were several doors in the wall, surrounded on both sides by narrow boards of blue-black slate, covered in chalk inscriptions. He looked them over; they were written in pure Ship Össein, with no transcriptive characters, and definitely no translation into some sensible human language. Humans tended to like the ornate letters of the Össean script; they made for good T-shirt designs. But few could read them well enough to stake their own life on it. No wonder he was currently the only Earthling in this majestic building at the best address in N-n-York.

The short prickle of fear had quickly passed. Lucas tended to have a laid-back, reserved attitude to almost everything, even Össe. Looking at the anxiously devout faces of his definitely-not-fellow believers, he felt the feeling of detached amusement returning. *Well, my dears, how well have you studied your little Holy Book?* he addressed them silently. *I sure hope your memory is conveniently patchy; I don't want to be stuck here all day.* Underneath his poncho, he shoved his hands in his pockets – thank God for Gerdan fashion, with a dash of Terran tackiness – and waited.

After a moment, a man in a blue priest's robe entered the hall, carrying a precious liturgical object: a wet sponge embedded in an ornate silver handle. Transcribed into the Roman alphabet, its name took about three lines, with at least a dozen ös and half a dozen ües. Before Lucas realized, his overtrained memory had dutifully dumped the word into his mind. He had no choice but recite it silently, all the while cursing Össeans for not simply calling a sponge a sponge. At a stately pace, the priest proceeded toward the altar. His religion dictated that he not avert his eyes from Akkütlix, even for a second, until he came close enough to press his forehead to the place where the shoes would be if this were a more human statue; and so he failed to notice the Earthling lurking between the columns. He performed his sacred duties, approached the wall, and used the sponge to wipe the blackboards by one of the doors. He then wrote a new verse on the right-hand side.

The Össeans all raised their heads as one. As the chalk dried and letters emerged from the darkness, they devoured them eagerly, thinking as hard as they could to decipher the meaning. The Sixteenth Book of Akkütlix – the one about the sacrament of Far-Seeing – consisted of a mere two hundred verses, but they were especially dissonant and difficult to understand, and a beast to learn. But this was Össe for you: you needed the memory of an elephant even to call your old grandmother. A stylishly dressed Öslean woman on Lucas's left shifted her weight impatiently and reached for the chalk, only to withdraw her hand in the last moment. Lucas could see the ruffled edges of her large ears shaking with anger and impatience. A single mistake could be very costly in the temple of a god so eager to take living sacrifice.

Akkütlix will probably snag a tooth trying to eat my brain, thought Lucas sardonically and grabbed the chalk before anyone else could make up their mind.

Only then did the priest notice him. "Do you have any idea what you're doing, stranger?" he squealed with unmistakable panic.

"As do all who stand here, Venerable One." Lucas knew only too well that the priest couldn't just wrest the chalk away from him, much as he might want to. Lucas was very much banking on the Öslean obsession with dignity.

"Our belief is different from yours. You may not realize –" tried the priest again, tremulously.

"Endless is Akkütlix's embrace, his arms open to all willing to stand in the shadow of his law," countered Lucas with the opening verse of the First Book, hoping to placate and impress the Öslean with his knowledge of sacred texts.

"You're risking your blood, perhaps even your life!"

"It's my blood and my life to risk, Venerable One," said Lucas, looking him in the eye. The alien's irises swirled with brown and bright orange, gradually revealing protuberances of eye-watering yellow. Lucas knew what it meant. These quivering fluctuations, this unstoppable, inescapable vortex, drawing all of you in with immeasurable force, was the reason Earthlings

found Össeans so frightening. Lucas waited a few seconds before easily escaping the prison of the priest's gaze. So much for the power of *trëighrü*.

It would be a lie to say he wasn't afraid. But the priest seemed even more frightened than Lucas. There was an uproar every time an Earthling bled to death on Akkütlix's *aiö*, even though it was always hushed up in the end: Earth needed Össe more than Össe needed Earth. *I wonder if they'd let me get away with cribbing*, smirked Lucas inwardly. He doubted it. Össeans took their sacred rites very seriously. The priest's narrow face was a quintessence of asceticism, at least what could be seen of it, covered as it was by rows upon rows of silver ceremonial rings, piercing the skin from his temples all the way to his chin so densely they resembled a living armor. They even covered the sides of his huge nose. Like any other god-fearing Öscean, he would never let anyone get away with anything; but he would also rather die than violate *The Word*, *The Mystery* and *The Commandment*.

"Your choice, Earthling."

"May Akkütlix's will be done," said Lucas theatrically and bowed to the statue, as deeply as his glaring lack of faith allowed. Without further ado, he walked to the slate board on the left and started writing.

The priest stood behind his back, watching him like a hawk. That which the Össeans called *trëighrü* still lingered faintly in Lucas's mind and played havoc with his memory. Caught in those amber alien eyes, you could easily forget your own name, let alone these verses, elusive and vague, written in the most complicated script in the known universe. Ancient *Ship Össein*, the Temple Speech, had nearly ten thousand symbols, often distinguished by a mere tiny detail – a dot here or there, a slightly different slant or angle, a trifle wider curve, or an infinitesimally thicker line. The chalk made precise writing even harder; Lucas could feel it crumbling on the wet, bumpy blackboard. *If the Össeans are so hell-bent on precision, they should furnish their temples with drawing boards*, he had once remarked to Kamëlä, a girl from Össe he knew. She had laughed at him. *If I didn't know you've learned all the Books by heart, Lus, I'd have to think you haven't read a single word of them*, she'd told him. *Haven't you understood anything?* She'd had a point. He understood all right; his brain just refused to believe the outrageousness

of it all. Slate boards represented chance and imperfection. Even if you remembered every single squiggle, you could still make a mistake – not by your own fault, but by Akkütlix's will, by the will of a crumbly chalk and an uneven blackboard. The Insect God despised intellectual defiance. Learn to draw thousands of meaningless pictures, humble supplicant; a few hours' worth of hard study every day, and in fifteen years or so you'll have them all down pat. But remember – it will never be enough. Some things will always be out of your control.

Keeping your believers in a state of constant insecurity makes a kind of sense, thought Lucas. *Too bad a die-hard skeptic like me will only risk his life around teatime on Thursdays. I certainly wouldn't have come here if I didn't have to.* Behind his back, he could feel the weight of the stone; the stone that had seen so much panic and screaming, rivers of sweat and accidental bowel release that it now literally emanated death. So far, Lucas had fortunately not done anything to contribute to its gruesome history. Seconds passed in absolute silence, interrupted only by the occasional scratching of the chalk. The onlookers, watching him draw the intricate symbols in steady, confident strokes – without unnecessary haste, but also without hesitation – could hardly doubt his sangfroid.

Still, the overwhelming ambiance of the alien temple affected him, maybe even more than others, for all that he tried to resist everything irrational with an armor of irony and skepticism. *They put you on your back, always on your back,* he thought unexpectedly.

His fingers trembled. The images came to him unbidden, despite his best intentions to ignore them. *Imagination is bravery's worst enemy,* claimed another Öslean proverb. Obviously, you could only be brave if you had no imagination whatsoever. Lucas imagined the moment that was just one stroke of the chalk away, and his breath caught in his chest. Suddenly he felt as if cold metal was already crushing his ribs, pinning him to the *aiö*. *They put you on your back, your brow by Akkütlix's feet, your head lower than your body so the blood pools underneath your chin... Ughh.* The image was so vivid he had to fight the urge to wipe the blood with the back of his hand while he still could, before they would come and bind him.

His link with Össe was embedded deeper inside him than he would have liked – it was the sort of affinity you might feel for a fishbone stuck in your throat. *Maybe I could have it surgically removed*, he thought. *Too bad they don't give you anesthesia when they do it on the altar*. He stared at a half-written symbol, racking his brain frantically for whatever might be missing, a bent curve or half-arch, but his mind had suddenly gone blank. Behind the mask of haughty composure, he felt the increasing pressure of Akkütlix's presence, almost physical, like a huge balloon blowing up inside him. A sharp, piercing tone sounded in his ears. His eyes were blinded by a dazzling light. His stomach felt heavy, as if he'd swallowed six pounds of cold clay. A sharp ray of divine consciousness pierced his mind, tinged with holy derision.

I'm going to get you, Lucas Hildebrandt. I'm going to get you whenever I want. Don't you believe it by now?

He nearly turned around. For a half-second, he nearly made an idiot of himself, wanting to shoot a quick look behind him and make sure the statue has not jumped off its pedestal and was now staring over his shoulder. *That terrible coldness; the violent chill gnawing at your bones when they put you on the stone slab...*

And then another thought came to him, much worse than this.

What does it matter if you succeed now, you fool? Your end will come soon, Lus. No matter what.

And then he heard a silent crack. The chalk had broken in his hand.

He stared unbelievably at the chalk fragments on the floor. How could he let that happen? Only the unison *aaaahhh* released by all the Össean onlookers who had been watching him with baited breath helped him regain some control. *A bad omen! A sure sign of Akkütlix's displeasure!* Superstition was the Össeans' bread and butter. All of them, including the priest, quickly raised their hands and pressed their fingers to their left shoulder.

Knock yourselves out, thought Lucas sourly. His fingernails were nervously digging in the remaining piece of damp chalk; a minuscule fragment he would have to save up as best he could. He would need every last crumb... unless he decided to give up right now. It all seemed very symbolic.

He shook his head. *Come on, you can't mess up now*, he told himself. *I forgot to take the morphine with me.*

With a grimace, he carefully added a few lines. *May the chaos return to the place it was forced to leave, the fortress from which it had been driven away; and may the screeching of birds drown out the word*, he remembered the remaining verse. It could be taken as a parable about Death, but it could just as well refer to communication, Far-Seeing, or whatever the heck you wanted. Make the twaddle vague enough and you can apply it to just about anything. He chuckled inwardly and started writing again. No, he was anything but overly afraid of death. And he could never forget the Össean script; not he. The symbols were etched permanently into his memory, sharper than with a diamond drill; an eternal brand, rubbed in with sand, burning like a red-hot thread.

Will I make it before the chalk is all used up? Oh, he could always grab another one; but then he thought of the superstitious horde gathered behind him, and decided to play it their way. If he managed to finish using only the remaining chalk, it would be a sign, an assurance that he would manage to finish all the rest. *Everything I still want to accomplish in the time that I have left*, he told himself.

The Council. D-Alpha. The Fomalhiwan. The only thing that still matters to me.

The chalk crumbled in his fingers, leaving only a trail of dust as he drew the last curve, but it was still a line. With a bit of wishful thinking and your eyes closed. Lucas was more than willing to close his eyes and think wishful thoughts. Theatrically, he swept the last pinch of chalk that had stuck behind his fingernails into the stone bowl, stepped back, and grimly looked over his handiwork.

The symbols were beautiful: balanced, precise. *Finished by fighting tooth and nail, literally*, he thought with a jeer; *just like my last day will be*. Underneath the folds of his poncho, he rubbed his frozen fingers together. *Rë Akkütlix*, he had done it. The be-ringed priest finally stopped breathing down his neck.

For a good minute, there was a complete silence. Finally, the Össean said: "Yes. You may enter."

*

The priest led him downstairs, through an oppressively narrow corridor. The lights here were embedded in the floor, and the steel plates covering the walls glinted in their diffused red light. *Typical Ancient Ship style*, thought Lucas. *A little too Össean for my liking*. The Well of Far-Seeing the priest had unlocked for him didn't look any more inviting. As tradition dictated, the omnipresent stainless steel was complemented by a hardpacked dirt floor, which did nothing for warmth and comfort. Lucas's nose was hit by the unmistakable odor of damp wood and fungi.

The Össean entered first. He raised the steel blinds covering the screens and patted them with his palm to erase the slight impressions the slats had made in them. Then he leaned over to the huge wooden vat and activated the transmitter. The fungal odor grew even stronger as the hyphae started waking up. As a well-informed customer, Lucas had skipped lunch today, and even swallowed a handful of charcoal pills as a precaution, but still felt instantly nauseated. He, who had never as much as flinched at the sight of a steep plasma slope, and had drunk Össean mushroom infusions since he was a little boy. *But I really don't like mushrooms anymore*, he thought cheerlessly. *Ever since I came back from Össe. Thank God I don't have to do this very often.*

The alien straightened up. "I shall now establish the connection, in the name of the Temple," he announced. "Where is your intended destination?"

"Thank you, oh Seeing One, but I would not presume to take advantage of your kindness. I will be happy to remain alone here, on the sacred soil."

The Össean blinked. "You wish for me to leave?" he exclaimed, genuinely taken aback, and immediately assumed the worst. "Do you doubt my word?" he said, offended. "That is entirely uncalled for, Earthling. We stand in the shade of Akkütlix's name. Any information you may wish to share is perfectly safe with us!"

"I would never dare doubt your word," Lucas assured him hurriedly. "I have come here as a suppliant, not as an unbeliever." Falling under the suspicion of blaspheming against the Öscean religion was terribly dangerous. It wasn't that he did not trust the aliens. He had no doubt they would listen in anyway so it didn't matter whether one of them would remain in the room or not; but he was also absolutely sure that even if the priests' vow of secrecy was not as unconditional as they claimed, they would never breathe a word to Terran mediantes – and that was enough for him. His reservations had another reason altogether.

He searched his memory for a suitable quote, and gathered up all the pathos he could muster. "Your time belongs to God, oh Seeing One. *Tend ye to that which belongeth to Akkütlix*, say the holy scriptures. Surely you would not find fault with me for not wanting to waste the most precious commodity in His temple." With bitter satisfaction, Lucas watched the alien's yellow eyes soften. This kind of lofty rhetoric never failed to work with the Össeans. He took a breath, and delivered the final blow. "How could I usurp more of His possessions than is my due, and make you do my work for me? By the grace of Akkütlix, your brethren have entrusted to me the instrument of Far-Seeing. I have my own pointers."

The priest's amber eyes widened with amazement, then fixed on Lucas with an entirely different intent. *Oh come on; when will you realize how useless this is?* thought Lucas, his insides cringing under the onslaught of chilly emptiness. Finally, he managed to break the *trëighrü* again.

The Öscean's eyes shone with respect, but Lucas thought he'd also caught a brief flash of suspicion. He was sure the priest was burning with curiosity, but did not expect the Öscean to actually voice any of his questions. He was right. If there was anything in the whole wide universe you could rely on, it was the Öscean sense of dignity.

"May Akkütlix sharpen your sight," the priest mumbled. He bowed to Lucas and walked out of the room, closing the steel door behind him.

I would much prefer if He let me keep the contents of my stomach, thought Lucas. He removed his poncho, hesitated briefly, and took off his shirt as well. It was cold in here, but Lucas had ample experience with walking

around with stinking mycelium residue on his shirtsleeves. He put his clothes in the furthest corner of the room where the soil did not seem as damp. Then he opened a circular case filled with nutrient solution, and pulled out two slices of yellowish jelly. Their shape reminded him slightly of the contact lenses his sister sometimes wore to give her eyes a more interesting shade than her own indeterminate blue. She even envied Lucas his own gray irises, which he always found funny. *The eyes of Akkütlix* were much larger than Sophie's, and saw much further.

Lucas walked over to the wooden vat, and looked at the dark mass inside, swollen up like hot tar and glistening with slime. He knew that if he watched the quivering surface long enough, he would be able to spot slow, unconscious movement. He preferred not to. Instead, he inspected several scratches on his forearm and the back of his hand, a couple of days old. Thankfully, they did not seem likely to reopen. He shivered at the thought of the spores of the *facultatively intravenous ascomycetes* (which was the correct term for the revolting goo in the vat) entering his bloodstream through some tiny scratch, causing hyphae to grow and spread in his veins. It seemed almost as disgusting as the stench in the room. He chose to ignore the fact that in his current situation, such concerns were absolutely laughable.

He put the mycelial pointer discs on a small chromed steel table, placed next to the vat for this very purpose. Obviously, it was a sacred object with another lengthy name in Ship Össein; but this time, Lucas actually managed *not* to remember it all. Eight syllables in, he ruthlessly cut himself off by pressing both palms to the pointers, immediately feeling the familiar hot tingling. *This would actually be very useful for defining a pain threshold*, Lucas thought wryly. *If you manage not to flinch, it's not pain yet*. With this comforting thought, he clenched his teeth and waited until the burning sensation was replaced by a strange, paralyzing numbness. The discs clung to his palms so tightly that he couldn't have pushed even a fingernail underneath. He knelt by the wooden tub and plunged his hands up to his elbows into the mycelium.

He didn't actually have to do this. Had he accepted the Seeing One's help, he wouldn't have so much as stained his pinky finger. But for this conversation, he needed to be alone.

He didn't want those on the other side to see the Össeans.

The screens lit up, and external speakers filled the room with the gargling sounds of interstellar noise. Lucas felt nausea rising up inside him from the stink of the fungi, but he knew it would pass eventually. It would return afterwards, with a vengeance: he would still be sick outside, in the fresh air, and for the whole day tomorrow, no matter how much brandy he would guzzle to wash down the persistent aftertaste from his palate. The cold, viscous substance twitched and slid through his fingers. It reminded him of custard full of tangled twine. Lucas knew only too well that it was pointless to keep his hands just beneath the surface, in the hope they wouldn't get too dirty. He needed to dive in and rummage until the pointer discs found the right thread.

Only then he would get to *them*.

Originally published in 2013. Three more books of the six-part series have been published as of yet. The fifth part is scheduled for late 2016, the sixth part for 2017. This is the first appearance of the excerpt in English.

About the author

Vilma Kadlečková (* 1971 in Prague) fell in love with writing of all things fantastic from the earliest age. Her stories started appearing in SF clubs' literary competitions and semi-legal fanzines. Once it became possible, in the early nineties, she published several books taking place in an alternative future and on different planets – in the world with working psychotronics and a mineral called argenite that fuels extrasensory powers. Her stories appeared in SF anthologies (*Imperium Bohemorum*, *Czech SF Stars*, *Bloody Honor*), she put together a children fantasy novel *The Secret Book of Shadowlight* and in 2010 she published an omnibus collection *Borders of Eternaal – Argenite Legends*.

The *Mycelium* cycle started to take shape after the events of September 11, 2001. It is her most ambitious project yet and it took more than eleven years to complete. The story takes place in a distant future, but at the same time it is a current and pertinent allegory of a clash of different cultures. Fifty years after the first contact with the ancient theocratic civilization of the planet Össe, the Terrans are still trying to come to terms with the Össean mentality. The balance of power is changing. Össean religious fanaticism is slowly creeping into the secular Terran society that, lacking an immune response to big ideologies, reacts either by xenophobia or by devout, ostentatious deference and insincere multiculturalism. But religion is not only a political force. It is always present on the level of personal experience; thus different characters of the novel try to find their own form of faith as an alternative to an institutionalized ideology. But the ones looking for a God on their own are easily sidetracked by a degenerated belief in miracles and uncritical adulation of cheap esotericism.

Mycelium is a story of a man who believes himself to be under no illusions. He scorns fanaticism. He relies on his aloofness. And indeed, he is one of the few to notice the danger – but he does not realize it's only because he steeped himself in the world of Össe too deeply. In the secret web of the intrigue of the Össean Church he fights his last desperate battle: not with the Össeans, but with himself – for the remains of his human self.

Website: www.argenite.org

Spark of Thought (*excerpt*)

by Lucie Lukacovicova

Prague, 1889

The gas lamps beautifully illuminated the silhouette of Prague Castle, of Vysehrad Castle on the opposite side of the river, the two towers of Tyn Church, and the Old Town Hall next to it with its huge astronomical clock, the Orloj.

"I have heard you arrested that inventor of yours." That was the first sentence Ignatius heard when he entered the Town Hall. He hated to go there, but from time to time, he simply had to. It had never been a pleasant visit.

Prague's mayor, Ferdinand Valis, was a middle-aged man, knowledgeable in finance, politics, and beer brewing. He was also a stern opponent of church law and Inquisition as such.

"Yes. He's accused of witchcraft. He can't enjoy the procedure of secular jurisdiction," Ignatius answered coldly.

"But you had him transported to your personal quarters." Valis didn't even blink. "That's not the prescribed procedure, is it?"

"But it's not prohibited either." Ignatius met his gaze.

"This inventor of ours is in poor health. I don't want him to die in the cold of Vysehrad dungeon. And he needs to continue some of his work, which the Church has commissioned, and it is urgent. At least he can pay some expenses of the process from his wages."

"So... You wouldn't mind if I looked through the documents about proper handling of suspects in case of witchcraft, would you?"

Ignatius looked out of the window. On the Old Town Square, lit by gas lamps, there was a beautiful statue of Joan of Arc, the bane of the Hussites, the saint who crushed the Czech heretics. He was intensely aware of Valis' presence and of his determination to oppose anything what Ignatius said or

did. It was a question of principle. The ongoing struggle between church jurisdiction and secular jurisdiction.

"No, of course not," Ignatius said slowly. "I don't mind at all."

*

Ferdinand Valis poured himself a glass of beer and watched a huge zeppelin thoughtfully.

The airship headed to the slender Petrin Tower, which resembled the Eiffel Tower in miniature. It was hastily built to show the world that the Holy Empire could keep up with the latest fashion, design, and inventive construction. At Petrin Hill, passengers could board the zeppelins of the Holy Empire Air Navy straight from the pier on the tower.

Valis looked back at his desk.

"There's no direct prohibition to what the High Inquisitor has done," the mayor stated, laying a heavy codex of church law aside. "But still. There must be a way to set that young man free. If I could only prove the Inquisition made some grave procedural mistake. I could beat them on that and stop the whole process."

His secretary, George, lifted his head from the typing machine. His short blond hair and blue eyes revealed George's Norwegian ancestry, although otherwise the twenty-year-old elegant scribe didn't resemble the Viking invaders of ancient times at all.

"There must be some additional material, some detailed instructions about the witchcraft accusations," muttered Valis as he stood up, looking through the papers and books.

"But we have our own prescriptions, sir," said George suddenly. "They are from secular law but concern any prisoner within the Holy Empire."

"What do you mean?" Valis turned to him eagerly.

George adjusted his glasses with thin rims of ivory and mother-of-pearl. "Anyone taken prisoner, accused of any crime, cannot work until his case is closed. He cannot receive any payment, financial or otherwise. The person investigating the case should behave properly and impartially. And you said the High Inquisitor had asserted that the accused was still working

for him. That is a breach of secular law." George fell silent for a moment. "But what about the poor health of the prisoner?"

"The suspect's health is only a pretext," Valis shook his head. "The inventor is slightly over thirty years old. He doesn't suffer of asthma, like I do, neither of tuberculosis, epilepsy, nor any other disease which would endanger his life. I knew him briefly during his time of studies at the Charles University. Nikola was not in poor health then, and he is not now. And we would be able to make a point of that."

"But sir, if we object, the High Inquisitor will simply throw Nikola back to jail and that will be it."

"It sends a message," said Valis, laying his hand reassuringly on George's shoulder. "I bet the High Inquisitor isn't just trying to be nice to a potential warlock. He is trying to ignore the prescriptions of secular law. He's trying to get a precedent that he can do as he pleases. If we let it be, he'll push harder in the future. The more space we leave him, the more he will consume. His appetite will only grow with the amount of food eaten, as the Czech proverb goes."

George nodded. His absolute loyalty to Valis was matched perhaps only by his skill in typing, sharp mind, and hatred for the Inquisition.

"Perhaps," George said, "we could stir the political waters a bit."

"Yes." Valis' eyes narrowed. "Stir the waters and open the discussion about the superfluity of the church law again."

*

Ignatius knelt in a side chapel of Tyn Church.

He held the silver cross hanging around his neck and lifted his eyes to the picture of his personal Patron Saint.

Joan of Arc. He tried to pray, but could not concentrate. (...)

He forgot the prayers for a while and decided to open an official letter he had received from his superiors a few hours ago.

He usually read any letters in his study. But this time he felt he would need the spiritual support and the quietness of Tyn.

The lines were brief and formal. A complaint from the Town Hall had reached the headquarters of the Inquisition for central Europe. *So Valis made his move pretty fast.*

It has also been announced that the town councilors of Prague would meet and discuss the current condition of legislation of the Holy Empire and the issues of ineffectiveness of church law. The report about the conclusions was to be sent to the Emperor's bureau.

That's worse than I expected. This stirs the waters of the status quo badly.

The Inquisition commanded Ignatius to incarcerate the problematic convict properly at Vysehrad and to torture a confession out of him as soon as possible. *They are afraid of Valis. They will relent and he will push further.*

Faced with possible political consequences, the Church didn't want Nikola nor his inventions anymore. Suddenly nobody cared about science, let alone the life of a single person. Ignatius could lie to himself no longer; he couldn't pretend he didn't understand the message. The order was clear, and there was no way around it.

They will make me kill him.

Ignatius desperately wanted to scream but made no sound.

Why did I start all this? Why didn't I just discard the denunciation on which I had based his arrest? Why did I take the chance? How could I imagine I would have him for myself? So near. Like this.

The candles were flickering in the complete silence of the church. Joan of Arc offered no answers. (...)

They will make me kill him. I'd rather be dead myself.

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About the author

Born in Prague, Czech Republic, Lucie Lukacovicova studied librarianship and cultural anthropology at Charles University. She loves traveling and collecting myths, legends, fairy-tales and ancient religious texts.

She gives lessons in creative writing and works as a translator from English and German into Czech; she also speaks Spanish. Her literary work

published in English as e-books include the novel “Spark of Thought” (Less Than Three Press, 2016) and a SF short story “Child’s Fears” (in *Around the World in more than 80 SF Stories*, Saphir im Stahl, 2016). Published so far only in Czech are about one hundred short stories, many articles and four novels: a historical fantasy *Vládci času* (*The Masters of Time*), a science fiction murder mystery *Stanice Armida* (*Station Armida*), an urban fantasy *Detektivní kancelář Sirius* (*Private Detective Agency Sirius*) and a slightly mystical historical fantasy about alchemists in Prague *Zelený drak, karminový lev* (*Green Dragon, Carmine Lion*). At the moment she is working on a steampunk novel *Hrbáčova křídla* (*The Hunchback’s Wings*).

She received the European fandom’s Encouragement Award in 2007.

She highly appreciates the support of her fans and keeps in touch with them. Therefore she also visits and lectures at various conventions.

She likes any literary challenge and experiments with different genres and literary styles. After finishing the university, she never stopped reading and studying. If she would be a character in a story, she would be the book-worm mage or the linguist, deciphering scrolls of long forgotten lore.

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Hexagrammaton (excerpt)

by Hanuš Seiner

translated by Julie Novakova

"Let us remind ourselves of our destiny."

The captain approached the command console slowly. Characters of the Vaian alphabet lit the screen. Clusters of the crew stood in the front cabin patiently, hiding in the dimness of the large space. Their bowed faces were not disfigured only by the inexorable signs of the virus; submission had erased the gleam from their eyes, humiliation had engraved deep wrinkles in their skin. What followed resembled a bitter elegy.

"We live in stillness and darkness," the captain read.

"We live in stillness and darkness," fifty voices echoed.

"...deep under our conquerors' boots."

"...deep under our conquerors' boots."

A narrow line of the ship's front windows ran behind the captain's back. The dim lights of the cabin reflected from the thick glass' surface. Beyond it, the shields glinted dark-blue, those heavy lids of vanadium steel closed five years ago, never to open again.

"But in ourselves, we bear the legacy of those who came to raise us up," the captain continued.

"But in ourselves, we bear the legacy of those who came to raise us up," the crew whispered mechanically.

"...and thus our enslavement has a meaning."

"...and thus our enslavement has a meaning."

In the short periods of silence, the quiet song of the running engines could be heard. Their sound wavered with the rhythm of the crew's words. The virus mediated the crew's feelings to the engines, just as it opened their minds to the engines' distant thoughts.

"Even though our gift became a burden..."

"Even though our gift became a burden..."

"...we still can pass its power unto humanity..."

"...we still can pass its power unto humanity..."

“...as Vaían asked us and as we promised Vaían.”

“...as Vaían asked us and as we promised Vaían.”

They all knew the words by heart and long ago had ceased searching for solace in them. They only found the unrelenting truth about what they truly were.

“That is our destiny,” the captain concluded the ritual.

“That is our destiny,” fifty bowed heads repeated after her.

She touched the screen with her fingertips. It went dark again.

“This is how we remind ourselves of our destiny, as well as all the other crews. You may return to your posts. Thank you.”

*

Threads of rain drummed relentlessly on the car’s tin roof. Streams running down the windows merged and went separate ways again. The air suffocated with water and the smell of wet earth. I stopped where the muddied road met a tall razor wire fence. I almost couldn’t see the gate in the thick rain; if it weren’t for the guard’s booth, it would seem that the fence crossed the road ruthlessly and gave no one from the outside a chance to reach the peak of the towering cone.

A soldier in a green-gray raincoat walked to the car and waited for me to roll down the window. Splashes of freezing water fell upon my arm. The soldier looked inside, at me and then Janita crouching in the passenger’s seat, and finally the cigarette box I handed to him along with a file in a water-proof folder. He took both in his cold callused fingers. I saw him checking the small bundle of wrinkled banknotes amidst the cigarettes; not a bribe, just a token of gratitude for limiting the personal searches and interrogations of my clients to the necessary minimum. He grunted approvingly, pocketed the file and box under his raincoat and hurried to the booth.

We remained silent. My gaze traveled to the rear mirror. The wiper fought the assaults of water tenaciously and at moments, I could recognize the outline of a village crouching by the cone’s base. From this afar, it resembled a stone battleship on a dark sea of the fields, the crows a parody of its gulls. The cone itself could have been a freak wave about to sweep the

ship into the muddy depths. But the scene was motionless, still like the lives of those buried deep underneath.

"Is everything all right? Is it supposed to go like this?" Janita was studying me with her European eyes the color of sesame seeds. I nodded.

*

When Janita first came to my office two weeks ago, I found nothing unusual in her. She was a little sleep-deprived and disoriented by the change in gravity and the openness of spaces on Earth; like all my clients. She introduced herself, I glimpsed through her application and gestured at her to sit down. By the rules, I had to first ask her a couple of questions to make sure that she wasn't just impersonating the real Janita Paltev. Like her birth date.

"June third, year seventy-one."

Or her nationality.

"The Free Republic of Europa and Ganymede." (Oh the mixture of bitterness and pride in all of their voices! Some even answered *Vaían*. As long as they didn't daringly write it in their forms, I ignored it. I don't look for trouble.)

The next question was necessary: "Who are you visiting?"

"Corporal Petr Paltev. My father."

"On which ship?"

"*The Destroyer of Seven Villages*," she replied without hesitation, though the answer wasn't simple. Each of the ships' names consisted of five Vaían symbols whose meaning depended on the three-letter cipher key used to read them. By applying the trigrammatons, *The Destroyer of Seven Villages* could also be called *The Obsidian Snail*, *Deep Slumber*, *Embrace of Aldebaran* or *Devil's Martyr*. The cycle was closed; by applying the next key, *Devil's Martyr* would change back into *The Destroyer of Seven Villages*. It remained difficult for people to shake off the feeling that one of the ciphers of the cycle is the basic one, and they obstinately insisted upon it. However, the Vaían civilization saw no difference in them; the cycle didn't begin or end anywhere and the ship bore all the names at once. More complex ciphering loops built upon the trigrammaton cycle. But Vaían didn't have the time – or

will – to give humans all the four- or five-letter keys to the tetra- and pentagrammaton cycles, therefore their extent and structure remained unknown despite all the government cryptologists' best efforts.

"Reason of the visit?"

She shifted in her seat. "Death in the family. My father's sister succumbed to cancer a month ago. I want to tell him in person. Anyway, he needs to sign papers regarding the inheritance, she had no children..."

I was leafing through the file. Everything seemed to be in order.

"Do you have a statement of health from an approved physician?"

She handed me a folded piece of paper. I looked upon it and felt the tickle of complication.

"This is just an unverified copy. You need an original or a certified copy."

"Oh," she breathed out. "But the original is on Europa. Cannot you certify it?"

I gave her the copy back. "I could but won't. There are three army hospitals with the necessary certification in town and they can give you a new statement in any of them. With some luck, you can get it today and we can resume tomorrow. What do you say?"

I really don't look for trouble. However, Janita morphed into one big trouble at that moment. "I can pay you. A lot. More than you'd think. Just certify the copy, please, and take me to the *Destroyer*."

She was still the shy girl with speckled skin and slumped shoulders. Yet while five minutes ago, I'd thought she was afraid of me, now I felt afraid of her.

"Please," she insisted, "it's the most important thing of my life. And even though you don't realize it now, in yours too."

I should have called the guards. Or I should have soothed her somehow, waited til her departure and then informed the police or my superiors. Instead, I watched in silence as she raised her pale sinewy arm, as if made of glass noodles, and pulled aside her hair. Her bared temples revealed what they had to reveal.

“Oh, damn,” escaped me. I haven’t seen anything like this for four or five years. After the last refugee camps on Earth had closed, I hoped not to see it ever again. The viral incubant was swirling among her hair roots, drawing spirals, symbols, labyrinths of images, resembling the dark Maori tattoos. I did not dare to guess how many people Janita had to bribe, blackmail, kill or sleep with to get here, into the comfortable chair in my office. The European guerilla army extended its fingers to me across half the system and grasped my throat. Across the table sat a true pro-Vaían fundamentalist, and on her body, she was carrying the alien civilization’s gift to humanity.

Originally published in Mlok 2013 anthology of award-winning stories from the annual Karel Čapek Prize contest. “Hexagrammaton” had won the prize. The whole translated story will be published at Tor.com on May 10, 2017. Set your calendars!

About the author

Hanuš Seiner is a Czech scientist and occasional SF writer. He holds a PhD degree in applied physics and is currently employed as an associate professor at the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague. Hanuš is married, has two kids, and lives in Pardubice, Czech Republic. Up to now, he has published more than 10 short stories, mostly combining elements of hard SF and space opera subgenres. His short stories appeared in Czech and Slovak SF magazines (*Ikarie*, *XB-1*, *Jupiter*) and in anthologies (*Mlok* book series, *Terra Nullius*). His other story translated into English, “Terra nullius”, is upcoming in *Strange Horizons*.

Small Markets, Big Wonders

by Julie Novakova

How many copies make a bestseller? What does an author need to do in order to have a novel accepted by a publishing house? How does a SF magazine work? We often contemplate these questions but perhaps rarely realize how vastly the answers can differ between national markets.

Last summer, I met Neil Clarke at Worldcon in London and we spoke about speculative fiction (SF, or *fantastika*) on the Anglo-American and Czech markets, finding sometimes unexpected differences, and the idea to zoom in on the workings of Czech SF sprang up.

But before you read further, beware: This is a zombie story.

*

From reading market statistics and talking with people in publishing, one can easily come to the notion that current Czech SF market is a high castle built of cards, splendid but fragile and constantly on the verge of collapse. But in spite of all financial crises, VAT changes and an alleged decrease in reading habits, it refuses to collapse, for which most of us are eternally grateful. Is it really as fragile as it looks? How does it differ from the English-speaking market and can either offer any useful insights to the other?

Czech SF has a rich history, from Jakub Arbes or Svatopluk Čech to J. M. Troska, Karel Čapek or Josef Nesvadba and to many modern authors. However, publishing was severely affected by political changes in the twentieth century. Nazi occupation during WWII and the subsequent decades of communist regime resulted in sixty years of very little freedom in this aspect as well as many others. After 1989, the market grew rapidly. Books and authors previously banned by the regime experienced a big boom and numbers of copies in tens of thousands were no exception. Yet on such a small market—Czechoslovakia (before division into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993) had about fifteen million inhabitants—this could not go on for long. After early 1990s, the numbers went down and stabilized rather in the thousands. Today, works of fiction are usually being published in fifteen

hundred to two thousand copies, though the number varies largely depending on the author, genre, and publishing house. How many sold copies make a bestseller? There is no official statement; some say three thousand already, but most publishers agree on ten thousand. In SF, many put the line at five thousand copies.

There are typically seventeen thousand published titles in a year (about ninety percent of them are new titles, about ten percent reprints). A little under seven thousand of them are fiction, and almost seven hundred constitutes speculative fiction¹, from which slightly more than fifty percent is fantasy, almost thirty percent science fiction and less than twenty percent horror (not broken into more specific categories like YA, genre romance etc.).

Most of them are translations; the number of novels, anthologies or story collections by Czech SF authors fluctuates around one hundred per year. The increasing trend of translated fiction is more apparent in SF than in the whole market: Overall, translations account for more than a third of all books published in the Czech Republic. More than half of the translations are from English titles, but German and French are also numerous with other languages falling behind these three. For comparison: The ratio of translated fiction on the US market is about one percent.

In the number of book titles published per year per one million people, the Czech Republic with fifteen hundred and eighty titles scored fifth in Europe, after Denmark, the United Kingdom, Slovenia and Spain². That doesn't sound bad, does it? But does it reflect how much people read? According to the NOP World Culture Score Index, Czech people spend on average seven and a half hours a week reading, which made for the sixth position, the first being taken by India with more than ten and a half hours of reading per week. These results paint a nice picture of the Czech Republic from the view of publishing. But there is no official data for the speculative fiction market. Can something tell us more?

Luckily, yes. To find more answers, we should go to the magazines.

*

We have two professional speculative fiction magazines in the Czech Republic: *XB-1* (formerly *Ikarie*) and *Pevnost*. Both are quite lively zombies.

Let me explain: *Ikarie* had been the first professional Czech SF magazine, founded in 1990. It was canceled in December 2010 by the publisher due to a decline in advertising revenue (surprisingly, a SF magazine drew fewer advertisers than lifestyle magazines). But the staff did not give up, found an independent publisher and without pause continued the magazine under the name *XB-1* (from the classic Czech SF film *Ikarie XB-1*), as the former publisher still held rights for *Ikarie*.

Similarly, *Pevnost* closed down in January 2013 but it was revived two months later thanks to a risk-loving and SF-loving investor.

Then again in June 2013, *XB-1* announced closure due to financial problems but later in the same month, another such investor stepped in and saved the magazine.

Pevnost and *XB-1* were resurrected by fans that believed the magazines brought something good and irreplaceable to readers and could ultimately prosper given wiser financial decisions and PR. To this day, they are both stable and popular.

Their sale numbers could tell us more about the number of SF readers; unfortunately, neither of the magazines discloses them. The estimate is somewhere between five and eight thousand sold copies each month, with *Pevnost* (more multimedia, film, fantasy and YA-focused) likely selling more than *XB-1* (focused primarily on fiction, translated as well as Czech). The vast majority of the sales are print versions. How is it comparable to situation on other markets?

We can try to make a comparison to Anglo-American magazines. Gardner Dozois's summation of 2013 in his 31st Year's Best SF anthology indicates that *Asimov's* sells around twenty-three thousand copies, as well as *Analog*. *F&SF* was around eleven thousand. But the American market is unique in the number of electronic and online magazines very successfully competing with their print cousins.

Interzone, the most famous British SF magazine with a long-standing tradition, was estimated to sell around two thousand copies. Yet the United Kingdom has a population of about sixty-four million people—six times more than the Czech Republic. However, the sales are hardly comparable

because there is no language barrier between the UK and USA. We should look at countries with national languages other than English. There are a lot of European magazines, but they're mostly nonpaying e-zines. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to locate the sales numbers for regular print magazines, which are not many. For those which have social network accounts, I could only look at their online communities, typically much less active and smaller than for the Czech magazines³.

And as far as I know, *XB-1* and Polish *Nowa Fantastyka* are the only European paying print magazines that regularly publish translations of foreign stories. One of the most famous European magazines, Russian *Esli*, which had been doing so as well, ceased publication three years ago.

In these circumstances, I cannot be but grateful for *XB-1* and *Pevnost*.

We've got zombie magazines—and they're magazines to be proud of.

*

Nevertheless—there are really only two magazines. Recently, the Slovakian irregularly published e-magazine *Jupiter* joined them as another paying venue for short SF in Czech and Slovak. But imagine you were Ray Bradbury and you wrote one good short story a week. If all of them should be published and paid, you'd need to fill all these magazines yourself and also contribute to most anthologies on the market—impossible. If you were that productive short fiction writer, you'd either need to publish short story collections or offer your stories online—but in the latter case, you couldn't expect to make profit.

When I wrote about Anglo-American online genre magazines for the website of *XB-1*, some people asked in the comments why we haven't got a professional online magazine in the Czech Republic. Surely it would be a good thing!

It certainly would. Unfortunately, it's verging on the impossible. Even with a similar percentage of paying readers that *Clarkesworld* has, an online magazine in such a small market would be extremely lucky just to break even. It's a risk no one is willing to take now, though that may change in the future if the readers' behavior shifts significantly towards supporting their favorite projects even if they can access their contents for free.

However, while pro-paying online periodicals could hardly exist in today's Czech market, that doesn't apply to e-books or electronic magazines. E-books currently account for less than two percent of revenue on the market but their impact is growing larger every year—and I've already mentioned the magazine *Jupiter*. What's more, those two percent apply to the book market as a whole. In science fiction publishing, the number is approaching twenty percent. E-books are certainly proving a viable strategy for publishers and many who refused to do them just a few years ago are now happily publishing them and would strive much harder without them.

But let's go back to the authors. The process from having a story/novel accepted and published is not much different from anywhere else; it's the part before that differs.

For a start, forget an agent. We're talking about a tiny market where only a handful of authors can make a living from writing—if they don't have a very expensive lifestyle. Agents are just unheard of. It's up to authors to submit their work to publishers. Unfortunately, most don't quite know how to do it. Publishers receive countless e-mails from authors who send them partial work; sagas printed out in Comic Sans, and novels totally outside their publishing scope.

A reasonable author figures on her own that the manuscript should be complete, with simple, readable formatting and ideally a synopsis, with a concise cover letter. But there are ways to help authors and publishers at the same time—especially by utilizing submission guidelines. Most Czech publishers don't have these. Any information about submitting manuscripts and whether the publisher is willing to look at unsolicited work is missing from the vast majority of publishing houses' sites. That results not just in a flood of crazy queries and submissions but also in uncertainty on the author's side. The lack makes it more complicated for both sides—but for some mysterious reason, nothing changes.

Why, you ask? The answer is again “small market”; a market where beginning authors are expected to make their appearance in contests first and have a couple of stories published in anthologies of the winning pieces before they submit to the magazines or write a novel. Once you follow the

contest results and read the anthologies and magazines, you start noticing some names and if their fiction appeals to you, you either solicit new stories from them or read their submission if they send you something. Apart from contests, anthology entries are typically solicited too. Or, sometimes, the guidelines travel by word of mouth.

In such a small and tight community as the Czech fandom undoubtedly is, it works, but this status quo may make it hard for new writers to establish themselves unless they participate in short story contests. On the other hand, the contests don't charge any submission fees, with one recent exception. But they also don't pay the published authors, unlike the magazines. Breaking onto the market with paid pieces is difficult almost regardless of how good you already are—which is a significant difference from the Anglo-American market, where nothing prevents you from submitting to the best magazines right away and the result is just up to the quality of your work and a bit of luck. All of that makes clear submission guidelines and tracking submissions very new—and pleasant!—for Czech authors once they venture abroad.

*

So what can we gather about the Czech market from all this? The number of published speculative fiction books, the magazines and their sales, compared to the number of Czech speakers, seems almost unreal. It suggests the Czech SF fan base is strong and active, but the peripeties faced by the magazines and some publishers also show that the current situation, however remarkable, really is fragile. We've mostly had happy endings so far, but can we count on it?

The rise of e-books and rapidly growing popularity of audiobooks are a sign that the traditional market is changing, though it's coming later and more slowly than on the Anglo-American market. On the other hand, we can't expect the changes to copy that development due to the small size of our market, which renders some of the changes next to impossible.

Czech SF works feature ambitious sagas as well as adventure-based book series, space opera as well as high fantasy, hard SF, military, detective SF and countless other subgenres. Maybe only weird and slipstream fiction

don't seem to be doing very well on the home turf. The market is small yet flourishing, at least more than would be expected, but it's rather isolated; the flow of translations—especially from English—goes in but very few Czech SF works go out. A handful of short stories had been translated into English, others, including novels, into Polish. Thanks to Jaroslav Olša, Jr., the former Czech ambassador in South Korea (currently in the Republic of The Philippines), some pieces were also translated into Korean. Classics like Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* were published in many languages, however, modern works rarely have any translations. With uncertainty about publishing the translation and the cost of it, the risk is too high.

I don't dare predict if and how this trend changes but I know of several authors considering writing in English or trying to get their works translated. Another question is whether the shift to writing in English is just a good thing or it takes something away as well. Vilma Kadlečková, a well-known Czech SF author whose story "Longing for Blood" had been translated and published in *F&SF* in 1997, says that despite her experience as a translator from English into Czech, she wouldn't write in English because her language is richer and more nuanced when writing in her mother tongue. That's certainly true for a majority of authors. Is writing in a foreign tongue more restrictive on one's style and imagination?

I'd say there's no definitive answer. In my view, it depends on the individual authors, their particular word power and the stories they write. Let us see when we have a large enough sample to compare...

The future seems more uncertain than ever—but also promising and full of adventure. If publishing taught me anything so far, it's that it is largely unpredictable. Let's take a ride into the future and see. And while we're at it, let's try to wisely use the steering wheel as well.

Useful links:

- [Europa SF site](#) (in English)
- [XB-1's website](#) (in Czech)
- [Pevnost's website](#) (in Czech)

- [Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror, annual summaries](#) (in Czech)

Footnotes:

¹ For a rough comparison: According to Locus magazine, the number of English-language books of interest in the SF field published in 2013 was a little over 2600 (via Gardner Dozois in his Year's Best SF: Thirty-First Annual Collection).

² <http://jakubmarian.com/number-of-books-published-per-year-per-capita-by-country-in-europe/>

³ Facebook followers numbers: nearly 2000 for XB-1, more than 3000 for Pevnost.

Originally published in Clarkesworld Magazine (04/2014), later translated into Czech for the e-zine Sarden (2015), and into Estonian for the e-zine Reaktor (2016).

Thank you for reading the book!

We hope that you liked *Dreams From Beyond: Anthology of Czech Speculative Fiction*, and invite you to share your thoughts about it. We'll appreciate it if you [send](#) us links to any reviews of the anthology.
Thanks!

Feel free share the book on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and other social media!