

LEGEND OF A GREAT WARRIOR



cyber-slavic abnormal stories

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Legend of a Great Warrior

It was in those distant years of the three-thousands. Across boundless plains rode hordes of mutants of diverse, most often lethal sort, and all manner of rabble that had bred without measure or purpose after the Night of the Great Nothingness.

Silence. Stillness. The howl of wind barely disturbed the harmony of the static idyll.

"He who does not know what the Spacva forest is, does not know what fear is," Marko Ivanovich laboriously spelled out, tracing the letters with a gnarled finger. On a hard piece of yellowish plastic a sign stood proudly, unstained by centuries of omnipresent entropy.

"Hey!" he turned to the others who were rummaging through the dusty ruins of Technograd. "Gentlemen, does any of you know what the Spacva forest is?"

"The Spacva forest? Hmm... You really mean the Spacva forest? Isn't that this thing here, what they used to call the European Amazonia?"

"Come on, don't be an idiot. I thought you wouldn't know," Marko nodded with satisfaction. "We haven't been known since time immemorial as a fearless sort for nothing. That's why we survived the Night of the Great Nothingness, unlike most of the other badgers who thought they were some kind of Uskoks. Hand on heart, it helped quite a bit that we hid in the basement of that building, but..."

Faint rustling sounds came from his rucksack.

"What? You know what the Spacva forest is?" he said, pulling Mihovil the Rectangular out of the rucksack. In the gloomy atmosphere of radioactive clouds Mihovil seemed browner than he actually was and smelled somehow strangely charred.

"Some kind of ancient graphics card. Those were very valuable during the ancient AI times."

"Well, fancy that. Where did you get that from?"

"I don't know myself. For a moment it seemed I had an inkling of what the Spacva forest is, but since I still don't know what fear is, I must have been wrong. And maybe we're fearless precisely because we know nothing about them? I mean, about those graphics cards. Some kind of connection, eh?"

Marko Ivanovich stared at Mihovil with concern. Ever since some unheard-of mutation had turned him into a brick, he had been behaving more and more strangely and saying such peculiar things. He could no longer ride, nor wield a sharp yataghan, he no longer drank, and his voice didn't echo through gorges in any satisfactory way. Actually, Marko's voice didn't echo through gorges in a satisfactory way either, owing first and foremost to the fact that they were standing in the middle of a boundless plain, but when the whole situation was carefully considered, that realization was of only negligible operational significance.

They had kept Mihovil for a whole week in a barrel of slivovitza, but it hadn't helped much. He still talked about walls, ziggurats, Mesopotamia, and generally about things that don't exist. Well, walls do exist, but not the kind Mihovil described. Straight. Resolute. Sheltering. In the end he did sing a little, and everyone felt relieved.

Just as Marko was putting Mihovil back in the rucksack, from behind a pile of rubble and debris appeared Hopeless Zdenko, carrying some kind of device in his lower arms, while with his upper ones he proudly pressed to his chest a container full to the brim with slivovitza. On the metal, slightly dented vessel a sign was still clearly visible: "Absolute zero, handle with care."

"Hey, give me some of that," now from behind the ruins appeared YXarX as well, reaching greedily for the container, whereupon Hopeless kicked him with his left front leg in the chitinous chest plate. YXarX squealed in pain and toppled into the dust.

"Get lost, I'll fuck your insect mother!" Hopeless bellowed, clutching the container possessively, shooting YXarX with his remaining eye. "You'd drink slivovitza! And you're not even a Neo-Uskok. Look at yourself. You're all in rags, like those shit-stained mutants that drag themselves through the ruins."

"I'm not in rags, my old armour is cracking. Ever since my horse started leaking, I've been slowly growing," YXarX retorted bitterly, awkwardly rising on his jointed legs. "And I'm not an insect, I'm a Gee'bar, I've already told you that, you dimwit. On my planet everyone is like me."

"What's a planet now?"

"It's like stars. In the sky."

"Clouds?" asked Marko.

"No, it's round and surrounded by nothingness."

"Well, I've never seen clouds like that," Marko said suspiciously, roguishly tucking his left moustache behind his ear and gazing into the gloomy sky.

"Bullshit," came quietly from his rucksack. "What black planets. The only thing that truly matters are walls. Resolute. Straight."

"There he goes about walls again," Hopeless sighed with concern and shook his head, examining the object he held in his lower arms. It emitted a strangely modulated buzzing and possessed some quality that was difficult to describe. It confused the senses. One would say the object was dark, but

that definition would be exceedingly superficial, as it could with equal accuracy be described as light.

When speaking of its weight, every word would sound harsh as a curse, however carefully one minded refinement and subtlety of expression. It had some tongue-indescribable comprehensiveness that would be capable of driving any reasonably sensitive person to madness. Hopeless, not possessing that quality, stuffed the object into his rucksack like a dead rat, deciding to examine it more thoroughly later.

Mihovil began to sing softly, which filled the others with peace and hope for a better tomorrow, and they too began to sing.

In the end, thought Marko, it isn't so terrible that he had become a brick. Small he may be, but in his passionate edges and manly, resolute faces there is a certain harsh elegance.

Having found nothing more that would be useful, interesting, or edible, they swiftly leapt onto their horses and set off into the parched, barren plain. YXarX lagged slightly behind, as his horse was not in the best shape. In the last battle a plasma beam had damaged its reactor and some shimmering, warm liquid kept slowly draining from it. They had tried to fix it somehow, but his horse was of the rare Aprilia breed, while the others rode Suzuki and Honda, so the parts simply wouldn't fit.

Marko rode at the head of them all, proudly and unwaveringly, as befits a Neo-Uskok harambasha, leader of the former pirates, now just heroic warriors in every possible situation. His manly moustaches, shaped by many a kiss from countesses and daughters-in-law alike, streamed behind him like victory banners, and his broad Slavic soul jutted so far sideways from his chest that its air resistance harmoniously tamed the lavish power of his red stallion.

They rode through the dusty plain encountering no one, until night began to fall. Due to the radioactive shimmer of the whole surroundings, the area couldn't boast any particular darkness, yet just like the ancient nights before the Night of the Great Nothingness it still concealed enemies and all manner of unknown dangers. The old Uskok saying went: he who doesn't camp at night is the first at dawn. And it's known: whoever's first, treads shit.

They made camp in the bed of a dried river that hid them from view and pulled their spoils from the saddlebags. It happened by chance that the moment they descended into the riverbed they ran into a scorpion the size of a man, which attacked them without hesitation, but YXarX swiftly cut it down with a blast from his blaster. The others nodded approvingly, both for his battle skill and for the generous meal, which in taste somewhat resembled lobster. They lit a fire and began to roast the scorpion, coating the blades of their sharp yataghans with its venom.

"Those Neo-Venetians really gave us a proper thrashing last time," said Mihovil. From close to a hundred, only the four of us heroes are left.

The others only nodded their heads, recalling the fallen friends with respect. They themselves had barely scraped out alive from the cunning ambush prepared for them by the despised Mediterranean pirates.

"Yes, it was rough," said Marko, briskly rummaging through the saddlebags. "But let us always keep in mind that the most important thing is to participate, as the learned Don Copperton wisely said."

Marko was known to resort to situational philosophy, which sometimes didn't quite strike at the heart of the problem. Despite this, Hopeless Zdenko instantly rallied and a tear of emotion started in his eye. He approached Marko, embraced him and gave him a friendly hug. In doing so he hooked

the ataman's horse with his rear right leg and it fell to the ground with a loud crash.

"See," Hopeless turned to the others, "that's what sets a harambasha apart from the other Neo-Uskoks. That enthusiasm, optimism, always a kind word. That endless wisdom."

He turned back toward the harambasha, tearful-eyed.

"Marko, you're like a father to me!"

His voice carried the tremor of suppressed emotions.

"Aren't you older than him?" asked YXarX.

"You don't understand anything," Hopeless snapped back. "If you were a Neo-Uskok, you'd know how all that goes."

"I'm not a Neo-Uskok and that's that. You're a real tiresome pain in the arse. I've been riding with you since my ship ran aground on your planet, which is a good ten years now. I've taken part in every battle and fought alongside you shoulder to shoulder like any other Neo-Uskok. So why am I still not a Neo-Uskok?"

"Because you don't look like a Neo-Uskok and you have more shoulders than you should," Hopeless stubbornly retorted, firmly crossing all four arms over his chest covered in soft feathers.

"Boys, enough!" said Marko, picking up the horse and wiping his hands of dust. "Let us beware of blanket judgements. Let us distinguish criticism from nitpicking. Come now, gentlemen, we are no one's small change!"

They all stared at him in bewilderment, whereupon he smiled in confusion and lowered the finger with which he had been emphasising the grandeur of his leadership utterance.

"Well, what? I heard that's how people used to address others."

"What does all that mean?" Mihovil asked him.

"I have no idea. But how about we open that slivovitza and have a few drinks. Who's in?"

"I am," said Hopeless and began carefully opening the metal container.

When he finally unscrewed the lid the whole surroundings were covered in frost and it became considerably colder. The brandy was of the finest sort, three hundred and eighty percent proof homemade. Its boiling point was below absolute zero, so it was most commonly stored in that noble drink. Just as the worm from the tequila was always kept for the leader of the Mexican bandidos, so too did the absolute zero in the brandy by tradition always belong to the Uskok harambasha.

When they had drunk close to half the container, washing down the delicious meal, Marko pulled out a gusle and led the singing. The powerful basses of the Neo-Uskoks resounded thunderously for kilometres across the bleak nocturnal plain, and since YXarX also possessed tracheo-tonal organs similar to a cricket's, he sang below the auditory spectrum as well, causing minor tectonic disturbances.

There was wild dancing around the fire too. Mihovil was generating small waves in his vessel of slivovitza, which was his version of dancing. A song about some river was struck up. It is an old Uskok song dedicated to an ancient type of vessel, for the Uskoks were originally seafarers. While Marko, flushed red, leapt over the fire, the others accompanied him with whistles, clapping, and cheerful "hey, hey, hey." After a few cups they all remembered their youth and sang cheerfully, but with grim facial expressions, as befits heroes. Then, after a few more drinks, Marko struck up a song about Viljenko the Various and they all joined in. When the song fell silent, YXarX asked: "Come to think of it, did Viljenko the Various ever actually exist?"

"Exist?" Hopeless was aghast. "But we're talking about the greatest of all Neo-Uskoks. He's here today, with us."

"How is that possible?" YXarX asked again, using the favourite phrase of the late Major Borovicka. "Didn't he die a hero's death long ago?"

"Idle fancies," Mihovil said drowsily and gazed pensively into the darkness.

"And love may yet befall us," said Marko and blushed like a young girl.

The others only looked at him questioningly.

"Forget it," he rose awkwardly to his feet and shuffled off into the dark with embarrassment.

"Viljenko was once an ordinary man," Mihovil continued, enjoying how the metal dish amplified his voice. "He was a fearless warrior, a splendid friend, and a man of vision. Across the world the most incredible stories and legends were spun about his heroic deeds. Friends delighted in his brilliant personality, while the despised enemy would soil himself with terror at the mere mention of his name. Women loved him so much that at least ten of them jumped from balconies, overwhelmed by an insatiable longing for his heroic private parts. In battle he was always first and the only two words he knew were: victory, victory, victory!"

"But..." YXarX started, but Hopeless elbowed him in the place where his chest plate meets his rear. Mihovil continued.

"The story goes that one night, accompanied by only a handful of his closest friends, he slaughtered an entire enemy encampment and burned their grain. When he returned to his homeland, they carried him on their shoulders to the hotel 'At the Two Tankards,' where Countess Smiljana had arranged unheard-of orgies in honour of the event. slivovitz flowed in

streams, and reportedly Viljenko himself drank four absolute zeros and in the end gave a speech so fiery that it took a hundred guests two hours to put out half the hotel. In a word, Viljenko the Various was a Neo-Uskok, one of a kind."

The others listened to Mihovil's story with approving nods.

"And?" said YXarX.

"What and?"

"And what happened then?"

"Ah, that. At the time of the Night of the Great Nothingness, when the fiery death ravaged the entire globe, Viljenko the Various passed into another quality of existence."

"A splendid euphemism, you're truly a master of metonymy, catachresis, and synecdoche. Stylistic figures in general. You mean he died?"

"No, exactly as I said, Viljenko the Various passed into another quality of existence. Since then he has appeared in a dozen different bodies. It's something like multiple personality, only in reverse. In multiple personality, several people live in one body, whereas with Viljenko the situation is such that he is one person inhabiting several different bodies. Remarkably, Countess Larisa Stroganova is reportedly one of the bodies in which Viljenko resides. In her case, the old sensualist has slipped into a truly beautiful body."

"Tits?" asked Hopeless.

"My God," said Mihovil with longing in his voice.

"And legs and arse?" came Marko Ivanovich's voice from the darkness.

"Miraculous. Absolute perfection."

"Perspicacious?"

"Abnormally."

"So, really absolute perfection," YXarX now agreed as well, being a slave to the pronounced sexual dimorphism characteristic of his species.

"And what's happening now with the other bodies?"

"Hard to say," said Mihovil, "nobody actually knows how many bodies Viljenko has. People say a dozen, but no one is certain. The only thing known for sure is that below his left breast he has a birthmark in the shape of a sarma."

"What do you mean, in the shape of a sarma?" Marko was puzzled.

"I don't know, that's what they told me."

"And that didn't strike you as strange at the time?"

"Not then, but now that you mention it..."

At that moment from the darkness came a shriek that froze the blood in one's veins.

The heroes leapt to their feet and drew their sharp yataghans, staring grimly into the night.

"What was that?" asked YXarX.

"Demons of the Spacva swamp," Mihovil said quietly from the dish.

"Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then never mind," said Marko and calmly sat back down by the fire, and the others followed his example. They didn't particularly care about that swamp, since they didn't know what it was, and they had only a vague notion about demons. Some even claimed that demons don't exist. Mihovil maintained that demons were small as rats and smelled of cinnamon, but no one truly believed him, because, although they don't exist, they howled too loudly for such small creatures.

They spent the rest of the evening in conversation about old times and the occasional song. They drank most of the slivovitza, leaving a few more litres for the morning, and set off to sleep, taking turns on watch.

The following day greeted them with a headache, an overcast sky, and a light drizzle of acidic taste that fell persistently, soaking the parched plain and the nearby swamp, quickly turning it into a muddy quagmire. They squelched through the mud having taken shelter under some half-collapsed building. They lit a fire from the surrounding material and gathered around it, warming themselves and reheating the remains of yesterday's meal. Hopeless had set off to check on the horses when he suddenly froze and gave a quiet whistle, whereupon the others grabbed their weapons. Voices and the soft sound of horses could be heard nearby.

Marko and YXarX quickly hid against a half-collapsed wall and waited for the newcomers to come out into the open. When they appeared riding on muddy horses, Marko fired a warning burst of plasma from his blaster. The newcomers reached for their weapons, but Hopeless, who had silently crept around from the other side, stopped them by sending a blast from his plasma rifle.

"Stop! Don't you move!" Marko shouted authoritatively.

The newcomers looked about in confusion, trying to gauge the number of attackers, but they couldn't see anyone behind the ruins.

"Who are you?" Marko called out again.

"We are Senj Uskoks," one of them shouted. "By the voice I'd say you're of our sort too. If we've entered your territory, it wasn't intentional, we don't know this area too well. We had to take shelter somewhere because we suffered heavy losses in the last battle with the Neo-Venetians."

"And you, the mightiest pirates of the Adriatic Sea. Well, how about that?" said Hopeless, cautiously peering out from behind the ruins. Slowly the others appeared as well, still keeping their weapons trained. The newcomers, eight of them, flinched when YXarX unfolded his segmented limbs, but the sight of the yataghans and blasters calmed them.

Marko studied them with an appraising eye. They seemed lost and somewhat sorry, but their proud bearing spoke unmistakably of their warrior standing. True, their armour and weapons had seen better days, but they compensated for that shortcoming with moustaches that reached down to their waists. Their broad Slavic souls were clearly visible. The burliest of them instinctively assessed who might be the leader, and addressed Hopeless with decorum:

"And who might you be, gentlemen, if I may ask?"

"We are the glorious Neo-Uskok company of harambasha Marko Ivanovich," said Hopeless proudly. "Admittedly few of us remain, but that in no way diminishes the significance of that fact."

"The company of Marko Ivanovich?" the big lad was dumbfounded. "That Marko Ivanovich, the man who ate an entire roast ox for a bet, beat fifty men with his bare hands, and in the end drank so much that he heroically kept peeing until sundown? The one who then bedded..."

"That's me," Marko cut him off, glancing furtively at his friends who were looking at him with surprise. All the newcomers turned to face him.

"Yes, that's me, but that was when I was still young and unruly. Later I matured, gained some experience and wisdom, and came to understand the sublimity of contemplation and the joys of daydreaming about simultaneous swimming."

The heroes leapt from their horses and prostrated themselves before the great war commander. They rose, wiping mud from their garments, and smiling warmly held out their hands.

"It will be an honour and a pleasure to ride with you, Marko, if we are welcome in your company."

"You are most welcome, of course. God grant a fuller cup. But tell me, what brings you here? You're far from home."

"In our parts the fun ran out, so we set off on the road. Along the way we gradually gathered in number and there were already quite a few of us, when we fell into an ambush of numerically superior Neo-Venetians. Only eight of us remain and here we are. That's all. We sons of the sea are always put to the test of fate, and as the old Uskok saying goes, which you surely know too, fate is not something you ride away from on horseback."

"Of course, of course. Come to the fire, sit down," said Hopeless now, and hospitably offered them slivovitza which they accepted with pleasure. They were still a little wary of YXarX's strange appearance, but out of courtesy dared not ask anything.

Marko Ivanovich, gladdened by his company having grown again, pulled out the gusle, ancient instrument from those parts and in no time, through the drizzle and rain, a song rang out thunderously. Naturally, there was leaping over the fire, clapping, and shouting "hey, hey, hey." They all got acquainted nicely and began discussing past adventures and mutual acquaintances, when the ever-suspicious Mihovil the Rectangular noticed how one of them was almost imperceptibly evaporating from his clothing.

He said this quietly to Hopeless, and Hopeless to Marko. At the harambaša's signal, and to the surprise of all the others, they threw themselves on him and tore open his cloak and shirt. He only managed to say in surprise: "Oh, fuck your—" before stopping himself. On his hairy

chest, below his left breast, a masterfully crafted tatoo-hologram shimmered, depicting a pot of sarma, legendary cabbage rolls, with steam rising from it.

"Viljenko!!!!!" Mihovil shrieked. Everyone turned to him. "Yes, it's him. He has the mark in the right place. Gentlemen, he is none other than Viljenko the Various."

Now they all turned as one toward the Neo-Uskok who was straightening his shabby clothing, quietly cursing and cleaning himself of the mud into which Hopeless and Marko had rolled him.

"Unbelievable. Stipe, are you truly Viljenko the Various?" asked Zdenko, the previous leader of their group. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I wanted to ride incognito for a while. You know, publicity, tiresome admirers, women, holo-tabloids, all of that starts to grate on a person after some time. A bit of real action and the old Uskok life does a man good. Besides, I had been in captivity for a long time and the slave-like monotony had worn me out, and on top of that they treated me in a manner below all criticism."

Now they all listened with reverence to the greatest of all heroes and sat wordlessly by the fire. They sipped their slivovitza absently, unable to take their eyes off Viljenko the Various, the living legend.

Viljenko continued: "About three years ago I happened to fall into the captivity of those shit-stained Neo-Venetians. Had they known who I was, they would probably have killed me straight away, but since they captured me just as I was trying to build some kind of storeroom, they found it so strange that they left me alive. It may have helped that I was wearing that stupid fur cap on my head."

"You were building a storeroom?" Marko Ivanovich was puzzled.
"Why?"

"We'll get to that. So, their shaman truly possessed magical powers and saw the unusual quality of my aura. They interrogated and tortured me for a long time, but I didn't give away a single word, first and foremost because I didn't understand what they were asking me in the first place. It was truly rough, but I survived. They wanted to kill me in the end, but the shaman, as I later learned, told them he felt some strange sensation connected to me, so they spared me and forced me to do the most foul, degrading work for them. Imagine, I had to get up early, be polite to women, and bake cakes."

"Ghastly!" they all shuddered.

"That's not all. For two years I didn't sing, nor taste slivovitza. I'd make a move on a girl only if she liked me and wasn't someone's girlfriend or sister."

"Our martyr," said Hopeless and a tear started in his eye. The others too were sniffing, trying to hold back their emotion and the shackle of icy dread that gripped their hearts.

"And so," the greatest of all warriors continued, staring into the distance, "we come to what matters most. I am not what I appear to be at first glance."

"We know," said YXarX, "you are one of the others."

"Ah, you know about that? All the better, it will be easier for you to grasp the very nature of my, let us call it that, otherness. Some of my doubles I have never met, most are men, but there are women too. We are all, of course, Neo-Uskoks, but of different sorts."

"How many of you are there really?" asked Mihovil, peering from the rucksack.

"Around fifteen. Somewhat more than people generally assume. I am a master of ancient crafts and a holder of secret knowledge."

"A master? Like those Neo-Venetian masters who can break a man's leg with just a look?"

"Something like that. I know how to build."

"Come on. With all due respect, nobody knows how to build."

"I do. Perhaps the only one on Earth. It all came about somehow without my influence. After the Night of the Great Nothingness I came to my senses in this body. The body knew all manner of things, but the most powerful was that it possessed knowledge of masonry, and indeed of drywall, finishing work, right through to rendering, grouting, and tiling. One day that will be a lucrative skill. Just as I had begun to enjoy that power of mine, I fell into captivity. When I escaped, I was no longer just a mason, but a freemason, and it is precisely that fact that truly changed my being. I acquired all manner of knowledge, I even know what the Spacva forest is."

"And you're not afraid?"

"Me? Why, I am Viljenko the Various."

Among the sons of the steppe a murmur of admiration and reverence spread. Taking advantage of that moment, the ever-curious Mihovil quietly asked what the Spacva forest was, and Stjenjka whispered to him, nearly pressing his lips to his rough surface.

"Really? That is the Spacva forest?"

"That and nothing else."

"Well, fuck me."

The other Uskoks had no wish to learn what the Spacva forest was when they saw Mihovil's reaction. They were unaware that the Spacva

forest itself was not so terrible, but rather Mihovil's realization of how many times he could have died in his life, which had been thrust upon him by the very capacity to feel fear. He could barely hold back the trembling that coursed through him irresistibly.

Marko looked at Viljenko.

"And can you build walls, the kind Mihovil talks about? Straight. Resolute. Sheltering."

"And more than that. I can build a weekend cottage."

The noble warriors did not know what a weekend cottage was, but dared not ask, such was the authority of the greatest of all Neo-Uskoks. Little by little the conversation returned to its everyday flow, the basses thundered again, the song about that river was sung. The slivovitza, though not much of it remained, warmed the heroes' hearts, and their falcon eyes glimmered brilliantly.

The next day began like any other.

The heroes rose, ate something, and began discussing the forthcoming campaign under Viljenko's leadership, when the hero said he was handing command to the capable yataghan of Marko Ivanovich, and that he himself was going to ride alone across the vast plains in search of Truth, Knowledge, and Roast Lamb.

There was no way the Neo-Uskoks could talk him out of this plan. Before he left, he performed a deed beyond the capacity of their comprehension. Namely, having learned what the Spacva forest was, Mihovil the Rectangular declared that after years of wild living the time had come for him to settle and reflect on everything in quiet contemplation.

And so they went into the heart of the terrifying swamp, and there Viljenko built a wall. Resolute. Straight. Sheltering. Mihovil was at its

centre, encircled by the friendly embrace of the other bricks.

That day is also known for another peculiarity. Hopeless, while rummaging through the saddlebags in search of something edible, pulled out the device he had found in the ruins of Technograd. Only then, examining it carefully for the first time, did YXarX let out a squeal of joy.

"Hopeless, my friend, I must have this."

"Get lost, it's mine. What would you do with it anyway? What even is it?"

"If I'm not mistaken, this is what is called a weave drive. It's used in Gee'bar spacecraft. It operates on the principle of travel through the very weave of space, so there's no thrust involved, it works on the basis of decision. The drive synchronises with your decision and you're there. Some form of technically induced teleportation. When I was coming to Earth my ship was in a squadron of three craft: the cruiser Potka and the fighter craft Klota and Frketa, in which I was. This is obviously the drive from Klota."

"I don't understand a word of what you're saying," said Hopeless, looking at the device. "It surely has something to do with those planets of yours. But if that thing is so important to you, we could swap. Have you got anything of equal value?"

"Well... I think I have."

YXarX reached into one of the compartments on his saddlebags and pulled out a pair of sunglasses.

"You won't look like you only have one eye, and you'll look cool. Women love that, hard to believe."

"Yeah?" said Hopeless and took the glasses, immediately putting them on his face, checking his reflection in the shiny deflector plate of his horse.

"Boys, how do I look?" he said, turning to the others.

"As a mean motherfucker," they all said in unison.

Hopeless wordlessly turned and handed the drive to YXarX.

"Deal."

All these events, as we have already mentioned, left their mark on history. The Neo-Uskok company of Marko Ivanovich became the most celebrated in the Technograd district and beyond, Viljenko entered legend not only as a Neo-Uskok one of a kind, but also as a skilled master of schallung, masonry, and finishing work, and the wall in which Mihovil resided became a place of pilgrimage, owing first and foremost to YXarX, who somehow cobbled together a ship and spread the legend across the known universe. Even today one can come across the occasional traditional Gee'bar who, in his underground dwelling resembling an earthly termite mound, will drink a drop of slivovitza, jump over a fire, and shout "hey, hey, hey," though not knowing himself why he does it or what it even means.

In the Frozen Plain

Countess Morana Raucker was playing the piano with deep concentration, swaying to the rhythm of a spirited melody. The arpeggio, rich and rhythmic, filled the room with a distant sensuality that crackled like electricity from the slender, delicate fingers of the young noblewoman. The lavishly furnished salon, bathed in the flickering light of candles, resonated with the tones of the ancient instrument, and the scent of refined perfume added an airy valeur of the gentle and aristocratic to the entire atmosphere.

Her slender figure, lean bosom, and long swan neck betrayed the blue blood that had flowed through her family for centuries, and the gathered silk dress hinted at the refined taste of discerning generations. Morana

Raucker was above all a passionate creature. The gaze of her large chestnut eyes, shadowed by long lashes, was soft and warm as a fawn's, but this was a deception. Behind that gentle appearance lay a person of pronounced carnality. Indeed, two persons.

Mega Zagreb, one of the most developed megalopolises of the late third millennium. Advanced civilization had brought many comforts to life, but into the city itself and its surroundings it was as though all the scum of the aging world had poured. Gangs of crazed uskoks and neo-Venetians fought mercilessly for months, and occasional atomic mushrooms in the distance sprouted like porcini after rain, altering the climate day by day and wiping distant summer estates off the face of the earth, which was a particular disturbance to the nobility. What bothered the young beauty, apart from the fact that her lover had been killed in the fighting with the neo-Venetians, was the alarming mental state in which she sometimes found herself.

Lovers, mind you, could still be found, because every young woman of her looks always had at least two more young lads in reserve endowed with two to three sizeable members apiece, but what really worried her was that impossible presence she felt with her entire being. Incidentally, Countess Morana was also married, but her husband, the noble Luka Ivanovic Raucker, spent most of his time trading narcotics and weapons with the Gee'bars, a space race resembling Earth's arthropods. The old Count was something of a man unto himself. After garden bacchanals he would often shoot at passersby in an unhinged fashion, drinking excessive quantities of supercharged antifreeze, which in those days was the drink of choice for anyone who held social prestige in any regard. Despite this, he was a man of good, noble soul.

Now, let us say a word about the countess's involuntary mental state: even as a small girl she felt herself irresistibly drawn to the bath, which everyone considered an exceptionally charming tendency, since the child spent most of her time soaking in donkey's milk and playing with a rubber duck. Her parents' spiritually elongated equine countenances were known to be dampened by tears of emotion when they saw their tender only child humming softly, from time to time churning the donkey's milk with such vigor that there was always butter to be found on her childish skin in the end, which on the black market of exceedingly wealthy shady types fetched as much as two kilograms of the most refined exotic drugs and aphrodisiacs.

Yes, all of that unseemly business was somewhat foreign to her parents, but the wealth of their ancestors was melting away fast, and doing any kind of bourgeois work was morally unacceptable to such a degree that a conversation about incest by comparison was considered a pleasant salon topic. Of course, in every family, including theirs, there were black sheep: Morana's uncle Svebor was allegedly once seen fixing a bathtub drain for a young lady he was keeping company with at the time, and was even, they say, scandalously dressed in a dirty blue coverall.

He flatly denied the incident, but his social reputation was tainted for all time by the spreading of that rumor. In the end, under pressure from the unyielding upper social circles, he went off somewhere into the wide world, and malicious tongues say that in some godforsaken backwater of the Gorski Kotar he opened a plumbing shop and got tangled up with some strapping plebeian woman.

Morana, being at that time but a tender bud, loved Uncle Svebo with all her childish heart and wept inconsolably for days when he left. That deeply painful experience was perhaps the reason she later married the

much older, unhinged and decadent Luka Ivanovic, who despite his noble lineage engaged in illegal trade, considering it an expression of nonconformism and youthful rebellion, notwithstanding his considerable age. When her mother found out about the relationship, she seemed on the verge of dying from excessive grief.

Young Morana grew into a beautiful girl who still spent most of her time in the bath. She herself couldn't understand where such a passion for excessive soaking came from, and she was asking herself that very question for who knows which time when she experienced a moment of illumination; in her soul, she suddenly understood, there dwelled another being, and that being was none other than a splendid porcelain washbasin, whose consciousness had developed in parallel with her own. One day it simply ripened and made itself known to the young woman's mind:

"Hey!"

"Hey?" said Morana, looking around the empty bathroom in bewilderment. "Who's talking?"

"It's me, the washbasin."

The countess stared at the washbasin in puzzlement.

"Not that one," the voice came again.

"Well where are you, then?"

"Inside you, dear."

This frightened her beyond all measure, so that her powder compact fell to the floor, shattering into a thousand glittering fragments, reminiscent of Swarovski jewelry or the floor after drunken rabble set about smashing everything made of glass. The young woman stared at herself in the mirror and somehow fancied she could detect something of the smoothness of porcelain in her pale aristocratic complexion.

"That's impossible. I am Morana, not some washbasin."

"Yes, it seems strange, my dear Moro, I believe also somewhat unsettling, but just imagine how it is for me. Until now I was a rational washbasin, conscious of my importance and refined design, traditional and conservative in my views, and now I have found out I am also a young firebrand who spends most of her time thinking about wild sensuality."

"Yes, it's frustrating at times," the young countess agreed. "I mean that thinking about carnal pleasures. Do you have such experiences yourself?"

"Washbasins aren't really cut out for those things. My relationship with your bidet is purely platonic. I will admit, though, there is much latent eros in her. Something I would call quietly repressed physicality."

"In her? Is it female?"

"Most bidets are. You didn't know that?"

"First I've heard of it."

The years passed, and the condition showed no sign of improving. Her parents were at their wits' end, because from the moment of that disturbing revelation Morana had stopped soaking in donkey's milk and the family, without that income, had fallen on hard times. From time to time she still had to bathe, but it amounted only to a quick shower, from which there was no real profit to speak of. The relationship between Morana and the washbasin grew more strained with each passing day, and one morning, unable to bear listening to their daughter arguing with an invisible person, they sought the help of a specialist. The celebrated Spanish professor Jorge Battista Tenebrio de Molitor was reputed to be the greatest name in psychiatry of that era and was a frequent and welcome guest of the degenerate and decadent nobility.

"Ha, it's all clear as day. In the morning a mouth like a razor, a screwed-up look, hands in pockets, and in the afternoon broad gestures, a smile on the face... Schizophrenia."

"Thank goodness it's only that," Morana's father breathed with relief. "Just imagine if it were some kind of demonic possession or, God forbid, something even worse."

"Demonic possession is, my noble friend, a completely unscientific category. What demons, come now, please. People say they hear strange sounds in the distant plain. And what do they expect to hear out there? Perhaps the sounds of household appliances? These are all mere delusions lacking any scientific basis."

The parents stared respectfully at the scholar, admiring the polish of his views, grounded in decades of selfless dedication.

"And? How do we cure our darling of this wretched washbasin business?"

"I'm afraid we can't," Professor Molitor frowned and sighed with resignation. "To be honest, my dear friends, despite extensive experience I have never yet seen anyone so detached from reality return to normal. We have tried various medications in such cases, but nothing works. Simply a fruitless exercise."

"Thank you, esteemed professor," the worried father said. "At least now we know where we stand. What do we owe you?"

And there Professor Jorge Battista Tenebrio de Molitor wrote them an enormous bill that set back their already poor finances to such a degree that Morana's mother, along with the maids, had to sell herself to drunken uskoks months later, and the other nobles wiped their boots on her father

when returning from hunts. Still, as the devoted parents would say, no sacrifice is too great for the wellbeing of their darling.

The young noblewoman, recognizing the awkward situation, concluded that things could not go on like this, and decided to set out into the wild and hostile world, laden with unknown dangers. Taking only the most essential things, she set off one foggy morning to meet her fate, shedding tears, when, having barely stepped through the wrought iron gates of her parents' estate, she was knocked down by the car of the noble Luka, who was just returning from some dissolute party, soaked since the previous evening to his ears in alcohol and various other things. Stepping out of an elegant ancient jet-propelled Bugatti he looked at the girl whose dress had folded up over her head, revealing all the allure of her porcelain complexion.

Luka fell in love at first sight with his bleary aging eyes, and his heart began to pound like the millennial bells of Šibenik Cathedral. Morana, pulling down her dress, looked at the distinguished middle-aged gentleman and despite his rather radioactive appearance she too fell in love up to her beautifully shaped ears. The realization of their relationship was initially impeded by the deep coma she then fell into. Luka carried her in his arms to the hospital and paid all the costs with rare extraterrestrial narcotics. Fortunately Morana emerged from that alarming state after just two months.

Despite the resolute opposition of her parents, the young woman married the older nobleman and moved into his large, well-preserved villa. Everything seemed just right, but after a few months the washbasin also emerged from its coma, hating Morana beyond all measure, accusing her daily of shameful licentiousness and a hairline crack at the hot water inlet. Her life became more miserable than ever before.

The noble knight Junker's released an arrow and hit a large long-necked bird that was carelessly flying over his estate. The unhappy creature

let out a mournful cry and crashed onto the roof of his stables, landing with a thud as if a badger had fallen, and, let's exaggerate, a Nile hippopotamus. Vailiant and Wyrd exchanged glances and burst into laughter.

"Heheheh, heheheh," the wizard cackled, "how are you going to get that bird now? I'd love to see you climb up onto that roof."

"What, me not be able to climb up onto a roof? I'm even more agile than before. And stronger. Watch and marvel, you unworthy melancholics."

Striding over to the stable with a heavy, purposeful step, he began scaling the uneven wall, chain mail and armor and all. His sword was in his way and kept hitting him on the legs, but against all expectations he was really quite successfully conquering the considerable height. At the roof's edge he swayed and nearly fell, but somehow caught himself and hauled himself over, snapping a few shingles.

"Ha? What do you say to this? Am I agile as a squirrel? A dormouse? A Cetian Vaas?"

"Hats off," said Vailiant. "Anyone who didn't know you were a nobleman and the owner of this fine brothel could easily mistake you for a dormouse."

Wyrd nodded with respect. Then he raised his eyes toward the hero and smiled in that particular way that always preceded some mischief. Junker's, already confused by Vailiant's peculiar compliment, looked pensively at the ancient mage, went over to the bird and came back carrying it. From a height of some seven or eight meters he stared blankly down at the muddy courtyard, and tears began rolling down Wyrd's face. Vailiant didn't understand at first what the wizard was laughing about, and then joined him heartily in the merriment.

"What about having one of my servants bring a ladder, instead of standing there playing the fool?"

Vailiant called a servant who appeared after a few minutes carrying a ladder. He looked up at Junker's in bewilderment.

"My lord, you're on the roof. You have a bird in your hand."

"A magnificent observation," said the noble knight. "When I come down, I'll have you flogged."

"But my lord, I really didn't..."

"Hand me that fucking ladder!!!"

Seeing that the matter was serious, the servant leaned the ladder against the stable and waited for his master to come down. Junker's handed him the bird and went over to his friends, in whose eyes a clear childlike delight was visible.

"Er... noble sir," said the servant cautiously.

"What?"

"What shall I do with the bird?"

"Give it to the cook to roast. Have some vegetables and noodles with it."

"About the bird..." Wyrd began.

"I don't want to discuss that stupid bird any further," Junker's cut him off. "Let's go have a drink."

Wyrd wanted to say something after all, then changed his mind and simply waved his hand. He followed the knights into the hall and settled into a chair near the large tiled stove that was heating the room pleasantly. This position afforded him a view of the entire room and, most importantly, of Junker's visually agreeable staff. By this, of course, we do not mean the

servants and the large, aging bartender with a bull's neck, but the abundance of the chattering female world.

At a table sat a couple of girls whose presence caressed the heroes' nostrils with the finest fragrances of the distant and mysterious Orient. Many had, to Wyr'd's great satisfaction, adopted the fashion brought by the recently arrived girls. Bathing was a new idea, somewhat unusual and revolutionary in its elementariness, with a hint of some elusive oddness. Some young women had embraced it wholeheartedly, while others still held to proven values and established traditions.

Waiting for the food, our heroes drained a few foaming jugs of beer, when the bird arrived at the table, garnished with noodles and vegetables.

"I'm really hungry," said Vailiant and tore off a large drumstick, the size of a lamb's leg. He bit into the meat and began working through it with powerful jaws so that everything cracked behind his ears. As he chewed on, the expression on his face shifted gradually from satisfied all the way to one of complete revulsion and disgust. In the end he spat the mouthful into the lap of the serving girl sitting beside him, at which she first gasped in shock, then ran off crying into the adjoining rooms. The alluring Anticipation, a tall woman in a pale blue dress sitting right next to Junker's, rose and went after the unfortunate girl, excusing herself. The noble prince watched her go with a long, pensive gaze and then looked reproachfully at his best friend.

"This is sheer misery, my dear Junker's," said Vailiant. "A gourmet who ends up in hell is surely served meals like this and worse. The damn carcass is hard as bedrock and reeks of dead fish. Disgusting!"

Junker's tried the meat, twisted his face in disgust, and nodded to Vailiant. He spat beside himself, but only onto the massive oak bench, since the other girl was tending to the revolted and horrified serving girl.

"That's what I was trying to tell you, but you didn't want to listen," said Wyrd. "That's a crane, and cranes eat fish, so their meat smells something awful. As the wise people of the coast say: eating a crane is like you've chugged the whole harbor."

"Well then why didn't you tell me, if you knew?" Junker's grumbled.

"You said: 'I don't want to discuss that stupid bird any further.'"

"Still, you could have told me. What are we going to do now?"

Instead of an answer, a servant appeared and brought them roast boar and venison. Everything was nicely prepared and smelled excellent. Junker's cautiously tried the meat and after initial hesitation chewed a mouthful with relish. He washed it down with beer, spilling it over his heroic chest, and looked at the servant who was taking the bird away.

"How did you know we'd need another roast?"

"My lord, I am an experienced hunter. I know crane can't be eaten, so I hurried off to the thicket and caught a boar there just for you. The venison was caught yesterday. A gift from the bishop. He says this new custom of bathing is something one certainly needs some time to get used to, but it's not without its advantages."

Wyrd and Vailiant nodded with satisfaction, but Junker's somehow didn't quite like it. His face reddened.

"Are you saying I'm not an experienced hunter and don't know what kind of bird that was? Unheard-of insolence, just look where this world is headed. Guards. Guaaaaards!!!"

The guards came running.

"Let the insolent wretch have ten lashes on his back. No, now I remember, you're the one with the ladder. Twenty on the back then, to teach you some manners."

"But my lord, I only wanted to help."

"Thirty."

The strong lads dragged away the servant, who resisted desperately, and began flogging him, and Junker's, muttering something into his mustache, applied himself heartily to the meal, listening to the poor man groan and yelp after each blow. Shortly he rose and said to the servants:

"Come on, that's enough. He doesn't take well to flogging, it's not for him. Softie."

When they had eaten their fill of fatty meat, they drank a few more foaming ones and began ruminating on past events rich in countless heroic exploits. There was talk of lavish feasts, of never-forgotten wines, and especially of adventures tied to the bedchambers of acquaintances, where each of them had plowed a furrow or two. They barely managed to talk the young serving girl into sitting back down beside the honorable prince.

He, already thoroughly drunk and rowdy as a brat, had barely been waiting for this and spilled beer on her, licking her along her round shoulder and slender neck, calling her a sweet little bud. The bud shrieked, screamed, and dashed off like a fury, hiding in the hayloft, quietly sobbing inconsolably. Fortunately in those young times they had not yet heard of lasting psychological trauma, nor the pitfalls of political correctness, so the girl, as those in the know say, was already happily hanging laundry the next day, singing and rejoicing in the whims of existence with the carefree simplicity of youth.

But let us return to our knights. They had eaten and drunk beyond all measure and the whole affair was already beginning to resemble those not infrequent occasions when they were found in the morning sleeping in the pigsty with the hogs, embracing a piglet, or in the manger, surveyed by the dull resigned stares of cows, while the wizard was sometimes found peering

out of a nearby elm he had leaned against in exhaustion and sunk into up to his waist. It all seemed set to continue in that fashion, when somewhere around midnight a late visitor knocked at the door. In the powerful blows there was something of a terrifying fatality, some elusive intention.

Silence fell over the hall. The heroes and Wyrd exchanged glances, and the guards grabbed their weapons, staring toward the massive door of iron-bound oak that echoed dully to the rhythm of their terrified hearts. Fearing nothing, the host rose from the table and made his unsteady way toward the door, picking up a knife from one of the tables along the way. He reached the door, lifted the massive bolt, and threw it open. Everyone started. On the very threshold stood a wounded viking and with his last atoms of strength handed Junker's a bloodstained scroll. One horn on his helmet was broken, and his long greasy locks and thick beard fluttered as though tossed by a wild gust. Strangely, outside it was a calm night, which made it seem all the more terrifying to the others. Several ladies immediately fainted, and others, accustomed to that activity, immediately thrust bottles of smelling salts under their noses.

Since the viking was still alive, Junker's ordered the soldiers to take care of him, and he went into the hall carrying the scroll. He sat down at the table, followed by curious friends and flushed young women, and unrolled a long document inscribed in small, uneven lettering.

"Runes," said Vailiant.

"No your highness, those are what sheep have, those little curls," objected the alluring Gregarina, a red-haired, pale young woman known for her fiery temperament. "Or is it goats?"

"Sheep," Junker's nodded competently. "This, on the other hand, is some kind of writing. My friend, can you read this?"

The wizard studied the letter, frowned a little, then began mumbling something into his beard, moving his lips. He raised his gaze, clouded by alcohol, and said:

"It's from Saab the Bloody."

"The old bastard," Vailiant cheered up, "what does it say?"

"It's about something truly unusual. It goes like this:

"This letter is dedicated to two drunken assholes, they'll know who I mean, and that freak of their friend, who is also my friend, though he is a spirit and a wraith."

A quiet laugh broke through the hall, dying abruptly when the knights looked at them darkly. Wyrd continued, chuckling himself:

"Setting out to hunt, one cool evening I stumbled upon a thicket that seemed exactly like any other, trees, shrubs, and so forth. My companions and I concluded it would be as good a place to spend the night as any other. We found a small clearing in the forest and fell asleep. But. That clearing, as I later learned, is known among the local folk as the Troll's Wetland, a place where trolls dance and ritually urinate thirty-seven times in a cycle of one hundred and thirteen years. Not knowing this, we fell asleep and a truly strange thing happened to us: the next day we woke up in a place that bore no resemblance whatsoever to my native north.

True, it was chilly, but everything looked completely different. I even thought I could make out some strange things in the distance, like when those nasty green fellows kidnapped us. There were also odd mushroom-shaped thundering clouds in the distance. Since my companions were not exactly of the heroic sort, that day we merely looked around at the strange surroundings a little and were barely waiting for night to fall before going

to sleep again. The next day we woke up once more at the Troll's Wetland and breathed a sigh of relief.

Olaf the Cowardly, one of my chamberlains, happened to find some kind of text in a metal cylinder there, so it would be good if you read it, of course if you can. None of us knows what it says, but perhaps Wyrd can decipher it."

Wyrd unrolled a second scroll, which had been wrapped inside Saab's letter. It was made of some synthetic yellowish material.

"I think I really will be able to read this. So, it goes something like this":

"What lies before you, dear possible reader, are the observations of myself, the humble Aristotle Ivanković Čuljak, a philosopher who has always striven to grasp the essence of the moment in which we live, hoping that he succeeds in this endeavor. Here are a few observations related to my experiences, which I hope will provide future generations with guidance on their path toward the Better and the Truer.

I stepped out of my modest home the other day and set off following my own nose, idly seeking excitement in my, I admit, somewhat somber existence. And so I walked along the rutted roads and concluded that despite the day being unremarkable in every way, everything around me had somehow suddenly changed. This strange perceptive state persisted for a while longer, when I noticed I had forgotten to put on my shoes, and the uneven surfaces of the road were pressing so hard on the acupressure points on my feet that one moment I felt increased kidney activity, the next a surge of sexual desire, then a burning started somewhere in my left ear, and in the end I began separating from my aged, thickened aura.

That situation, entirely unfamiliar to me until then, would certainly have continued, had I not, dazed by a sudden sense of rapture, struck my toe

against some sizable piece of metal on the road. All the stars then blazed before my eyes and I collapsed to the ground groaning in pain.

Despite that somewhat unfavorable outcome, I am satisfied. Every such occurrence is a certain school of life, for I now know with certainty why prophets walk barefoot. Mystical experiences are irreplaceable for a person of pronounced spirituality, but the awakenings are markedly unpleasant and I find myself facing a profound dilemma as to whether it is all worth it or not."

Our heroes exchanged glances as they listened to Wyrd, their mustaches curling from suppressed laughter.

"This one reminds me of old Tint, that idiot captain who used to write such nonsense in the ship's log. Continue, go on," said the host. The wizard muttered something to himself, then continued:

"So, likewise, I had some stuffed peppers for breakfast the other day and, putting on shoes this time, set off into the wide world. Everything that day was soothingly reliable and echoed in my mind with images of the traditional and dear to my heart, even the mutant crickets with daisies instead of antennae, which could be found near the old cracked reactor my mother forbade me to play around, on account of their universally known distasteful cynicism.

I came across people I knew, exchanged a few words with them, joked around, walked through the little groves I've known since I was a boy climbing trees, instinctively returning to the customs of my ancient forebears. (I had often asked myself: what on earth were those hairy ancestors of ours doing up in trees? That question represented an unknown that had torn at my naturally curious nature all my life. So I climbed a tree and spent an entire day and half the night up there waiting for some benefit to manifest.

But as the night wore on, hunger began to torment me, and it grew so unpleasantly chilly that I climbed down and went home, eating the last two stuffed peppers upon arrival. I fear the whole ancient theory stands on shaky empirical legs, for though I inquired of many a traveller and wayfarer, no one has yet observed on any tree either self-seeded peppers or cabbage rolls, nor any firm young women of pronounced carnality. I doubt the hidden meanings of that teaching remain buried somewhere in the mists of the past.")

"Well, I never," said Vailiant, and the hall erupted in laughter. "This fellow acts like he's been eating crazy frogs. He really does remind you of Tinto. The only thing I find useful in all his rambling is that I can at least roughly determine the text is probably from the late three-thousands, somewhere in the area of Croatia, perhaps around Mega Zagreb."

"You're saying it's actually a letter from the distant future?" Junker's grew interested. "Excellent. I'd wager Saab is actually inviting us to go and see what it's all about. Besides, it's been a genuinely long time since we've had something truly challenging."

"Are you certain you're capable of withstanding the cultural shock of being in the three-thousands?"

"Better ask whether the cultural shock is capable of withstanding us," said Vailiant with self-satisfaction, and Junker's merely gave a combative nod.

"Right then, we set out north tomorrow," said the noble prince. It will take time, but for such an adventure no sacrifice is too great. Besides, Junker's could along the way meet his as yet unseen offspring."

The Prince and Wyrd began to snicker maliciously. Junker's played the innocent. "What offspring? The father of Ikea's child is that Volvo the Dim, not me."

"Did anyone mention Ikea and the little boy?" Vailiant grinned. "You brought them up yourself."

"I don't want to hear any more about it," the knight bristled. "Besides, what's got into you today, taking me on like this? First that business with the bird, then the ladder, and finally that child. Ease up a bit."

"All right, all right," said the wizard, "we're just having a bit of fun. Now, tell the servants to pack things for the journey and then have them bring from the castle what Vailiant needs. We'll have to go on horseback, as I've been having some trouble with visualization lately."

The road to the wild north was fraught with many trials and dangers, but of that perhaps another time. Their guide was the viking who had delivered the message, the brave Geesem Eriksson. Our heroes did not know this overland route, for the last time they had travelled to the royal city of Uppsala, still as young men, they had gone by ship on some sort of diplomatic visit by Vailiant's parents.

Remarkably, it turned out the viking had actually nothing wrong with him, and the peculiar state in which they had found him was merely the product of his pronounced sense of drama and need for validation, caused by a lack of attention during childhood. When asked how he managed to have his hair billowing like that, he mentioned things unknown to them that would take us too far afield to discuss.

The journey lasted months and when they reached the royal city of Uppsala, snow was already drifting through the air. From the border of Saab the Bloody's kingdom, a small military unit had accompanied them, along with Throtgar the Man-Eater, who after his strange experiences aboard the frigate of the Portuguese pirate Tinto had sworn never again to set foot on

the deck of any ship. That decision certainly harmed his naval career, but contributed greatly to his peace of mind.

So it was that they arrived one day at the royal city, where a great multitude of enthusiastic people received them. When they caught sight of the large bear-like figure of their friend, they embraced him, knocking helmets in the traditional fashion.

"I knew you'd come," said Saab. "Missing a heroic opportunity is for you like a marriageable woman missing a handsome and wealthy suitor. Simply, something beyond the bounds of possibility."

"Wisely spoken, proud king of the north," said Wyrð. "Life without adventure is like a cold woman and a grounded ship, wretched and full of uncertainties one would rather not see."

"Hey, where's that old chair? I'd like to see him, the big lad," asked Junker's.

"We didn't know when you'd arrive. He asked me to take him to the carpentry workshop of Ikea's father, who lives further north. There are a few charming armchairs there that caught his eye. Simple and wooden as he is, he prefers girls of somewhat more baroque proportions. He says, better to rock than to chafe. That's what, as he puts it, his father used to say too, who was himself a rocking chair."

"Ha, good on him," said Vailiant, somewhat elliptically. Since time immemorial, vikings had, alongside tales of the mythological exploits of Thor, Odin and the rest of their divine retinue, gladly spun sagas about matters pertaining to sensuality and carnality. They liked, of course, to say a word or two about their heroic campaigns as well, but to a casual listener this was most often considerably less interesting and would come across as a kind of showing off.

That evening the hosts laid on a celebration the like of which the magnificent fjords had not seen in decades. Wine and beer, plundered on countless raids, flowed in streams, and there was so much roast venison, boar and bear that most of it ended up thrown to the dogs and trolls who always lurked about the area. One joke followed another, horns blared at full blast, drums beat, and the eyes of our heroes rested with pleasure on the fair-haired and long-legged daughters of the north. Their firm breasts looked as though they would surely burst, had they not been constrained by embroidered bodices, and a fondness for a good drop favourably influenced their sociability.

The daughter of Throtgar the Man-Eater, having peered well into her ox horn, approached Vailiant, sat in his lap and kissed him on his aquiline nose, flushing it bright red with lipstick brought from the far east. The assembled nobility burst out laughing, but this did not bother our prince in the least. With a ravishing young girl of golden hair in his lap they could freely throw axes at him and he would still feel perfectly comfortable.

The daughter of Olaf the Ripper attempted the same with Wyrd and was not a little surprised when she failed. She tried to bite the wizard on the nose and was surprised by the result. Then she whispered something in his ear and he shook his head, smiling. The girl smiled too and remained sitting half submerged in his unusual ectoplasmic person.

"Hey, where on earth has that Junker's got to?" said the host. "What came over him to just vanish like that? Isn't he having a good time at the party?"

All the others looked around the merry noisy crowd, but there was no trace of Junker's. Still, the explanation was not long in coming. Volvo the Dim staggered in propped up by a middle-aged red-haired lady of

considerable displacement and blurted: "My dear Ikea has decided to show your esteemed friend the beauties of our city. Hospitable as always, my wife is a true angel. But as for Junker's, hasn't he been here before? Somehow I feel like he's..."

"What will you have to drink, friend?" Saab interrupted him with unusual cordiality.

"Beer. Or wine. Is there any slivovitza?"

"Girls, bring our friend beer, wine and slivovitza. Give him everything, can't you see the man is hungry and sober as if he's not quite himself."

Volvo the Dim was later observed slipping away with the widow of the blacksmith who had come to an unfortunate end on their last joint raid. Ikea reappeared only the next day, her face radiant, and Junker's too seemed none the worse for wear. The celebration lasted three full days and nights and for two days afterward they nursed themselves with sour milk, honey and brine, then stocked up on everything they needed and set out on the road to Troll's Bog.

"How do you get on with the Tatar Khan?" Vailiant asked Saab, riding his sturdy grey.

"That little fellow with the pretty slender wife considerably taller than him? Well. When he showed me the letter from you, we made peace and no longer attack each other. I visited him recently. He offered me some impossible dish made of rotten meat. Still, the roast served at the end was a real treat. Likeable fellow."

"Well, I'm glad you're on good terms. But how much further to that place you were talking about?" "Maybe two or three hours yet, depending on the weather. It's good that we'll get there at night. We'll light a fire, have a few drinks and fall asleep under the watch of my warriors, who will just

in case be turned with their backs facing it. I hope the spell will work, that is, that we'll manage to reach that place. Wyrd tells me it lies very far in the future."

"It's very far in general," said Wyrd. "On horseback like this it would take us at least six months to get there."

"And can't you arrange to somehow transport us using those spells of yours? The Tatar told me you can do that."

"Not in this case. I've already told the lads, I've been having trouble with visualization these past months. My ectoplasmic stability isn't quite what it should be. The forces of the universe are in some kind of turmoil."

"If you say so." As Saab the Bloody had said, in about two hours they came to a modest clearing in the forest. They lit a fire, had a bite to eat and a few drinks. As the long arduous journey had tired them somewhat, before long they all fell into a deep and healthy sleep. The next day, to their great satisfaction, they truly did wake up in a different place. Around them there was no forest, only the occasional solitary shrub of neglected appearance. In the distance the sound of some machine could be heard, and in the sky a battle between two gleaming aircraft was visible. The heroes grabbed their weapons, staring in amazement at the unfamiliar landscape.

"Ahem, ahem, excuse me, gentlemen, have you seen anywhere about an aluminium tube with text on foil?" came a voice from behind them. In an instant, Junker's turned, leapt like a tiger and pressed the blade of a dagger to the man's throat.

"Who are you and what are you doing here? Speak!" the knight pressed out threateningly through his moustache.

"Please, good sir, I haven't done you any harm," whimpered an older man with a tangled grey-streaked beard, dressed in a felted three-quarter

dolman of dark brown and ill-fitting, too tight and too short blue trousers. His gaze held fear and a kind of childlike guilelessness. Seeing this, Junker's let him go. The man, overwhelmed by fright, sat down in the dust, breathing heavily.

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"And who are you?" Vailiant now asked him.

"Professor Aristotel Ivanković, gentlemen. At your service. You are strangers here, so I don't hold your somewhat hostile manner against you, but were you locals you would know this is my favourite place for contemplation. Just the other day I arrived at a curious finding; namely, if a man goes out bareheaded and makes his way toward the country estate of the noble counts Raucker, and it happens to start pouring with rain along the way, he arrives there completely soaked. Remarkable."

"It seems we really do have before us the author of that text," said Wyrđ with a smile.

"And you are, noble sir?" the philosopher interjected. "What brings you to our part of the world?"

"I am Prince Vailiant, and these are my friends and comrades-in-arms; Saab the Bloody, king of the vikings, the knight Junker's, and Wyrđ, wizard of all worlds."

"Very good. Some of the things you've mentioned I don't understand, but who am I, unworthy as I am, to know of such things and pass hasty judgements. But, your highness, are you not perhaps, hmmm... a touch middle-aged to be a prince? And why, if it's no secret, do you have traces of rouge on your noble nose?"

"My father, the king, is still in search of the Holy Grail. Tell me, while we're on the subject, have they found it by your time?"

"Your father?"

"The Holy Grail."

"By now? No. From what you say, and I would add partly from your clothing, it seems you come from serious antiquity."

"Our Aristotel here is quite sharp," said Saab the Bloody. "Perceptive."

"Well, I am some kind of thinker after all. Perhaps I don't look at most things through the same eyes as the average commoner, but I always reach the right conclusion. For instance, you are a head taller than me and of large build. I'd wager you're of considerable bodily weight."

The konung looked toward Wyrd, who merely shrugged. The knights exchanged glances and grinned at each other.

"Now then, gentlemen, I see there is a wizard among you, and an idea comes to mind; if you have no more pressing business, I would ask you to accompany me to the Raucker estate. You see, Countess Morana suffers from a strange form of split personality, which to me looks more like demonic possession. The only difference being that in her case it concerns a demonic washbasin, so, I must admit, I am not acquainted with any effective curative. Perhaps you will know what is to be done."

"What have you tried so far?" said Wyrd with interest.

"Look, I am really no kind of exorcist, merely a humble philosopher. For such things the neo-Venetians shamans are far, far better, but they are useless, being too aggressive and hostile. In an old manuscript I happened to find it is written that if a person wishes to rid themselves of a demon, they must go to the Valley of Dry Uncertainty, which lies beyond the belt of the plain. On horseback, it's two days from here. In that valley the forces are apparently arranged in such a way that one can somehow influence demons,

though, frankly speaking, I don't know what it's about. I went there once, but came back quickly. The place is somehow eerie."

"We have good horses," said Saab the Bloody, gesturing toward his elegant chestnut, "we can get there sooner."

"I wasn't thinking of those large, unusual animals. I meant proper horses. Atomic powered and all."

"What is he talking about?" they asked Wyrd. "Motorcycles, most likely. Those are mechanical horses that replaced the old ones."

"How?"

"You'll see. Horses have round rubber wheels, don't they?" Wyrd asked the philosopher.

"Of course. If they were some other shape they'd turn less well. Shall we then stop by the young Countess Morana? There will be food and drink, don't worry, and if you cure her, her husband will reward you handsomely, he worships the ground she walks on. I help them because the count is a patron who supports my intellectual work financially and in every other way. What do you say?"

"No problem. Let's go."

Riding along, Vailiant stared toward a concrete grain silo and fell into thought. He looked at his companions, frowned and said:

"Have you noticed that all our adventures have something in common? Some letter arrives, then we travel and perform all manner of heroic deeds. Well, not always exactly, but in the great majority of cases."

"I think adventures are like that by their very nature," said Wyrd, behind whom the professor was sitting awkwardly in the saddle. "People must somehow inform you, so letters and messages are necessary, and on the other hand, as the saying goes: adventure doesn't wait for you in your

own yard. So it follows of itself that there's no genuine heroic exploit without letters and travel."

"And this ability of ours to talk with anyone, from wherever they come? Doesn't that strike you as somehow strange?"

"That falls under the same thing. Linguistic barriers would only hinder us in heroic escapades, believe me. Better this way." "It does seem logical, actually," agreed Aristotel. "You are, noble sir, something of a philosopher yourself, I see?"

"Well, a little. Amateur, more for my own sake," the wizard brightened. "Contemplation is not foreign to me, and rich experience does confer certain advantages. For instance, hand on heart, I float above the waters rather well."

"So you prophesy as well?"

"Here and there. Nothing special."

Approaching the country estate of Luka Ivanović, they rode through a landscape one might call gentle and picturesque, but such a description would capture its qualities rather imprecisely. There was something bluishly unusual about its rutted roads and little groves inhabited by mutated small creatures, which, following ancient instincts, built their nests from industrial waste and polymer bags. But not everything was of that tone. In fact, everything around was either green or grey. Life teemed in the most varied forms. At one moment the earth shook and a mushroom-shaped cloud appeared on the horizon.

"What kind of cloud is that?" asked Junker's.

Those are the Uskoks, Mediterranean ex-pirates on land, and the neo-Venetians fighting. One day, if they carry on like that, those mushrooms

will blow the whole world up." "You're just imagining things. Mushrooms generally affect people in strange ways. Or sometimes even in amusing ones. Everything will, believe me, turn out fine."

"I admire your optimism," said Aristotel Ivanović, "and I believe you are right. My cynicism is at times merely a trait of immature self-satisfaction and intellectual pretentiousness. Things do actually always turn out somehow for the better, don't they?"

"Certainly. Especially for us heroes. Commoners occasionally do have some truly nasty things happen to them, but we seem to be somehow immune to that. Tell me, do you have children?"

"My daughter Pythia and her elder brother Demosthenes, my darlings. They are wonderful children."

"Your son must absolutely become a hero, and your daughter must marry a hero. No artists, intellectuals, windbags and that sort of useless types. Merchants are no better either."

"Is your son a hero?"

"He's still too small for that, but he certainly will be."

Everyone turned toward Junker's.

"Your son?" said Vailiant, sniggering.

"All right, my son. Ikea showed him to me while he was sleeping. A proper little angel. The spitting image of me."

"You mean, he's moustachioed, drinks heavily and is highly promiscuous and violent? Likes a good fight more than he likes honey. Does he have a brothel?"

"Not yet, but one day it'll all be his."

"And what about Volvo?"

"What would be about him?" said the knight, surprised by his own answer.

Approaching the Raucker estate at last, they began to encounter other people, who regarded them with a mixture of fear and curiosity. More than anything else, the horses drew their attention, for in those days they were fairly rare animals that only the wealthiest members of the nobility could afford. They rode into the estate's courtyard and a servant came out before them, offering bread and salt. That ancient custom was familiar to them, so they did not object to the modest fare and waited to be taken to Countess Raucker.

The heroes' mouths watered when they caught sight of a young woman who, before a large mirror, hair tied in a ponytail, was exercising dressed in a tight grey leotard and over-the-knee stockings, sweat darkening her slender and muscular back. She danced a little longer, watching the newcomers with interest in the mirror. Then, wiping her face, neck and hands, in a sensual voice asked the guests to wait while she quickly showered and dressed. As she left, she sized up the strapping visitors once more and walked out of the room with a sinful sway of her hips. Servants brought them colourful drinks with little umbrellas, which the heroes fell upon with great relish. A tense silence settled over the room.

"Aaamazing!" Vailiant finally exclaimed, and the others just shook their heads with expressions of suffering.

"Yes, I forgot to mention, the young countess is of strikingly harmonious proportions," said the old philosopher.

"I think we'd have noticed that even if you hadn't told us," replied Junker's, gazing after her. "Tell me, in that future of yours, do all women look like this?"

"No, only the beautiful ones," said Aristotel, and Saab the Bloody could not resist and gave him a proper smack so that he ploughed the tip of his nose into the expensive Persian rug.

"Why was this, your highness?" the philosopher startled and stood up awkwardly, holding his backside.

"Will you finally start giving straight answers to questions?"

"But everything I told you is perfectly true. Ugly women really don't look like Countess Morana. Believe me."

The konung was just deliberating whether to hit the poor man again when the countess appeared in the doorway dressed in a sumptuous silk gown, wrapped in a cloud of fragrance. A tall hairstyle accentuated her long neck and pale aristocratic complexion. She was frowning and talking to herself.

"Right, I've really had quite enough of you now. Do you think the polishing fluid matters as much to me as it does to you?"

A pause, and the young woman stared off to one side. She shook her head and hissed angrily.

"Out of the question. Besides, settle down, I have guests."

Then she turned toward the guests and smiled.

"You know, washbasins."

Everyone nodded politely and was introduced to the young noblewoman. Aristotel explained to her what he had in the meantime learned about their origins, explaining that Wyrð might perhaps be able to put an end to the unruly washbasin, at which she exhaled with a soft sound and smiled in a way that gave each of them goosebumps. She entertained them with the finest foods and in cheerful conversation they awaited the arrival of Luka Ivanović, who had returned that very day from a business

trip. The count was delighted to see them, hospitable as he was, and immediately invited some of his friends to a party in their honour.

The whole night through they feasted, songs rang out, there was dancing and excessive drinking, and the inevitable bećarac was heard too. The expensive rug and the rosewood parquet of the spacious reception room suffered when it occurred to the count that a party isn't a party unless you jump over a fire.

The next day they rose in the early afternoon, and the count took them to his stables.

"Here, gentlemen, choose the horses you'll take for the journey. I'd gladly lend you my transport aircraft as far as the start of the plain belt, but I must be off again tomorrow. The Gee'baris are very demanding when it comes to business. Your animals will be looked after by the servants, don't worry. I have a few such old-fashioned horses myself."

"Will you not come with us?" Vailiant asked him.

"Unfortunately, I cannot. Duty calls. I must warn you that on the road to that valley you'll have to pass through a war zone, the professor Ivanković has probably already told you. It will likely be quite dangerous."

"Well, we are warriors. To us danger is... what an umbrella is to a cocktail," said Saab the Bloody, recalling the previous evening's festivities.

"But these are the mad uskoks and neo-Venetians."

"Doesn't matter."

"Still, I have something for you. I see you have those old-fashioned swords. Somewhere in storage I have those light ones, which will nonetheless be better for this purpose. They're the Jedi IV, Chinese-made I

believe, already sent for them. Genuine rarities. The servant will be here in a moment."

A moustached, lean young man in a red uniform brought a brownish box of old-fashioned natron in which lay three devices that in no way resembled swords.

Junker's took one and began examining it.

"That's a sword? Where's the blade?"

The count took one and pressed the switch at the top. A green strip of light about a metre long shot out. He swung the sword and cleaved a metal beam twenty centimetres thick in two.

"Blimey!" Vailiant was astonished. "This really is something. Why does it go zwoonk, zwoonk when it moves?"

"No idea, probably some kind of design flaw. Or it's a theatrical effect."

"Like when your hair billows and there's no wind?" asked the knight.

"Exactly."

They practised swordsmanship with the lightswords and did excellently, as was to be expected from masters of that ancient art. Riding the motorcycle presented rather more of a problem. Vailiant, having given it too much throttle, flew off into a haystack, denting his armour in the process, while Junker's and the viking konung thoroughly shook themselves up on the unwilling turf before getting the hang of it somewhat. Still, nimble as they were, by the end of the day they were already tearing around the countryside at incredible speed, enjoying every moment like children.

The following day Luka Ivanković kissed his wife and said his farewells to everyone, wishing them all the best on their journey. His orbital aircraft waited in front of the house and silently soared into the skies.

"This is like some kind of dream," said Vailiant, and the others nodded enthusiastically. "It's a shame we won't be able to tell anyone about it when we get home, as everyone would think us completely mad. And the lads in the black hoods might suddenly start taking an interest in us."

The whole of that day they again practised swordsmanship and riding. They proved to be exceptionally good students and before long were riding as if they had never done anything else. Countess Morana, like all noblewomen, was very skilled with horses.

That night, excited about the next day's journey, they slept poorly. Saab the Bloody and Vailiant, concerned for the health of the young countess, stopped by her bedchamber to see if she was well. In the morning they looked somewhat tired, but did not seem dissatisfied. A particular mischievous smile like morning sunshine illuminated Morana's beautiful face, which reminded the prince of a certain event long past. An adventure full of uncertainty lay before them.

They mounted their mechanical horses and checked their equipment. The learned Aristotle carried some foul-looking rifle, assembled from a black polymer frame, gleaming optics and blued metal parts, with which, as he said, one hunts the slobber-toothed beasts of Aarex II. Though our heroes found this hard to believe, Aristotel Ivanović insisted he knew how to handle it well. His help was nonetheless of great use, as he was the only one who knew the way to the valley. For some reason the area could not be flown over, as navigation devices failed, so a guide was indispensable.

The Knights and Saab the Bloody had contented themselves with light sabres, and the countess wore the most advanced plasma blaster on her hip. Adding to the heroic impression alongside the blaster was a form-fitting suit of shiny black-and-red leather, which accentuated her slender, strong figure. That morning, accompanied by the pitying glances of our heroes, she had

spent some twenty minutes quarrelling with the washbasin, which, though the noblewoman could block its senses, suspected something was wrong. Naturally, as history records no woman ever losing an argument, the washbasin fared no better.

Having prepared everything necessary, they set off to the quiet purring of engines, following a dried-out river valley that led toward a distant belt of forest to the east. Their journey was unhindered at first, but already around noon, as they approached some ruins, they came upon a sizeable group of uskoks of very suspicious appearance, armed to the teeth, who were just about to attack them when they recognised the countess. From the crowd of dishevelled unshaven types stepped a large fellow with an unbelievably large moustache and long hair braided in a plait. He approached the countess and bowed.

"Your Grace, allow me to introduce myself. I am Ivan Šangulin, leader of the Senj uskoks. At your service."

"Ivan Šangulin? The Ivan Šangulin? The man who bedded an entire girls' boarding school on his own, and after whom all the girls wanted to marry? It is a great pleasure. You are a famous person."

"The pleasure is mine. How is the noble Luka?"

"Well, as always. He is on his way."

"Excellent, meaning he will probably bring us new weapons and vodka with antifreeze in the next delivery. I genuinely look forward to seeing him, he is a true gentleman. Few people can drink as much and jump over fires the way he can. I have also heard he plays the bugarija quite virtuously."

"Ha, he tries."

"One who tries might also succeed. It often goes that way," Aristotel Ivanović interjected. Everyone looked at him with the reserved expression

reserved for a man who tells an unfunny joke.

"Hmm... yes. Tell me, where are you headed?"

"To the Valley of Dry Uncertainty."

"What will you do there? It is full of taiga demons and all manner of nastiness. There is nothing of value. Everything looks strange, threatening, and if I knew what fear was, I would be afraid there too."

"We go on important business. Personal in nature. It has to do with washbasins."

"If that is the case, press on bravely. Watch out for the neo Venetians. Those sly little bastards can be truly dangerous."

"We will. Er, Ivo..."

"Yes."

"When we return from this mission, drop by for coffee sometime. A lady gets bored when her husband is always on the road."

"What is coffee?"

"I don't know, that's just what people say. It is a phrase at least a thousand years old."

The uskoks bowed to her and kissed her hand. At last they took their leave and headed toward the boundless taiga. Luka Ivanković's horses were of the enduro type, adapted to rough and demanding terrain, as well as the marshy conditions of the Spacva swamp forest, whose trees were already looming threateningly above them. After about an hour they were deep in the forest, which was crossed by an overgrown path, here and there still partly covered by some brown synthetic material.

"Brrr... it has been a long time since I was here," the philosopher said, glancing around nervously. "I had forgotten how dreadful it is."

Indeed, the sight the forest offered most closely resembled an atmosphere that ought to be accompanied by music in D minor. The dense forest was embraced by climbing plants, and the marshy, squelching ground seemed as though hands might at any moment rise from it to drag the unwary into treacherous mud. Wisps of fog drifted through the cool, dim landscape, and the only thing missing, to employ a somewhat cynical construction, was a young dark-haired girl in a white semi-transparent nightgown, wandering through the forest at night, while a deranged killer with a bloody kitchen knife some thirty centimetres long prowled the surroundings.

"I admit, it is not quite the most beautiful forest I have been in," said Junker's. "Back home, tall trees do not grow out of water and slimy swamp, nor do slobbering toothed creatures quite so often silently creep up on philosophers from behind."

Aristotel Ivanović turned with unexpected swiftness, rolled over his shoulder and with a jet of plasma from his rifle split an enormous larch tree in two, which splashed down into the swamp.

"So, you call yourself a philosopher," said Wyrd, watching as Saab the Bloody and Vailiant wiped themselves clean of blue-green mutant algae. "You are somehow a bit too nimble with that weapon."

"Well... I was not always a philosopher," he said, wiping rotten leaves and mud from his dolama. "Did you know that in distant history one American president had previously been a TV presenter, and a Russian one a former military spy?"

"What were you before you became a philosopher? A hired killer?"

"A hunter of slobber-toothed beasts from Aarex II. Right after the neo Venetians smuggled them to Earth."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It paid well, and I had three hungry mouths to feed. Still, in the end I quit, it simply was not suited to my fragile disposition. Too much stress in all of it. And my wife was always nagging: 'Aristotel Ivanović, look at the state of you, you are all slobbery and dirty again. The hallway is a proper pigsty. Look how muddy and bloody everything is.'"

"A president is something like a king, if I am not mistaken," Vailiant interjected.

"Ah."

"And how did that fellow go from a lowly TV presenter to king? And what is that anyway?"

"In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it was terribly popular to be a TV presenter," Wyrđ cut in. "If you were a presenter, all the women loved you and pelted you with knickers and bras. One pole dancer even became a proper queen. The other actresses, when they got older, put on weight, and stopped... socialising with owners of oil wells, would start zealously concerning themselves with seals, whales and ozone holes. And, of course, Tibet."

"I do not understand you at all. What does one have to do with the other?"

"It seems clear as day to me. The enlargement of the posterior makes an artistic person more humane and more favourably disposed toward Tibet, whoever that gentleman may be," said Aristotel Ivanović.

Wyrđ nodded in agreement, impulsively crouched at the edge of a pool and, disregarding the others, peered at a yellow flower, recognising it as *Ranunculus repens*, or in common parlance, creeping buttercup. To his great

surprise, nobody was particularly impressed when he shared this knowledge with them.

They mounted their horses and, guided by Aristotel Ivanović, whom they all now regarded as an entirely different man, set off through the threatening taiga. It turned out he did remember the way after all. They rode slowly, as the path was frequently interrupted by belts of swamp and quicksand. Along the way they were attacked by a large slobber-toothed beast resembling an old-world T-rex, but the philosopher put it down with two precise shots from his rifle, earning himself additional respect from the others. He said that killing beasts was like riding a bicycle, once you learn, you never forget. Saab the Bloody apologised for having fired a blast at him, which the philosopher accepted with the innate good nature of a true humanist.

"That can happen to anyone," he said polysemously, making it unclear whether he meant the victim or the aggressor.

With the coming of evening, the mood became even more gloomy and threatening than before. Fog had risen from the swamp and soon one could see no further than ten metres. Hastily choosing a somewhat dry clearing, they pitched their tents and placed powerful kryptonite lamps all around. They sat by the fire and warmed the goulash the old count had supplied them with.

Junker's was first on watch. He kept glancing toward the dark forest, which had come alive in the night, full of movement and unpleasant wet sounds, slowly drinking sloe brandy with antifreeze.

"Noble countess, tell us, how did it all start with that washbasin?" asked Saab the Bloody, handing her his flask of brandy.

"The wretch grew up alongside my tender being. Yet, whatever he may say, I am still mistress of my own body, however shameful and strange that

situation may be. Besides, when have you, your highness, ever seen a girl who is also a washbasin? It is a grotesque and untenable state of affairs."

"I have heard of girls who are also fish. They say they are... I beg your pardon, noble lady."

"Are, what?"

"Never mind."

"Go on, say it now," Vailiant cut in. "Now I am curious too."

"Well, if their lower half is fishy, it is of no use to anyone. I leave the rest to your imagination."

"Ah," Vailiant nodded, and the countess blushed and smiled at Saab the Bloody.

"Have you tried?"

"No, I only heard."

Aristotel Ivanović was concentratedly thinking about something. He began to mutter, then turned to the others.

"Do you know that three out of four is seventy-five percent of the population?"

That question received no answer, because Junker's cried out and his sword lit the fog surrounding him in green. Around him one could make out low creatures with fur caps and wolf jaws, armed with short curved sabres, attacking him, silent as ghosts. But despite their numbers, it was hard to get the better of an experienced warrior such as our knight. Using the advantages of the light sabre, with a few swift movements he laid them out on the slimy ground like damp firewood.

The others grabbed their weapons and joined the fight. The small creatures attacked in silence from all sides, but our heroes proved themselves worthy adversaries. The vampire-like little ones, realising they

had no chance in a face-to-face fight, tried a back-to-back fight, but as one of our heroes would cut them down or hit them with a plasma blast the moment they turned around, they abandoned that too. They still tried for a while longer to shoot with blasters and rifles from a distance, but could see nothing through the fog. The battle lasted all in all about five minutes, and then they withdrew, taking their dead and wounded with them.

"Who are these people?" said Junker's, out of breath from the fight. "Why did they attack us for no reason?"

"These are mutant neo Venetians, they always attack for no reason," said the countess. "These vampire teeth are the product of genetic engineering. They wanted to look more frightening."

"Well, they partly manage it," said Vailiant, looking at one toothed corpse. "But they are wrong. It is not about appearances, one must simply be frightening. Like us. We come across as refined, yet we are in fact frightening, are we not?"

"That is so," Saab agreed, and Vailiant simply nodded.

"You really have no problems with self-confidence, have you, gentlemen?" said the countess.

"We do not."

The others simply nodded. They had somehow not developed receptors for fine irony. Expecting a second attack from the neo Venetians, they doubled the watch, but no one attacked them again that night.

The second day they quickly breakfasted on cold tinned goulash and pressed on. In the distance among the trees they would occasionally spot a neomlechan warrior. As the forest was dense and dark, and the ground even more swampy, they could not advance very quickly, but fortunately no one attacked them. Around noon the forest began to thin and Aristotel Ivanović

indicated they were approaching its end. Then they nevertheless happened upon a young dark-haired girl in a white semi-transparent nightgown, walking alone through the forest holding a kitchen knife in her delicate hand. She turned toward them and smiled, so that the charming dimples on her cheeks were visible. She greeted them politely, giving a little skip like a girl:

"My respects, gentlemen and my lady. Is this the way to Mega Zagreb?"

"Yes," said the countess. "Good heavens, are you going through a swamp forest on foot? It is dangerous."

"Ever since that maniacal killer started chasing me, no vehicle of mine will start. My car got stuck by the lonely house in the forest, and my horse is nearby but won't budge. It seems there is some kind of structure that must be respected."

"A psychopathic killer is chasing you?"

"Not anymore. I got tired of screaming and running through the forest, tripping over roots every other moment and so on. My knees are completely scraped up, it is a disaster. How am I going to go to the beach like this, I ask you."

"And the killer?"

"I hid, gave him a good whack from behind the corner with a branch, took his knife and cut his head off. If you do not do that, they keep grabbing your ankle, however dead they ought to be. That is what those horror psychopaths are like. Tough."

"I find it strange that your horse still will not start when you have already killed him. Fortunately, I happen to have in my saddlebag a military

coverall I brought along just in case. If you put it on, perhaps you will be able to start the machine."

"I would be truly grateful. Besides, it is quite chilly here."

And there, to the great delight of all the male company, the girl stripped out of her white soiled nightgown, remaining only in her bra and miniature knickers, and briskly pulled on the military camouflage coverall. It was a little too big for her, but, as she said, it would serve the purpose. She then sat behind Vailiant on the horse and they all rode together to her stubborn vehicle. A wine-red Kawasaki was lying in a damp bush. The girl lifted it and pressed the starter. The engine hummed quietly. She nodded with satisfaction, sat on the horse and waved to them.

"Watch out for the neo Venetians," said Vailiant.

"I eat those for breakfast. Compared to psychopathic horror maniacs, neo Venetians are merely a minor nuisance. Once again, thank you. I will return the coverall," she said and sped off into the Spacva forest.

They only reached the Valley of Dry Uncertainty toward the end of the day. That area, as Aristotel Ivanović explained, had suffered great shifts in the fabric of reality as a result of the so-called non-bombs, like the entire part of the universe around the planet Xerox. None of those present, except perhaps Wyrd, understood what he was talking about, but this did not particularly bother our philosopher.

The sparse landscape was permeated with an extraordinary, one might say, secondariness. There were ruins of houses to be seen floating in the air, swimming pools that were vertical, and a multitude of other things whose existence enthusiastically and quite successfully defied physics, as well as common sense.

"This valley really looks like when you eat too many magic mushrooms in the evening and dream strange things," said Junker's.

"As I said, the fabric of reality has been damaged by non-bomb strikes. Some natural laws are therefore suspended, but the benefit of all this is that in this area we can probably reach the parasitic washbasin in the countess's mind. At least that is what it says in that ancient manuscript."

"Where do we need to go?" Vailiant looked around at the strange landscape.

"In the middle of the valley, where a lake once was long ago, there is some kind of ancient church or monastery. It is a few thousand years old, as some say. That is not impossible, because in this valley things one would otherwise be completely certain do not exist, exist most emphatically. We are there in a few minutes, it is not far."

As Aristotel had announced, in the distance there appeared a structure of strange unearthly architecture. Around its domes and arches a clear stream spiralled upstream, without touching the building. When they drew closer, to the astonishment of our knights, in that unheard-of free-standing watercourse fish could be seen swimming in flashes, swift as shadows.

"Trout," said Aristotel. "Very tasty."

"Perhaps we first do what we came here to do?" said Wyrđ. "We shall see what we can do with that washbasin, and afterwards we will fish. For that our esteemed Vailiant is a real master, and Junker's is not bad either. My lady, are you ready?"

"I am a little nervous, but I place my trust in your expertise."

"Do not worry. First I will make contact with your washbasin, and then we will somehow work out how to be rid of him."

"But only I can hear him."

"I will hypnotise you, and he will surface."

"As you say."

They entered the ancient temple. The interior was cool and lit by light of some indefinable quality, whose source could not be determined. In the middle was a large stone altar, resembling a sacrificial table of the kind they had had occasion to see during their heroic adventures. Wyrd told the countess to lie on the altar and in a quiet, monotonous voice began to induce hypnosis. Her beautiful face, after initial nervousness and resistance, finally relaxed in hypnotic sleep. The others surrounded the table, holding hands.

"Back home the inquisition would have us for this," said Junker's quietly.

"Magic is the real thing, fuck the inquisition."

Saab the Bloody liked such things and smiled broadly.

"Quiet, gentlemen, quiet," said the wizard, "now I will connect with the washbasin. Washbasin, speak up! The countess is asleep."

At first nothing happened, and then the countess carefully spoke in a male voice:

"You are?"

"Wyrd."

"Pleased to meet you. Milivoj. I am the washbasin."

"I will not beat around the bush. You know what this is about anyway. The countess complains that you make her life unbearable. I am afraid we will have to expel you from her mind. It is not nice to pester a lady and intrude upon her intimacy."

"A lady? That little wanton. Do you know she cheats on that fine Luka with everyone who comes near her? Besides, ask your friends."

"I do not wish to discuss that. Will you leave of your own accord like a proper gentleman, or will we have to drive you out by force?"

"My dear sir, I am doing nothing wrong, truly. I merely reproach her for her licentiousness, because I cannot do otherwise. Besides, I have the right to that, I am a constituent part of her personality. If you somehow separate me, you will probably kill the girl, and then there is truly no benefit in any of it."

"We will verify that now."

Wyrd dissolved and his ordinarily semi-transparent body turned into a whitish haze that enveloped the countess.

"Hey! What are you doing?" the panicked voice of the washbasin was heard.

This lasted a few moments, and then Wyrd rematerialised and woke the countess.

She blinked her long lashes and opened her eyes. She sat up on the altar, breathing deeply.

"Do you remember anything?" Wyrd asked her.

"Everything. First your conversation with that wretch, and then some strange cool sensation of merging."

"That was me entering your soul. This place truly enables such things for me. My wizardly powers are far stronger here than usual. However, I am afraid the washbasin is right. About fourteen percent of your souls is shared. If we expel him, you would probably suffer irreversible harm. But I have learned one thing about washbasins, which yours conceals like a snake conceals its legs. I already have an idea how we can stop him."

"How?" a male voice was heard from the countess's mouth, making an unpleasant impression on our heroes. The washbasin had broken through to

the surface.

"Noble lady, do not let him prevail."

A struggle was visible on the countess's face. At last it ceased and she grew calm. She spoke in a male voice.

"You can do nothing to me now. I have taken control of her body, and for that, like it or not, you yourselves are to blame. Had we not been here, I would never have managed it. Idiots."

Wyrd simply looked at his friends and they grabbed the countess and pressed her back onto the altar, taking care not to injure her. The washbasin resisted strongly, using her trained body, but could do nothing against four strong heroes.

"What do we do now?" said Vailiant.

"Hold her like that and pay no attention to what the washbasin says. I need to have a word with someone. If all goes well, I think there will be no problem."

The wizard approached a small mechanical device that resembled an electric generator. It was hovering a hand's breadth above the ground. He began to speak with it in some strange language, and our heroes and Aristotel only looked at one another. Later they all agreed it seemed to them that the generator had nodded in the end.

Wyrd took the device and held it to the countess's chest.

"Hey, what are you doing? What are you planning with that contraption? Stop. Stop!!!"

Panic could be detected in the washbasin's voice.

When the wizard finally touched the countess, a bluish light flashed from the generator and entered her lean chest. Her body instantly ceased to resist.

Vailiant and Junker's exchanged worried glances.

"Why is she so still? She is not..."

"I think everything is fine," said Wyr. "Countess?"

Morana blinked again, opened her eyes, embraced the wizard, gave him a peck on the cheek like a little girl and spoke in her sultry alto:

"Thank you, noble friend. I do not know what you did, but I no longer feel his presence. I cannot say I will miss him."

"You will not be able to miss him. He is still in you, but he can no longer cause mischief. I covered him."

"Covered? What are you talking about, sir?" Aristotel Ivanović interjected.

"When I entered the countess's soul, I learned, hmm... besides some really juicy details about her personally, also the secret of her washbasin. Washbasins are like certain birds, parakeets or canaries, for instance. If you cover them, they will fall asleep immediately, and as long as it is so, they cannot wake up."

"And? How did you cover him?" said Vailiant.

"Quite by chance there happened to be in the generator, let us call it that, fortunately, the spirit of a bedspread that felt uncomfortable in that machine and was terribly bored. I arranged with him to cover the washbasin, at which he is extremely skilled. From all this, we actually have multiple benefits; the bedspread will not disturb the countess, it will be enough for him to merely peep voyeuristically into her world from time to time, the wicked washbasin will sleep forever, and the young lady will be able to return to a normal life."

"What is the name of that spirit?" asked Saab the Bloody. "Does it have any name?"

"It does not. If we name it descriptively, the whole thing takes on an entirely different meaning."

And here, dear reader, our somewhat deranged story comes to an end. Everyone returned cheerful and in good spirits to the estate of the noble Luka, and upon his arrival spent a few days offering their mind and body every possible pleasure. The countess shone in all her inconspicuous multiplicity and everything ended as it should. The old count showered the knights with all manner of valuable things, and they departed to their time and place, satisfied and full of new knowledge.

When the philosopher returned home, Dragica, his wife, did not recognise him. As our heroes had come to regard him as an entirely different man on account of his fighting skill, he had returned home ten years younger, with long blond hair and considerably taller. Little Dragica, as she was called on account of her exceptionally short stature, summoned her brother, who was called Malum Ovum on account of the strange shape of his head. Together they questioned the philosopher and were just about to throw him out as an impostor and pretender when a slip of paper fell from his pocket bearing a description of their adventure. When they read it, a weight was lifted from their hearts and everything was finally as before.

Aristotel Ivanović commented on the whole episode in his collection of reflections in his characteristic manner:

Just the other day, while I was thinking about the strange mental state of Countess Raucker, it occurred to me how complex and still unknown to us a thing the human soul is. Is a person truly only a collection of vague impressions, or rather a magnificent creation that with its semi-divine influence subjugates rivers and drains swamps? Who can say. Nature is full of surprising phenomena. Just the other day I put a steak on to fry and nothing happened even after ten minutes. This surprised me so much that I

called my children to share this unusual experience with me. Observing this phenomenon, my daughter concluded that it might perhaps be advisable to turn on the stove. Remarkably, she was right. You can clearly see that this is my child. Reason and intuition.

Luka brought the uskoks new weapons of great destructive power. They had hoped that in this way they would finally put an end to the neo Venetians, who had also acquired something similar. That whole affair later significantly affected the mental constitution of the young countess, but that is already quite, quite another story.

On Pyramids and Mysterious Scrolls

When a planet is in trouble, it goes without saying that something needs to be done for its wellbeing. For hundreds of years, even for dim millennia, man has striven to achieve global progress, and the only thing he truly managed was global warming. From that unwilling fact begins our somewhat unusual story, which includes Bosnian pyramids, climate change, altered levels of existence, and lean, grey-haired druids who appeared even in places they had never inhabited. There will even be mention of cooking "maništra od stine", the famous Brač delicacy made from boiled sea stone, but this will not decisively affect the plot itself, which breathes with tension, the otherworldly, and, at moments, sensuously erotic.

Global warming melted the polar ice caps, sea levels rose, and the entire old continent became a subtropical oasis of entropy, anarchy, and lawlessness. Also, on the other hand, a very pleasant place for fishing and barbecuing. A small group of determined and bold intellectuals, after a

lengthy discussion of this phenomenon, decided that something needed to be done about it. There were three excellent people and two determined animals: alongside Leopold, a charismatic adventurer, Anikka, an alpha Swede, and Mbwowo, a shaman from the former Ivory Coast, there was a raven, whom everyone called simply Raven, and a lively cathedral marten of the folk name Zatica. She is, incidentally, by far the most problematic individual in the entire group, because when a cathedral marten rises onto its hind legs and looks you straight in the eye, you are not indifferent. Anyone who has ever looked a cathedral marten in the eye knows this.

So, without going into overly detailed descriptions, this group decided to establish order and set out in search of ancient secrets buried in the Bosnian pyramids, because Mbwowo and Anikka claimed that the scrolls buried there contained the secret to saving humanity. Raven and Zatica said that, since they were not human, humanity was not exactly their concern, but that it would be stupid to miss an adventure of such a challenging nature. Everyone liked the idea of travel and adventure, which was supposed to end with their heroic rescue of a fallen and twisted human society.

"So, how would we even get to those pyramids?", asked Leopold, sitting on a sizable rock and trying to open a stubbornly uncooperative can.

Anikka sighed and in doing so drew the attention of the male population, because nature had endowed her with all the striking attributes of an alpha Swede. Golden curls, a slender strong body, and proud breasts that seemed so taut that everyone felt the need to touch them at least a little.

"Well, we could... I don't know.", the girl looked at Leopold. "What if we just go by plane? That seems the fastest and most comfortable to me. So we don't have to wrestle with the Crazy Yokels through post-cataclysmic

Balkan ravines. We could do exactly that. But... what do we do with them?", she nodded her head toward Raven and the marten.

"We could declare them as pets, for instance", said Leopold.

Raven nodded approvingly, and Zlatica rose onto her hind legs and stared at Leopold.

"What do you mean, pets, dear? A little respect would really do you good. I am a cathedral marten, raised in the haciendas beneath Zagreb Cathedral, and I have eaten more mummies than you will ever eat. You fool!"

Since the marten had risen onto her hind legs and looked him straight in the eye, Leopold was not indifferent. But he knew that Zlatica was actually quite right, she just liked to push things her own way.

"Come on, kid, stop talking crap", said Anikka. "First, you lived in the catacombs, not in haciendas, second, who in their right mind would eat mummies. You're imagining things, like that couple that shows up when you eat those yellowish tablets. Besides, who's forcing you? Do you want to go or not?"

"Alright, alright", Zlatica lowered herself to the ground, "Why do you jump in like that, what's wrong with you? I'm going. Fine, but don't go around telling people. That we're pets. That's zero points."

Once they had finally reached agreement, it did not take long from idea to execution. Our heroes gathered a few necessary things and some weapons, and breaking through to the airport past the army of Crazy Yokels took them only about three days. They killed everyone who got in their way and calmly headed to the airport. Before that, Anikka had sold the loot from earlier raids, and she also had some strong and expensive drugs from a laboratory where things had evidently gone wrong, as the bodies of

the unwilling chemists had fused with the concrete in a strange and unsettling way.

All manner of folk were to be found at the airport. Since after the collapse of states the airports had mostly been guarded by strong paramilitary forces, there were no particular problems getting onto a plane, above all thanks to the fact that Anikka had given the head of security a bag of exotic chemical preparations. In those more relaxed times, formalities were not so strictly observed, so pilots often flew dressed in bermuda shorts, Hawaiian shirts, and flip-flops, and the flight attendants, to the immense delight of the passengers, were often scantily clad beauties, of cheerful disposition and exceptional sociability. At the entrance, a buxom dark-skinned woman in hot pants and a bra, prepared them for the flight:

"Dear passengers. Since we have additional VIP passengers in the cargo hold, we would ask you to carry your belongings with you, as there is simply no room. And when it's crowded", the girl winked merrily, "it's more fun, isn't it?"

"Wait, how is it that your VIP passengers are in the cargo hold?", said a conspicuously elegantly dressed highlander, of small stature and somehow mismatched proportions.

"Oh, you know, Chinese. It's sort of in their tradition. They like it that way."

"Well, if it's good for them, it's good for me."

The flight attendant came to Anikka and spoke quietly with her for a moment. Anikka smiled and nodded at her.

"What was that?", Ivan asked her.

"Well, she said that besides having to hand over our weapons for safekeeping, we will have to carry Raven and Zlatica with us. That's actually better for them too, isn't it?"

"I think it is."

Boarding took longer than they had anticipated. Since there were a great many Chinese, some of the unfortunate passengers' things had to be thrown out, but it seemed there was no other way. Raven, who had comfortably settled in Anikka's lap, looked around the plane and noticed that among the colourful crowd there had appeared, seemingly at random, about ten people of some indeterminate race, dressed in greenish togas. They all clutched black bags of some unknown woven material and exchanged furtive glances with one another.

"Hey, did you maybe notice these...", said Raven.

"I'm just wondering how long it'll take us to get there", Anikka interrupted him excitedly. "I haven't been on a plane in a long time. It's not like it'll take forever, but I really think it's cool."

The shaman turned toward them and simply smiled. They had seated him next to a slender tattooed girl with short hair and a nose-heavy, somewhat bird-like expression, who made no secret of her interest in his mysterious, dark-complexioned, and exotic person.

"But, shouldn't we maybe...", Raven continued, but at that moment the plane began to taxi down the runway and violently soared into the subtropical sky, streaked with wispy little clouds.

In the rear section of the plane a tipsy crowd had gathered, cheered by the journey and by a very strong brandy that one of the flight attendants was selling at very affordable prices. Already after about fifteen minutes, singing rang out from the back of the aircraft, and the lavish joints that had

begun to circulate spoke of camaraderie, warm humanity, and joyful togetherness.

Raven was constantly agitated, so that his anxiety transferred to Zlatica as well, who was nestling in Ivan's lap.

"Look, now...", Raven started again.

"Will you stop it?", said Zlatica. "You remind me of those idiotic action films where someone is constantly trying to point out a problem, and they always get interrupted, and like an idiot they never finish the sentence, until the shit hits the fan. And by then it's too late."

Just as Raven was about to respond to that typical outburst of Zlatica's nerves, the people dressed in togas pulled short automatic rifles from their bags, which looked very deadly.

"See?", said Raven to everyone, and Zlatica looked toward Leopold and Anikka. Ivan was carefully following the development of the situation, and Anikka sighed in displeasure and shook her head, so that her golden curls danced.

Two terrorists went to the captain and stayed in the cockpit for about ten minutes. The tension could be cut with a knife. The passengers waited expectantly for someone to finally tell them what was going on, when the intercom crackled and the captain's quiet, nasal voice was heard.

"Dear passengers. We are at ten thousand metres and the weather is fine, so we do not expect turbulence. There are, as you can see, terrorists on the plane, who, if you ask me, are making completely unreasonable and bizarre demands."

An uncomfortable silence fell where joyful song had rung out until then, and the passengers looked at the armed hijackers with considerable hostility.

The first to take courage was a bearded gentleman dressed in short fur, who somewhat resembled a Crazy Yodel.

"Well, I couldn't give less of a damn about their demands. I want to go home and they can kindly go fuck themselves. Not happening."

The hijackers all at once aimed their rifles at him. Just when it seemed the situation was becoming truly unpleasant, one of the flight attendants came tottering out of the cargo hold on unsteady legs, giggling and saying "naughty little devils, the way they went at it with those little hands. But, does anyone have soy sauce? They just started preparing one of them, but they say human meat isn't really tasty without soy sauce. Oh!", she finally noticed that things were not quite as they should be. "We have a situation here, I see. Hijackers again, huh?"

"Yeah", one of the passengers sighed in resignation.

"The way things are going, I think nothing will come of those pyramids", Anikka sighed quietly. "And as for the druids and the calendar, don't even get me started. We can be happy if we get out of this alive. These are some really messed-up assholes."

The flight attendant went to the cockpit, and after speaking with the captain and the two hijackers made her way to the cargo hold. It turned out that their leader, as if made to order, had a bottle of soy sauce in his bag. He also gave her a little ginger, assuming that might come in useful as well.

Mbwowo had already got hold of the girl beside him and it was clear that here was a man of knowledge and routine. Ivan and Anikka began voyeuristically peering over the seats, and in their eyes flickered that magical gleam connected with the heat of skin.

And then something utterly strange happened. In an instant it visibly darkened and everyone got the taste of some indeterminate berry fruit in

their mouths. The hijackers simply nodded with satisfaction and lowered their weapons, as if something had been accomplished. Raven, Zlatica, and Anikka exchanged astonished glances.

Suddenly, from the direction of the emergency exit door, a strong light appeared, illuminating our heroes. The shaman's travelling companion, who had just got down to serious business, raised her head in bewilderment and looked around. The bodies of our company began to glow with their own light, which softly lit the seats. Ivan looked toward the bright light beside him and it seemed to him as if voices and music were drifting from that strange non-place. He looked more carefully, and from the light there appeared first outlines, then entire figures of a young curly-haired red-headed woman and a thin young man dressed in a colourful jumper. Raven and Zlatica cautiously exchanged glances, and Anikka quietly whispered to Leopold.

"Do you see this? I'd be willing to bet those are the same ones from that party. The ones who don't actually exist."

"Which party?", Ivan whispered, looking with wonder at his glowing hands.

"Well, I told you once. When we were younger we used to go to those loud raves. You know, electronic music, dancing, and love. Little sweets and all that."

"And?"

"Well, a couple of people told me they'd meet those two at every rave. They're special beings. They only live in hallucinations. That's why I think this is really not happening to us", the girl whispered, stroking the agitated marten.

The strange pair stepped out of the light and came to their seats.

"Hey", the young man addressed Anikka, smiling in a friendly way. The shaman and Ivan cautiously nodded at them. The red-headed girl gave them a friendly wave and tried to pet the marten, but she pulled back and tried to stand up, though Anikka stopped her.

"You don't exist, do you?", said Anikka. "What the hell is this? What's happening?"

"We exist, we exist", said the girl. "How could we not exist?"

"And who are you then? What's your name?", the raven asked her. The shaman looked at him in amazement.

"I don't really have a name", said the girl. "You see, strange. But this is Ludwig."

"Greetings, everyone", Ludwig smiled pleasantly.

"And what do you want from us now?", said Ivan suspiciously. "Are you some kind of aliens, or?"

"Or you don't exist", Anikka added.

Ludwig and the girl exchanged glances and for a moment withdrew back into the light. It seemed as if they did not need speech to understand each other. In the end they seemed to have reached an agreement, and the girl came back to them.

"Right, Ludwig is holding the light together. We have about two minutes. Do you want us to take you exactly where you were headed? You know, the pyramids, the druids, the scrolls that will save civilisation?"

"And how do you know what we want, huh?", Zlatica cut in. "Nobody told you anything."

"We simply know", said the girl and looked toward Ludwig. "Our existence is of a different kind from yours. Thought, time, cause and effect, and matter are merely small and nearly irrelevant parts of our relationship

with other species and civilisations. And don't worry. In the end we'll bring you all back."

"Back how?", said Raven. "So that means you take us where we intend to go, and then we go where we intended to go and return to the plane which then goes where we already were, but still intend to go. That somehow..."

"Doesn't hold water?", Zlatica finished, and the whole group nodded and looked at the girl with a mixture of interest and concern.

"Yes, to you that is illogical...", the girl thought. "Actually you're right. We can take you both where you intend to go and return you to where you set off from. We can also erase your memory, so you don't have a time paradox inside you."

"You're not erasing anything of mine, you fool", Zlatica bristled.

"Well, I won't if you don't want me to", the girl laughed. "Right, the light is closing. Are you going or not?"

Anikka looked questioningly at the group. There were all sorts of reactions. Mbwowo had gone back to the young woman, as the whole situation did not particularly interest him, Ivan was silent, and on his face was etched hesitation and mild concern. Raven and Zlatica were watching distrustfully as their newly acquired glow faded.

"Adventure, right? Shall we go?", said Anikka. "Something like this never even crossed my mind as something that could happen. This is insane."

"But...", said Raven.

"There he goes again like you're in a movie. Come on, don't be wimps. I'm going, and you can do as you like. Are you coming, Ivan?"

Somewhat reluctantly, Leopold shook his head in concern and started packing. When he saw that movement was being prepared, the shaman simply nodded, winked at the girl, and took a few of his things. It did not take long and the whole group headed through the brilliant light. After an initial sensation of floating they felt the ground under their feet. The air smelled of damp and decay, leaves and mushrooms. The light slowly faded, the music disappeared too, and before them appeared a picturesque scene: the dark massif of a mountain and a group of white-clad elders gathered around a fire, roasting on sticks something that reminded Leopold of vacuum-packed Kranjska sausages.

"Here", said Ludwig. "We're here. Before you is the Bosnian pyramid, and there are your druids. They will surely know where the secret scrolls are. We'll be going now."

"Wait, where are you going?", Anikka protested. "You said you'd bring us back from where we came, or... Can you maybe drop us off at, say, the Caribbean?"

"Well, the Caribbean is mostly underwater", said the girl. "Maybe Hawaii? It's better there. You do what you need to do, and then we'll drop you off, no problem."

"Hawaii works for me, I'm fine with anything", said Anikka.

The rest of the group exchanged glances and everyone started nodding with approval. The shaman had in the meantime sat down with the group by the fire and carefully helped himself to a hot sausage and a potato he had fished out of the embers. Ludwig opened the rift in the light again and waved to them. The girl entered and in an instant dusk fell around them again.

"Come, help yourselves", said one of the grey-haired men pleasantly. "There are sausages and potatoes for everyone."

The group joined the kindly druids and in a moment all that could be heard was satisfied smacking, blowing, and slurping. It turned out, namely, that the druids also had mead and some fairly good homemade brandy.

"So", said one of the druids. "What we saw was truly strange. You came out of the light and talked with those two esoteric ones. And here you are now. What brings you?"

"You're druids, right?", asked Zlatica. "How come it's already dark?"

"We are. Priests, actually, if we're being local about it", said one of them, and the others simply nodded in agreement. "Not only is it dark, but it's two days later than you think."

"That's like when aliens abduct you and you have a two-day gap. Well, excellent then. So, here is the Bosnian pyramid and in it are the mysterious scrolls with which we will save humanity. And then these ones will come for us and we go to Tahiti."

"To Hawaii", Anikka corrected her.

"Right, that. Come on then, tell us how to get in", said Zlatica confidently. "I know my way around underground haciendas. I've eaten mummies, you wonder. A pyramid is simply nothing to me. Like it's just an ordinary mountain with haciendas."

The druids exchanged glances in considerable amazement. One of them stood up, measured the dark massif behind him, and approached them with an unfathomable expression on his face. The others began watching him in anticipation, occasionally interrupted by a sip of brandy and a bite of sausage.

Raven wanted to say something, but Anikka interrupted him, waving her hand for him to be quiet.

"The thing is", said the druid uncertainly. "What do you mean we'll give you the scrolls from the pyramid? We don't have them. And this hill behind us isn't really a pyramid. It does somewhat resemble a pyramid, but it's an ordinary hill. I think the Bosnian pyramids don't actually exist, so we can't help you with that. If you're up for a bit of sausage and brandy, no problem. We can also take a stone out of the sea and cook a fine maništra od stine, or stina na maništru, as they also call it. No problem. But scrolls and saving civilisation... That's not going to work."

"Wait, you're saying that interdimensional beings brought us here, and there's no pyramid or anything", said Ivan in disbelief.

"Hmmm... yes", said the druid with some discomfort. "I think they were having a bit of a laugh at your expense. Perceptual passages are a handy thing and you can do all sorts with them, but as for your adventure... How did you actually intend to save civilisation?"

"Well, I don't know. The scrolls would probably indicate what needed to be done", Anikka cut in. "You know, hidden codes, complicated puzzles, rappelling down on a rope..."

"I'm sorry, but there is no pyramid or scrolls here. I'm afraid nothing doing", another druid cut in and offered the shaman some brandy, which the latter accepted with pleasure.

And there, quite unexpectedly, our story comes to an end. The entire company, together with the druids, waited a full week, but there was neither hide nor hair of Ludwig and the girl. The druids told them they had perhaps gone to find themselves, but this sounded somewhat like consolation and quite like some kind of nonsense. Everything indicated that they had, in the end, left them in the lurch. Anikka, of cheerful disposition, quickly forgot about this somewhat awkward affair and contentedly gave herself over to

the enjoyment of the maništra od stine the druids had prepared for them. The shaman, as was to be expected, found a girl in the nearby hamlet. After just two days they fell in love and he decided it was high time he settled down. Everyone said goodbye to him filled with emotion and he left with a somewhat dishevelled young woman of smooth skin and generous hips.

They were already missing him the next day, but since he was living only a kilometre away, the very next day he came to ask the druids where they got all those sausages and where he could get hold of some. On the seventh day Ivan suggested that perhaps they could head home, given the situation, and Anikka immediately agreed with him.

Zlatica had in the meantime been hunting rodents and eating the leftovers of the occasional wayfarers that the druids would now and then catch, purely so as not to eat sausages all the time. She would help them by rising up onto her hind legs, and, while they were not indifferent to this, the druids would finish the wayfarers off with rocks and clubs. Only Raven was constantly bored and nothing suited him, and it annoyed him even more that people were not taking his bad mood seriously. When they finally decided to set off home, he spoke up:

"Well people, what a waste of time this was, I can't believe it. No pyramids, nothing. Actually, from the very start we hadn't even agreed what our mission actually was. They even played us for complete fools, those characters. You know when I'll go with you on some adventure next time?"

Anikka and Ivan looked at each other with delight.

"Say it once, please", said the girl.

"I won't", Raven protested.

"Come on, say it", Ivan joined in.

Said Raven: "Go fuck yourselves!"

Dear readers, it later emerged that everything had in fact been arranged, and that anyone who had looked a little more carefully would have found quite a few hints that something was not quite right. The interdimensional inhabitants, the girl and Ludwig, had been worried, because for reasons only they could understand, a change in the existing state of affairs did not suit them, so the fate of our heroes had been in their hands from the very moment they boarded the plane. Of course, they had been in cahoots with the druids, who had been there at exactly the right time and in the right place, which had struck no one as suspicious except Raven.

The mountain that had loomed over them was in fact the Bosnian pyramid in which the scrolls were hidden, scrolls with which the fate of humanity could be changed. And in the end, Ivan somehow remembered Raven's suspicions and they went back, entered the pyramid, found the scrolls, and changed the fate of humanity. The druids helped them a great deal in this, since they felt uncomfortable about their scheming and cooperation with the unfathomable esoteric ones. In the end it turns out they are entirely upright folk, of good intentions and quality gastronomic habits. As for how they ultimately saved humanity, it seems we will not find out after all.

Zdeslav and Mislav – Robots and Influencers of Today

Zdeslav and Mislav are, at first glance only, urban students in their third year of history studies. They had always been, or so it seemed to them at least, typical young local men: tall, heavysset, and devoted to history, the church, and communism. Despite the fact that the people around them kept

telling them that clerical communism as a worldview simply does not hold water, they always declared themselves as such, and whenever someone started to reproach them for it, they would immediately cleverly accuse them of being a "hater", after which they would mostly be left alone, with people commenting suspiciously that "those two don't have both oars in the water, mate".

Sometimes it would come to blows, but since they were several times stronger than people and both highly skilled in martial arts, the hater-haters would as a rule come off worse and, as people would often (and wrongly) say, "get it around the head" and then spend some time in hospitals.

How did all this actually begin? Our robots were not the work of any man or any aliens for that matter, but were the fruit of a long evolution, entirely beyond the knowledge of the greatest scientists on Earth, about which the robots themselves knew little, so they assumed God had created them and were for the most part quite religious, though not in that intolerant and aggressive way that humans do it. Their evolution had begun with geobacteria that feed on electricity, then gradually changed through prehistory into metallic forms and subspecies, and in the end resulted in fully humanoid robots, who had a reproductive system and customs similar to those of humans.

Of course, the robots would not have done this had nearly their entire population on Earth not at one point been wiped out by a solar flare, which with a powerful electromagnetic pulse had destroyed the fine structures in their sensitive central cognitive circuits. Only a few hundred robots survived across the entire world. Since this happened in the early Middle Ages, Mislav and Zdeslav had ended up stuck in solid metal cages for goodness knows which time, as they had been declared sorcerers.

Those cages saved their sensitive brains from certain death. They extricated themselves from the crazed mob with torches and hoes through sparkling intelligence, good strategic decisions, firm rhetoric, and, more than anything else, an extremely abrasive file, which a girl had smuggled to them in bread, a girl tremendously taken with Zdeslav's stamina in bed and his unusual, imaginative ideas. She was also captivated by his strange ability to emit a weak current from certain parts of his body, which afforded her orgasms she kept silent about like a sealed vault, fearing that some intrusive, long-legged, taut and carnal wanton might steal her wondrously valuable king of the senses, Zdeslav.

Both of our heroes have not been living in these parts since the often-mentioned seventh century, but are the product of the already twice-mentioned evolution, which concluded approximately three hundred and twenty million years ago. Zdeslav, who liked to boast of this to girls, was not taken seriously by anyone, although it was perfectly clear to people that there was something truly strange about him and his equally bearded designer friend, who wore an Andean colourful cap even when the sun was blazing at full strength.

Mislav, despite the Andean cap, was more sensible and would never say he was millions of years old, so he even, hard as it is to imagine, fared better with girls than his colleague and friend. Both of them liked to drink and love, which they enjoyed immensely, for it had taken them a great deal of fine-tuning before they had built systems that respond like the senses of other beings, such as humans and sometimes the humanoid captives from Xarx 4, who often passed themselves off as vampires.

After careful recalibration, they began to enjoy food, drink, and sex; they even created a reproductive mechanism, so they were born as babies, although from time to time a metallic atavism from the past would appear,

and such individuals would, with the cruelty of children, be mockingly called tin, and get beaten up at school. Mistake. The tin ones were born with ancient plasma and gravitational weapons, so skirmishes would sometimes end badly for the humanoid ones. There was a lot of work later for the doctors/mechanics, as they had to repair severed heads and cut-off limbs.

The two of them had met in distant times, long before the then very numerous robot population on Earth had grown tired of the enormous rudeness of the dinosaurs, and the whole planet had decided to deal with those toothy, gluttonous aberrations of nature. Be that as it may, they managed in just a few years to exterminate those insolent, stupid, and unpleasant creatures. Since there were no longer any carnivores, the large herbivores multiplied so greatly that they ate everything around them and died out, while the smaller specimens were genetically modified by Zdeslav, Mislav, and their friend Jura, so that they became the ancestors of today's birds. A similar modification they later made to some unremarkable ape-like creatures that subsequently evolved into the human race.

Humans turned out to be all sorts, but in most cases they liked to gather in angry mobs and were fond of torches, sharp objects, and menacing battle songs. As they changed and gradually became the dominant organisms on Earth, so too did the robots change form and gradually infiltrate among humans. The authorities from other parts of the universe would often unload all manner of ruffians and villains onto Earth, who would invariably present themselves to Earthlings as mythical beings and gods. This irritated the robots, and Mislav and Zdeslav in particular, so much that they spent several thousand years as exorcists and hunters of the supernatural.

The two of them had also dabbled in the fringe areas of science, attempting to build a time machine, which only partially succeeded, as they were irradiated by temporal particles and the machine itself completely

disintegrated. So from time to time, for reasons unfathomable to them, it would happen that they were transferred to the past for a while, and would equally return to their present without any agency of their own.

So one evening Zdeslav was watching Mislav work his way into some attractive red-headed girl, swaying from carefully induced intoxication and lewdly grazing her body, which nature in a good mood had generously furnished her with.

"My dear Lana", Mislav was slurring tipsily, "that was a big problem until just a couple of hundred years ago. The Earth had to be cleared of all that riffraff presenting themselves as dragons, vampires, and witches, or whatever you want to call them."

"Wait", said the girl in amazement. "You two are like two Van Helsing. You know, fighters against vampires and werewolves."

"Exactly so, we are your veritable Van Helsing", Mislav brightened up and by mistake, not looking, reached into the ashtray, thinking it was a bowl of snacks. "Actually we were exactly like that, but that was before. Now we've taken up studying history. It took us quite a while before we adapted our appearance, so that our beards, man-buns, glasses, and bicycles grew", said our hero, carefully chewing two cigarette butts and a sachet of hibiscus tea.

"And yes. Whatever some evil tongues may say, we are not responsible for the Jurassic extinction, well, maybe a little we are. We even really tried to preserve the archosaurs and therapsids, but that didn't quite work out for us."

"And the dinosaurs?", said the girl and snuggled cosily against the attractive, urban, and fairly tipsy influencer.

"We took care of them later, the big ones at least. For fuck's sake, you couldn't even go for a walk without some disgusting allosaurus, t-rex, or that tiny, also feathered velociraptor charging at you and trying to bite your head off. We sorted all that out."

At that, Lana looked at Mislav with that familiar tender gaze, grabbed him by his heroic genitals, then by the hand, and led him in a fully emancipated manner to her car, where they made love wildly until they were interrupted by a police patrol and a gathering of grumpy, appalled citizens of more conservative worldviews, prone since time immemorial to violence, pitchforks, hoes, and torches.

So Mislav and Zdeslav frequented their usual haunts, Krivi and Medika, and often talked about film production, while somehow managing to counter the corrosive effects of beer with more frequent repairs and occasional shots of pelinkovac and honey brandy. It all went down well and life seemed good to them, though now and then this idyll was broken by attacks from robot hunters.

Once they had to rescue former eco-architect and current auto mechanic Jura, because the remnants of the first humanity, the one that didn't descend from apes, had sent a mercenary to capture and torture him. You can easily imagine how that story ended. A few days later they were sitting in the bar Krivi, debating with the locals about the aesthetic and marketing aspects of film production, when a temporal shift hit them and a brief but peculiar event began.

Without noticing anything unusual, he had gone to the toilet and on his way back found himself in an entirely different tavern, Mislav sat down next to Zdeslav, turned toward the guy at the bar beside him, and observed a group of tipsy soldiers. Outside, the hammering of howitzers and mortars

could be heard. The soldier was looking at him with a bewitching, unfocused gaze, unhappy with his appearance, flinching at every explosion.

"Hey. What's the deal, who do you look like, mate? Look at yourself, you're all hairy and dressed like a ragpicker dragged you in," he said to Mislav, frowning.

"Sorry?"

"Who are you with? Are you one of ours?"

"What do you mean, yours? I've been living in these parts for hundreds of millions of years. I'm more than one of yours."

"Are you Croatian?" the soldier asked, drawing the attention of the rest of the bar.

"Of course I am. I'm Mislav, a Croatian robot," said our hero proudly. "I'm both father and mother to all of you, just so you know, lads."

At those words the soldiers just looked at each other and stood up from the table.

"You seem suspicious to me," said one of the soldiers and started toward him, scowling and spoiling for a fight.

"Suspicious? How suspicious? Hey, where were you in '91?" Mislav asked provocatively, and the whole crew exchanged glances. At that moment a 120mm mortar shell hit the building and all the windows shattered. Everyone threw themselves to the floor.

"Well, it's '91 right now, you idiot," said one of the soldiers, getting up, brushing rubble, glass, and wood splinters off himself. Zdeslav, as if nothing had happened, sat calmly and talked to some girl who had been terrified, so he was calming and comforting her. Everything was happening as in a dream, and our robot's enhanced senses suddenly detected an incoming temporal distortion. He turned toward his friend in trouble and

noticed that through the slowed time, a massive ashtray of ground Bohemian crystal was flying straight at Mislav.

"Mislav," said the handsome influencer robot, while the now-calmed girl admiringly measured his regular, hairy profile and little straw hat.

"What is it?" said Mislav.

"Watch out, ashtray!"

Mislav ducked quickly and his Andean beanie slipped off his head. The ashtray smashed into the bottles on the bar and again there was wreckage and breakage. He looked at his friend, turned toward the room, brought down the attacker with a skilled sambo throw, and turned around.

"Thank you, bro, you saved my life," he said, and with a well-measured rear roundhouse brought down yet another tipsy malcontent.

"Fall, fall, you ugly wretch, the rear roundhouse will be your death," he said.

Zdeslav looked at him in amazement, and Mislav grinned mischievously and blew away a wayward strand that had slipped out of his bun.

"Ah, it's just something you say," he said and...

At that moment both of them found themselves back in Krivi. They looked at each other, shrugged, and downed a round of pelinkovac with the bartenders. They listened to the sounds of The National and afterwards happily knocked back each their own delicious honey brandy and washed it down with beer.

They turned around and at that moment two young women approached them with green hairstyles, thick-framed glasses, and grandmotherly baggy floral dresses that had nonetheless failed to conceal the exceptional harmony of their figures. It didn't take much, and soon the grimy ladies'

toilets were echoing with agonized-ecstatic sighs and cries. Our heroes no longer gave a thought to the unpleasant incident, the wrong turns of evolution, malicious aliens, and the temporal shift. What can you say? Well, that's actually all, for now. But it is undeniable that a robot's life is always quite interesting, and sometimes truly beautiful.

1

Best laughs he who laughs from behind

Dear reader, this is yet another story about Junkers, Vailiant, and Wyrd, but they are not the main characters in it, because it is hard to be the lead when you are measured against the peoples of crystal, gentle slopes, or indeed various frequencies of light. Those cucumbers are mentioned somewhere, but we won't dwell on matters of thoroughly questionable propriety and aesthetic value.

So there they gathered, as in a joke, a comedian, a Hungarian woman, a horned and hairy forest creature, and a picture-book-tattooed bearded humanoid robot with an unusual sense of humor, who launched an IT startup and produces cloud AI applications used to teach people old crafts, with an emphasis on stacking firewood.

But the beginning of the story doesn't go quite so simply, because this is not some stupid joke, though that is quite a dubious statement, given what follows, but rather a completely unusual event, as we have already hinted, of problematic quality and significance that eludes most of our perception, and indeed stubbornly resists elementary common sense. And later there will genuinely be mention of a nun and a small creature with a bushy tail.

Our heroes ended up here entirely by chance, because Wyrd had somehow got wind of it through the grapevine, or perhaps through some

kind of larvae, that this was something entirely exclusive, a pangalactic festival of humor, and that piqued the curiosity of our heroes. Of course we all know that humor is a thoroughly elusive thing and that even after millennia of fruitless attempts various artificial intelligences, in their attempts at jokes, provoke all manner of reactions among the inhabitants of the multiverse; from mild revulsion through mockery to full-blown panicked flight. Among organisms that have a head, naturally. The race of leaf-trail creatures from the planet Labrax 3 was known for its rather unpleasant derision of mediocre intelligences in their hopeless attempts. Somewhat cruel, but that's leaf-trail creatures for you.

After the insectoid space race the Ge'bara enabled rapid communication among all manner of living beings across the galaxy with their so-called loom drive, its inhabitants quickly connected and began collaborating on various levels, sometimes difficult for our senses to conceive. Thus the distinguished representatives of the crystal people from Tau Ceti very quickly learned to respect the rather repellent and dim-witted earthly fascination with football, which most other space races found quite off-putting, and athletes appeared among them who could refract light in very fine yet astonishingly skillful ratios of light frequencies, which made them heroes.

Those heroes of illuminated fluids enjoyed all the offered perquisites and luxury, so that some of them had come to spend their time in hedonistic immersion in vessels full of various sinful solutions, tended to by fungi from mycorrhiza, passionately bound to the roots of some evergreen trees resembling the earthly dwarf thuja.

This debauchery of the crystals was exalted to the heavens by Cetian sports journalists, rapturously refracting light in amber yellow, whereupon almost all citizens aligned with them, except for a few dissident loafers who

were anyway always subversively and stubbornly against everything, and whose area of interest lay in the pretentious and snobbish spectrum of ultraviolet.

But let us start from the beginning. The Pangalactic Association of Losers, headquartered on the planet Pegula IV, frequently launched various initiatives, understandably with utterly modest to no results. Purely for one to feel pity at such touching futility. So they ambitiously took on event management as well and set about organizing a pangalactic festival of humor.

The head of the association was the noble Guzzi, one of the eminent representatives of the exotic race with the truly peculiar appearance of a tree-crown treehouse, and his most loyal collaborator and right hand was literally one of the right hands (third from the top) that a certain Oooooowhhh could boast of and indeed grip a branch with most firmly. A strange creature resembling a centipede, who in the end did not attend the convention, because he was trying to reach some succulent fruit and fell from a tall tree and bruised himself badly. When things aren't going your way, they simply aren't going your way.

The Earth delegation at the convention on planet Beta 426X was made up of a comedian joker, an attractive blonde Hungarian woman who makes an excellent goulash, a bearded influencer, a robot evolved from geobacteria, and, of course, Prince Vailiant and his companions, the honorable knight Junkers and the ectoplasmic wizard Wyrd.

The convention started with a slight delay, because the guests did not quite keep to the schedule, since a good portion of them culturally had no familiarity with the concept of time, such that categories like "before" or "later" represented nothing they could in any way be guided by.

"Eventually" and "sometimes" or "despite" and "barely" would already work.

One humanoid boorish comedian in his very first performance very carelessly knocked down several taboos, because he crudely mocked the orange spectrum among Cetians, and told the arthropod Ge'ebars about shrimp in buzara sauce, which they experienced as utterly unacceptable cannibalism. To the bush-like Ixxians he said their canopies were tall, which insultingly offended them on an aesthetic level, because toward the often arrogant trees that looked down on them from above, they felt pronounced aversion.

That unfortunate soul disappeared without a trace on the second day and no one ever found his body. It is suspected that the proud Ge'ebars dissolved him with digestive enzymes, and the warrior race of evolved squashes, the Zauchenci, absorbed him through their roots. None of this has been fully confirmed, because he was also repellent to the local police, the worm-like Jooh-uhs, so they didn't even investigate what had happened.

The organizers with all their souls (some of them had up to four) apologized to the guests for the outrageous behavior of that troublesome creature of strange, humanoid appearance. All the participants found humans very peculiar, except for the Hungarian Ilonka, who, alongside long legs, generous hips, and ample breasts, contained in the harmonics of her being certain qualities of which other beings were very much aware, and humans barely, only in traces.

How this wholly special girl ended up in the Earth delegation no one knew, but she was a being for whom many would wilt or turn knowingly, intoxicated by her sensuality, refined structure of existence, and bewitching pheromones that aroused in the Ladransians, a people resembling cardboard boxes, a positively unearthly lust.

Her multidimensional, irresistible joie de vivre reached all manner of beings, from crystals, through intelligent self-aware fluids, to structural proxemic beings that existed only with the appropriate arrangement in the five-dimensional, so-called tilted universe. Her goulash and paprikash were loved by all extraterrestrials, so juicy and spicy it was. Some considered it mysterious. Some even wise, decisive even.

Gradually it became clear to the organizers that they had found themselves somewhat in a pickle, whatever that expression might mean, because the very idea of humor varied quite considerably across different civilizations, though it turned out that not everything was as disappointing as they had feared it might be. On the contrary, everyone was very pleased when the universal translator reported that one of the disembodied artificial intelligences, upon the mention of the number two, had responded with "fuck you," though it took a little while for all participants to form some idea of what "fucking" was, but once they found out, everyone burst into laughter, however that looked and sounded, because there really was all sorts there. Their senses responded well to the universal cosmic resonance of crudeness. Even completely sexless races were happy to laugh at jokes involving sex, sensuality, or reproduction.

The Earth team did not particularly distinguish itself, because the robot Jura attempted some sarcasm and wordplay, but no one was very enthusiastic about that kind of humor. Jura was a pleasant fellow, but inoculated against quality piss-taking. Everyone was waiting for the performance of the popular Ladransians because, taking the translator into account, it went like this:

First one. (rolls four times across fine multicolored gravel) Second: You're a bit of a rolling stone, old boy. First: But I rolled first. (General

laughter) Second: And first to roll gets the box. (Ovation) First: No, he who rolls first, the gravel grinds.

That was very well received. The universal translator was roaring with the laughter of the others, with some commenting knowingly that without the gravel it wouldn't have been the same and that it was the cherry on top that made the difference. The Earth team watched it all with baffled incomprehension and somewhat in shock.

"What the fuck, people?" Jura was dumbfounded. "This is a joke about the love life of cardboard boxes? Oh, Jesus..."

"I like it," said Wyrd, while Junkers and Vailiant looked at each other, took a sip from their horns of red wine, and smiled the smiles of people who had been through a great deal.

"No, I know, old boy. I'm off," Pan cut him off and first checked whether what was beside him was an ordinary forest or some delegation and culture.

As it turned out to indeed be a forest, he skipped off on his goat legs, accompanied by the gazes, sensors, and spiritual harmonics of the participants. He seemed to go down rather well with the Cetians and the Ge'ebars. Jura watched it all with a bewildered look, because in his long life over the past three hundred million years he had not experienced something so strange that he was unable to process it. He had been learning from humans for thousands of years what humor was, but it seemed to still elude him somewhat.

For a while he had been cynical, back in the influencer days, but it turned out that most people didn't find that cynicism funny, and sometimes they even physically attacked him, because it came across as mockery. The space races and their unusual ways of existence were as foreign to him as they were to humans, still quite unaccustomed to other worlds and their

inhabitants. After all, he was in every way a human, except for his inorganic origins. Through the evolution of his kind from geobacteria to conscious beings with emotions and very pronounced senses, they had learned more or less everything humans can, except for magic, intuition, and extrasensory perception. That robots and AI entities, their disembodied souls, could not do, or so it seemed.

"And you, enchanting young lady? What do you think of all this?" Junkers approached the Hungarian woman, who was standing at a stall and with a smile offering goulash to passersby, dancing to a csárdás playing in the background. He came up to the stall and tried some of that fine, spicy dish. He nodded his head, contentedly, and wiped his mustache with the end of his sleeve. Ilonka handed him a few paper napkins and he nodded his head to her, grateful.

"Excellent. I might have it even spicier," said our knight, expertly, passionately, with tears in his eyes and a pained grimace on his face, and the Hungarian woman, hidden beneath long lashes, looked at him with respect and smiled at him.

"You handsome boy," she said and sized him up hungrily with eyes blue as cornflowers, "and you liked my goulash. Very nice. I understood nothing of that with the boxes myself."

"To me, my dear, all of this is one big what the fuck. Not uninteresting, but what the hell is going on here? I'm genuinely curious how this is going to develop. They say the group that looks like jellyfish tells excellent jokes."

"I don't know," said the Hungarian woman and took him by the hand, at which he stroked her on the back and she gave him a lovely smile.

"And where's that forest fellow of ours?" Vailiant joined in, and Pan appeared from the bushes. He had concluded it was time for a slightly more

idiotic joke, since they were all here anyway.

"Why do a rabbit's ears stick out after it's hidden?"

"Why?"

"Because it didn't hide very well."

That went down rather well with one sedimentary and one composite person.

"Very nice," said one such individual, "beautifully put and magnificently retarded." "What is a rabbit?"

Junkers looked around at the surroundings and nodded his head. Ilonka and Pan were still looking to see who was addressing them.

"I apologize, I thought you were a slope with a small landslide," said Wyrd suavely. "But when I see your layering, that's quite another story."

Junkers and Vailiant only looked at him questioningly, still not knowing who the wizard was talking to.

"That keeps happening to me, don't worry," said the cheerful sedimentary being, streaked with a few clumps of grass and three dandelions that had, or so it seemed, seen better days.

"It was a pleasure," said Wyrd politely.

"Mine too. Dragutin is a very lovely name. Will you tell us a joke rich in vulgarity? You Earthlings are good at that."

"You'd want that?" Wyrd was surprised, and the others answered affirmatively, each in their own way. It seemed that, alongside goulash, they all enjoyed crude raunchy humor. Ilonka, all devilish and perky, blushed and nodded, and Pan just smiled knowingly and fixed his gaze on a rather appealing plant person.

Jura and Ilonka looked at him questioningly.

"You know, this is my territory," said Pan, and all around general merriment took hold. The Ge'ebars, who were notorious for crudeness, whistled approvingly.

"What the fuck?" Pan was surprised.

"Exactly," Jura joined in.

"Fucking hell, old boy, fucking hell," said XXXXyrhzY, known as the Ge'eban master of lascivious satire.

"Tell the crew, most of them don't know this, how come your name is Jura? I find that hilarious."

"Well, actually, they got my name wrong, because they think I'm responsible for the Jurassic extinction."

"And you're not?"

"I'm not. But at one point, about two hundred and fifty million years ago, I was trying to fix something deep in the heart of the Earth, and I did something wrong."

"And what happened then?" asked Ilonka.

"Volcanoes woke up and the oceans turned to acid. Everything alive drowned and 90% of all life on Earth went extinct."

"And when did that happen?" asked Pan.

"In the Permian."

"In the Permian? Ahahaha, fucking hell. Reminds me a bit of..." Pan burst out laughing, and the others joined in, not entirely sure what it was about.

"You lot are genuinely retarded. You've got a sense of humor like you're all mental," Jura complained.

At that moment one of the Cetians spoke up, still snickering at Jura's expense.

"Come on then, tell us something really funny."

"Right then," Jura groaned.

"A nun asks the children: 'Children, what is it, it's brown and furry, has a bushy tail and jumps through trees? It buries acorns and hazelnuts. What is it, Ivica?'"

Ivica: "I haven't the faintest idea."

Nun: "What is it, Gretel?"

Gretel: "Could it be a wolf?"

Nun: "There you go. Look at that. If you're a hammer, the whole world is a nail. So everything is a wolf to you. And you, Perica? What is it?"

Perica (thinking it over): "Weeell, I know the right answer is Jesus, but it really sounds like a squirrel to me."

"What are a hammer and a nail," the sedimentary slope chimed in.

At that one of the crystals said:

```
using namespace std; int main() { cout << "beauty is in the eye of the  
beholder. and so is the squirrel" << endl; return 0; }
```

He incorrectly believed that ancient C++ was one of Earth's spoken languages. And so, when he once visited Earth, he had learned English, Burushaski, Chukchi, and Finnish, but also a host of computer languages, among them ancient C++ and Python.

A tree of rich canopy said:

"Well now, it's not a bad joke, but it lacks some, you know, sex, violence, and crudeness. How do you Earthlings put it, what are the mandatory ingredients of something good?"

"There definitely has to be a bit of rolling in the hay," said Ilonka sweetly.

"What is hay?"

"Hay is the best. And a good cave too," Junkers nodded, and Wyrd and Vailiant looked at him with mixed feelings. "Without that there's no beauty. And it's good when you joke at your own expense. Only the best do that. Nobody tells jokes about Mujo and Haso better than Bosnians."

"Come on then, give us that. Let's hear what it sounds like," said the tree.

"Right then. So Fata and Haso had devoted themselves to cheating on Mujo, when the sound of a key in the door is heard.

Fata gets scared, and so does Haso."

"Here's Mujo, we're fucked, he'll kill us," said Fata.

"What do we do now?" said Haso.

"Here's what we do. You stand in the corner and pretend to be a robot."

Raucous laughter spread through the assembled company. The trees and the fluids and the crystals all seemed very merry and approving. From behind a bush a badger appeared, which would not have been strange except that they were on planet Beta 426X, on which there had traditionally been none of those striped animals with a peculiar sense of humor. But he too seemed pleased, probably being one of those beings that can change their appearance.

"Wait, the joke isn't finished," said Jura.

"It isn't? Well go on, continue," said one of the Cetians.

"Right, Fata, I got back from the market and had a couple of rakija shots with some mates. But... what's that robot doing in the corner?" said Mujo.

Again general laughter rang out.

"Wait, the joke still isn't over."

"It isn't?" Vailiant asked him.

"No."

"Well go on and finish it then."

"Right, here goes. Robot? He's like a vibrator to me. I felt like a bit of carnal pleasure so I used him."

"Could I use him for a bit?" asked Mujo.

"Go right ahead, be my guest," said Fata.

"And so Mujo started caressing Haso, but he didn't particularly enjoy that," said Jura, and again laughter spread through the company. Everyone was enjoying the story, which was, well, not all that funny really.

"What if I grab a cucumber or a squash, maybe it'll be more erotic for him? Or whatever, a dildo?" said Mujo.

Then Haso spoke up, in a robotic voice:

"The squash will be fine."

Everyone burst into laughter, led by the guys and girls who were fluids. Their servants were pouring them from vessel to vessel, which was their equivalent of rolling around laughing. Tree and shrub canopies were shaking, and the Cetians were refracting light flat out.

"Hehehe, hehehe," said one Cetian. "This is about those oval things, eggs, is it? Is this the Fata from that joke where the, well, dimwittedly quantity is exalted over quality?"

"Sorry?" asked Jura, surprised.

"Fata is Fata, but twice is twice."

Jura, Pan, and Ilonka looked at each other, marveling that a crystal from a distant galaxy knew about that.

"How do you know that?" Jura asked, surprised. "How many light years is your planet from my Earth?"

"Three hundred and sixty-eight."

"A fine amount," said Jura, Pan, and Ilonka in unison and general approval began.

The young Hungarian woman was just about to say something, still all flushed and hot from laughing, when she was interrupted by a new wave of tittering. Namely, in every space race there are individuals who don't quite catch the joke right away, but start sniggering a little later.

And so, through no fault of our own, we have come to the end of our story. We learned a little. To everyone's surprise, the entire festival was not a failure. This welcome exception brought endless joy to the organizer Guzzi, who had been inhabited by our badger (it turned out that it really had been a badger in the end), and indeed to his friend and right hand Oooooowhhh.

Some wonder how Oooooowhhh appeared there, given that it was said he did not attend the convention in the end, because he fell from a tree? To that logical question there is really no coherent answer. Perhaps the narrator simply lied shamelessly and without clear motive? But I would know why I would lie, because that is me. I am the narrator, if I am in the first person, presumably. If he/I am in the second person, it's not the same, but I would still know. And I don't know. Strange.

Bricked

One day they just came, without any announcement. Earthly astronomers, astrophysicists and various military bodies were completely unprepared for the arrival of the spacecraft that headed toward Earth, sending the message:

"We come in peace... we come in peace... we come in peace..." And so on without stopping. Before anyone managed to react in any way, the ships landed on Earth. Contrary to expectations, little green men didn't immediately walk out and set off on some mission — the ships just stood there, motionless and silent.

There was something ominous in the magnificent indifference of the newcomers, and as time passed, the absence of any visible desire for communication made the nerves of the people in charge increasingly tense. All of this went on for about a week when the newcomers suddenly, seemingly without any reason, broke their silence, sending a brief message:

"Esteemed ones. It took us a few days of monitoring your media to learn something about the development of your civilization and to, in accordance with what we learned, adapt the marketing treatment and other elements to your needs. We are now ready for a meeting and would like a conversation to be arranged with the President and the leading businessmen of Earth. We repeat once more, our intentions are honorable and friendly. Thank you in advance, The Management"

The Earth government could hardly wait for events to get off the dead point, somewhat surprised by the formal tone of the message. Bodies for relations with the newcomers were hastily formed, and through electronic media a notice was continuously broadcast that the Earth government was also ready for the first meeting. The historic Meeting was arranged for the following day at 11 in the morning; after the first coffee, as the spacemen put it. The scientific teams of the Earthlings looked somewhat puzzled at the remark about the coffee.

The next day, the eyes, lenses and sensors of the entire world were fixed on the largest of the spacecraft, to which soldiers in ornate parade

uniforms had brought a red felt carpet, glancing with unease toward the enormous craft. Tension was rising.

Politicians and scientists approached the ship with anxiety in their hearts, somewhat calmed by the presence of snipers guarding them. The moment they got to approximately ten and a half meters away, a door opened on the rim of the craft and a delegation of spacemen calmly stepped out with a certain dignified awkwardness.

The entire world gasped in wonder. They were varied: medium height, middle-aged, a few of them grey-haired or bald; what they had in common were well-tailored suits, gleaming shoes and document bags. They showed a somewhat odd taste in the choice of ties. All in all, the delegations of the Earthlings and the spacemen resembled each other like one egg resembles another.

The Earthlings looked approvingly at the spacemen. It was clear at first glance that these were beings one could do business with.

"My respects!" the first spaceman called out and warmly hugged and kissed the President. By chance, while studying the customs of Earthlings as a model for relations with other peoples, they had taken old communist Russian customs as their model, as they found them very charming. They weren't particularly fond of the later Russian and American aggressive vision of diplomacy. The President, who in his long diplomatic career had long since had contact with the Russians, returned the kisses just as warmly, while the other members of the Earth delegation behaved considerably more reservedly, though here and there a kiss would ring out. The eyes of the world were fixed on that scene laden with some deep significance.

Both delegations walked in casual friendly conversation toward the official vehicles of the Earth government. The entire world breathed easy;

the spacemen, contrary to all expectations, appeared quite ordinary and, most importantly, were clearly in a friendly mood.

As soon as they found themselves in the privacy of the government chambers, the President said:

"Welcome to Earth, dear friends from the bosom of space! I am glad that your appearance and culture are so similar to ours. That is truly heartening and confirms many theories of Earth's exobiologists..."

"Excuse me," the head of the spacemen's delegation interrupted him, "we Zauchencians don't resemble Earthlings in the slightest, we merely adapted our appearance so as not to attract attention or, God forbid, fear in the local people."

"Well, and what do you actually look like?" a member of the Earth delegation asked curiously.

In an instant the foreign delegation assumed its true appearance and the entire Earth team stepped back in discomfort. Scientists, politicians and economists exchanged questioning looks, not knowing how to comment on the appearance of the newcomers.

"Hmm, I'm afraid it would be more convenient if you kept the Earth form," the President said. "With all due respect, with this appearance you won't get far on Earth, and incidentally, there are certain creatures living here that feed on Earth plants of an appearance very similar to yours."

"Didn't I tell you?" the chief Zauchencian replied, once again assuming the appearance of a successful businessman. The others in the delegation followed his example.

"Let us continue..." the President insisted, not wanting to be left without his carefully composed speech, for which he had wasted a week, struggling with rhetoric experts who had pestered him with learning and

pronunciation and spent days explaining in detail what it was he was actually saying. Hand on heart, the President, though inclined to public appearances and long speeches full of self-admiration, was not exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer, which is a common phenomenon among the human race.

"The meeting of our civilizations is a historic matter, which will influence the development of both our worlds, because our natural and human resources in conjunction with your advanced technology..."

"Actually," the spaceman interrupted him again, "we came for money."

"I beg your pardon," at the mention of money the President's watery old eyes lit up.

"For money."

"What do you mean?" the President asked with interest.

"Here's the thing: in some transactions with the Aldebaranians we invested enormous sums which, due to some paperwork problems, are now sitting, as you say, in the cold."

"You mean, on ice?"

"That's it. Since our funds are frozen there, we are now quite illiquid, and the Cetian credit banks are knocking on our door. All in all, we find ourselves in a truly unenviable situation."

"And how can we help you?" there was the refinement of a thoroughbred predator in the President's voice.

The President sent a signal to the leading economic expert of Earth to join the conversation.

"Well, by at least lending us money."

"That's clear to us, but what money?"

"Ah, that's not clear to you. Here's how things stand: the money we use is what you call bricks. These are blocks approximately one of your meters long and hollow in a certain way."

"Do you have a picture of this money?"

"Here."

In an instant a holographic projection appeared in the air of something that truly resembled an ordinary oversized Earth brick. The President's eyes lit up.

"Very well, we don't have quite such... money at the moment, but we can make it in a relatively short time."

"Wonderful," the spaceman cheered up. "Then everything is fine."

"Wait a moment," the President raised his eyebrows, "and what will we get in return?"

"And what would you like?"

"Whores and cocaine. Oil and gold."

"We don't have those."

"Well, some fruit of your technology then, something that doesn't exist on Earth and is useful."

"Excellent, we have at least two tons of that in the ship."

"Of what?"

"XF RTP."

"And what does it do? Is it perhaps some kind of weapon?"

"Well, we won't tell you that just yet. We'll give you our product, and we'll explain its full application to you when we take the money."

The President looked toward the bankers and economists, and they gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

"Alright, here's a hand."

So the two delegations shook hands warmly, the kisses rang out again, and after agreeing on the terms and signing the contract, a fairly large crate was unloaded from one of the ships, and a few minutes later they vanished into the blue of the summer sky.

Since the meeting of the spacemen and the Earthlings had proceeded somewhat contrary to expectations, it took some time before Earth's representatives announced the course of that historic conversation to the curious population. Hundreds of experts studied the objects left behind. They were all the same shape and size and, setting aside their cosmic significance, they were wedges, exactly 6.5 cm long, widening from the tip into a square profile of 1x1 cm.

Chemists persistently tried to determine their composition, but the only thing their experimental results showed was that the substance they were made of was unknown on Earth, and when journalists, always hungry for news, asked them about it, they said that this was certainly a monomolecular metal that wasn't particularly hard — one might even compare it to soft linden wood.

Since nobody knew what to do with these things, part of them was kept in state ownership, while the rest was offered to the market, where the small wedges, due to their exotic nature, fetched fabulous prices.

On the other hand, in anticipation of additional treasures from space, most of the Earth's economy switched to producing space money. Everywhere one could see piles of enormous bricks just waiting to be exchanged for unseen cosmic goods. Many people abandoned their centuries-old family trades and devoted themselves entirely to work that promised quick and easy earnings.

Meanwhile, since no real application could be found for the space articles, their price was falling, so that in time even less well-off mortals could get their hands on a piece of space technology. The only thing one could do with this noble item was to wedge up some old, expensive and significant piece of furniture.

When someone thought of it, influencers all across the world and social media wanted to wedge up their chests of drawers, wardrobes and dressing mirrors in a short time, so that it gradually became a genuine fashion craze. Their value rose dizzily again. Stock brokers tore their hair out over the constant oscillations in the value of the space articles, and many of them, reacting wrongly to the stock market, ended up miserably bankrupt, because they were too ugly for influencers and too stupid for prompt engineers.

Those who survived the financial shipwreck did so not thanks to any particular wisdom or exceptional sense of the market, but simply because at the moment when a decision had to be made they were on the phone. One was trying to convince his sister that the octopus she had bought at the market was not an alien but merely strange, as they usually are. Another had spent an hour negotiating with someone in Osijek over the price of a second-hand Hohner accordion he didn't know how to play and had no intention of learning. A third was silently listening to his father-in-law explain the correct way to salt cabbage, which went on so long that the market had in the meantime opened, reached its peak and begun to fall. The market, as always, rewarded the absence of basic common sense.

Furniture manufacturers rushed to produce tables, shelves and sofas with one shorter leg, which was exceedingly trendy and chic in those days. Designers competed to come up with the most elegant name for a structural deficiency — some spoke of "asymmetric balance", others of a "dynamic

horizontal", and one particularly ambitious Italian called it "gravitational dialogue with space" and sold chairs at the price of a small car. Buyers purchased them not to sit on them, for sitting on them required a certain athletic ability, but placed them in hallways where they greeted visitors as silent proof of the cultural superiority of their owner.

Eccentric rich people would even order furniture with one longer leg, so that they wedged up three legs, this was a display of wealth and an indisputable status symbol, which also said something about political orientation, although the space thingies were liked by both the woke and the non-woke.

After some time, another application of the space thingy began to be noticed. Namely, during parties where people sang loudly and sat near furniture wedged up with space wedges, alongside the voices of drunk and merry people one could hear a soft and timid humming which turned out to originate from the small wedges. This immediately attracted the interest of science.

For days and nights laboratories rang with the powerful voices of famous tenors and sopranos, while in those with smaller budgets one could also hear the somewhat uncertain singing of the scientists themselves. The bolder ones played the symphonic metal band Epica for them, because the little things didn't react to Nightwish. With their singing there was always a soft accompaniment, both from the laboratory tables and from under the wardrobes and kitchen tables. Sometimes, if there were several space thingies in the same room, they would accompany the singer in a lovely duet or trio.

After a certain time, various laboratories and institutes, independently of one another, concluded that this was a phenomenon, unseen in the known universe until then, called the piezovocal effect. This discovery again

contributed to the rising value of the space articles, which reached a price almost identical to when they had first appeared on the market.

Meanwhile, mountains of space money had begun to clog up passageways and bother the neighborhood. Everyone was impatiently awaiting the great Day of Arrival. When that day finally came, the whole army of people gathered again — armies, journalists and statesmen — but this time without any great fear. The ships descended silently and in no time the same delegation as the first contact stepped out. Again they hugged and kissed their Earth colleagues and without much fanfare headed together toward the government building.

As soon as they entered, the President addressed them:

"Dear friends, mighty space travelers! It is my personal pleasure to welcome your arrival, which will be of mutual benefit to both our civilizations and bring..."

"Well... the thing is..." a voice was heard from the leading spaceman. Discomfort was written on his face.

"What? Is something wrong?" the President asked. "We've made more of your money than needed. You can take all of it, we won't make an issue of that."

"Oh, that's not the problem."

"What then?"

The Zauchencian squirmed uncomfortably in the spacious leather armchair, smiled at the President and spoke:

"Look, that deal we had arranged with Aldabaran, which everything got stuck on — it went through after all. Everything somehow got moving and came out with even greater profit than we had hoped, so we no longer need that money."

"But you could use it for some new deals with Aldabaran."

"Not really. in that deal, in order to protect our interests, we had to harm the buyer's interests, the contract was imprecise and... All in all, they no longer wish to trade with us, they even called us offensive and rude names such as a gang of crooks and communists, and shouted in our faces that this, damn it, would certainly not happen to them a third time."

The President stared at the spaceman in disbelief.

"What do you mean, a third time?"

"Well, we'd been to Earth before and did business. Is that not known to you?"

"Hmm... What's the problem?"

The President looked toward the other members of his group, who gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

"Well, um, that money is only valid there, in the other galaxies those are just worthless bricks," the spaceman continued. "So when our last deal fell through and they asked us what to do with it, we didn't know what to tell them. We heard that they later built magnificent temples and ziggurats from it. Some, it seems to me, Babylon, if I'm not mistaken. There, you see that it all worked out in the end."

"And your products? What about them?"

"You mean the XFRTPs? The least we can do is give them to you as a gift as if the deal had gone through."

"Wonderful!" the President felt relieved. "And what do they do?"

"Well, for instance, if your table or wardrobe wobbles, you can wedge it up with them."

"We already discovered that application," spoke up one of the hungry social media owners, "I hope that's not all."

"Come on, of course not. For instance, if you sing, they will sing with you — softly and unobtrusively, but accurately."

"And that's it?!" the President shouted, upset. "Don't fuck with me."

"Look, and what would you like?" the spaceman looked at him, offended. "When you fold a newspaper and wedge up a table, does that folded newspaper sing with you? And so accurately at that?"

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