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MOKOPOLITAN



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Writing this short introduction, I have no idea if you, my dear reader, know anything about Polish speculative fiction. I don't know if you ever played Polish games or read Polish books. I can't say if grasping this whole matter just in few sentences is possible at all. But I'll do my best.

Several years ago, Bronisław Komorowski, then president of Poland, during his widely transmitted meeting with the US president Barrack Obama, presented him with a copy of „The Witcher 2” computer game, naming it „our number one exported goods”. A joke, by all means, but one with a shadow of truth around it. Nowadays, speculative fiction is Polish cultural mainstream, and, to be honest, an important one. We do much in the field and there are many projects around it, mostly targeted to our own fandom. Due to the language barrier, just a small part can cross Polish border.

How you may know it? Well, we made our share of games – video (The Witcher series), board (Scythe) and role playing (Neuroshima) alike. Pyrkon, the biggest Polish convention was visited by more than 40 000 attendees this year, and among its guests were such people as Mark Rein-Hagen, John Wick or Graham Masterton. And, last but not least, we write books.

This year's Locus Award was given to Andrzej Sapkowski („the father” of Geralt of Rivia), for lifetime achievements. In two years we'll be seeing a movie based on his works, directed and created by Tomasz Bagiński. We also have international LARPs, such as School of Wizardry at Czocha Castle and Witches School at Moszna Castle.

Maybe you have heard about it, maybe you already know it.

Today, we'd like to present you with even more of Polish fiction.

We give you 6 short stories, published in Poland between 2013 and 2016, by authors from Kraków, Katowice and Gdańsk, and 6 articles about our culture, traditions and history of speculative fiction literature. A word of warning, they might not be that simple. Especially Piotr Górski's text about sociological bases of mid-twentieth-century Polish sci-fi literature can be considered a bit more difficult, even for Polish readers. However, it's crucial for grasping the whole picture. I hope you will find it interesting.

ELIN KAMIŃSKA

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Table of contents

Stories:

DRAGON AND CAPRICORN	2
I GIVE LIFE	20
A SILENT BLUE	30
BEGINNING/END OF A CENTURY	44
THE ALARM CLOCK	73
SCIENCE IN THE SERVICE	106

Journalism:

THE PHENOMENON OF JAKUB WĘDROWYCZ	72
POLISH CONVENTIONS	77
LEGENDS OF KRAKOW	82
RPG IN POLAND	87
PAINT MY SPACE RED	90
THE BEST CONVENTION...	97
POLISH WRITERS WORTH READING	101

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: **Elin Kamińska**

elin.kaminska@historiavita.pl

PUBLISHER: **Fundacja „Historia Vita”**

ADRES REDAKCJI: os. Akademickie 6/22,

31-866 Kraków, redakcja@historiavita.pl,

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EDITORIAL: **Katarzyna Koćma, Karolina**

Fedyk, Michał Szymański, Lex Long, Joel

Paisley, Diane Wu, Dracavia, Bryan Deeney

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS: **Marcin Kłak,**

Anna Łagan, Piotr Górski, Krzysztof Rudek,

Andrzej Pilipiuk, Michał Cholewa, Marta

Krajewska, Magdalena Kucenty, Artur

Nowrot, Paweł Majka

TRANSLATION: **Karolina Fedyk, Magdalena**

Małek, Artur Nowrot, Danai Chondrokouki,

Monika Wiklik, Paulina Drewniak

PROOFREADING: **Katarzyna Koćma, Karolina**

Fedyk, Paulina Drewniak

ILLUSTRATIONS: **Daria Lebida, Anna Kędzior,**

Wojciech Walas, Elżbieta Głowacka, Anna

Tomiczek

COVER ART: **Elżbieta Głowacka**

LOGOTYPE DESING: **Adriana Depta**

COVER DESIGN: **Krzysztof Bernacki**

LAYOUT & DTP DESIGNS: **Olga Furman**

DTP: **Krzysztof Bernacki**

E-BOOK FORMATTING: **Anna Jakubowska**

CONTRIBUTORS: **Olga Sienkiewicz, Błażej**

Kardyś, Paweł Ścibiorek

PRINTING: www.printgroup.pl

Dragon and Capricorn

Author: Magdalena Kucenty

Translation: Paulina Drewniak

Illustration: Daria Lebida

Editing: Lex Long

Capricorn watched the rock wall rebuild itself. Stones rubbed against one another, jumped and turned and eventually fell into place with a quiet crunch. Patches of moss grew out of crevices and expanded, covering more and more of the cliff, filling the air with a forest smell. A lively creek sprang from a narrow chasm near the top and split into several silvery ribbons, disappearing amongst the rocks.

He could feel a wet chill bite his skin, breathe in the ionized air, but his senses were not deceived. They acutely signaled the cliff was not a work of nature.

Indeed, in a moment a whole, meticulously detailed training wall formed before Capri's eyes. He reached for some chalk from the bag under his belt and rubbed it into his hands, then tested the ground with his foot. It gave way. Capri did not feel like checking this trap, so he moved over and tried several feet away. Here the ground seemed solid, so he began to climb.

Time and time again he forced his fingers into the water-spitting holes, scattered like open wounds across the face of the hundred-foot tall cliff. He stepped onto inviting edges, often only to learn that the foothold they offered was not sufficient. At last, about halfway up, in a steep place, he slipped on

a wet stone. And trying to regain balance, he discovered that beneath the nearest moss patch there was only air, nothing more.

The mistake cost him dearly. Falling, he hit his head on an exceptionally large boulder, on which he had rested only minutes before. Eventually, that moment of weakness ended with a broken spine.

Looking, empty-eyed, into the holographic sky, redness trickling down his face, with his wounded lips he mouthed a single word:

"Revert."

The waterfall reversed its flow, the silver threads joined into wider bands, and ran back into the chasm at the top. Meanwhile, Capri's cervical vertebra were falling back into place, just as the bruises on his forehead were shrinking. Like in a movie being played backwards, the boy jumped into the air, got glued the face of the rock and climbed down the cliff.

Then he raised his head, and started climbing again.

* * *

Pisces watched her brother in growing excitement. She liked it when he practiced, because he always took off his shirt, and she

could admire his athletic body, firm muscles and wide arms. Capricorn was slim; he had boyish, hairless cheeks and blond hair that reached below his ears. But no one would call him a weakling, or effeminate. No, Capri was beautiful.

Pisces would throw her arms around his neck in an instant, if only she saw but a shadow of invitation in the grey eyes. But Capri's eyes remained ever-distant, misty and unreachable, shielding the endless rows of computations in the boy's mind.

Now he did not even notice her, as he stood there, eyes fixed on these stupid rocks, muttering constantly to himself:

"Revert. Revert. Revert..."

Neither did he pay any attention to Pisces when he finished. Without hesitation, he started to climb up the cliff, finding seemingly nonexistent edges, unerringly placing his feet. As usual, he reached the top faster than she expected. And as soon as he got up, he clapped his hands and gave the command to reconfigure, and the cliff beneath him came to life.

Pisces cupped her hands and shouted above the clutter of the mechanism:

"Will you fuck me at last?"

The boy looked at her. Annoyed, she saw that rather than answer, he began computing the likelihood of that.

1. Capricorn's mind

Capri ate cookies, drank unsweetened tea and waited, killing time testing his mental powers on the customers in the cafe.

The woman eating apple crumble is fucking some pure one. Soon the affair will go public: the husband will dump her, and the lover will end the inter-caste romance.

Boring. Behind her—a couple of deformants, eating ice cream. The man will propose tonight, and will hear the magical "yes". They will have a dozen of ugly kids. Nothing special. That cutesy pair of ordinaries in the corner, to the contrary: they won't last long together. They will start fighting, then break up before the year ends. Boring, too. And the homeless guy by the window, asleep over a mug of cold coffee, will be dead within a month.

Revert. Add money.

The homeless guy, asleep over a mug of cold coffee, will get mugged and beaten. He'll die within a week.

Revert. Subtract money, add hospital.

The homeless guy, asleep over a mug of cold coffee, will be diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He'll be dead in four months.

Capricorn tried different variables, but the result was always the same: an unavoidable, imminent death.

He lost enthusiasm for the game. He gazed into the surface of his tea and started playing with a cookie, turning it in his fingers.

Three hundred and six turns later, in came Logan. Sprayed with fake tan, with a network of artificial wrinkles and traces of grey in his hair, he looked older than usual. He looked fifty rather than thirty. More, he was dressed differently today: a leather jacket, unbuttoned shirt, and jeans. But Capri thought it was enough to look at the man's tender hands and even teeth to see through the act.

"Hi, rookie," said the pure one. "Now, finish these cookies and let's go." He did not sit down, but stood by with a look of impatience in his eyes. "I'll explain everything on the way."

Capri did not feel like eating anymore, so he just stood up. But it was not until they

stepped into the evening darkness outside when Logan began.

"We're going to the Den. Have you heard of this place?"

Capri nodded. He also heard that the Den hosted illegal mutant fights, reportedly very popular.

"So you know why I need you," Logan explained and snorted: "But why do I even bother. I bet you already divined it all in that fucked-up mind of yours."

The boy ignored his companion's mocking tone and rude words. He understood why he was needed. They were walking though the Cauldron, the only place beneath the dome of the Mother where deformants were allowed to live, and the homeless allowed to sleep. Crime flourished here: any time an armed mugger or a desperate schmuck could attack Logan and his shiny white teeth, and Logan cared for his skin more than for anything. Since he came to the Cauldron in disguise, he could not afford his official bodyguards. He needed something low-key.

"I am to be your bodyguard," said Capri. He spoke for the first time since morning, and as usual he felt a weird stiffness around the mouth.

"Yeah." Logan clapped his hands. "Smart boy!"

Capricorn did not like Logan's little jabs. He did not like Logan either. But for as long as his father wanted him to cooperate with the pure one, the boy just did his job, paying no attention to all the stupid talk.

For some time, they walked in relative silence. There was some distant noise, dimmed voices, even a shriek, but no one bothered them. Until finally, out of the blue, a man appeared before them, dressed in torn trousers and an old jacket.

"Hey, boss," he looked at Logan with intensity. "Would you spare a few credits for a poor old bum?"

The pure one's eyes sparked with malice.

"Well of course, mister bum." He reached for his wallet. "How much? A hundred? Two?"

The bushy beard could not conceal an expression of surprise in the beggar's face.

"My benefactor!" he sobbed. "What grace...what grace..."

Logan waved the shiny three-digit card, and the bearded man, as if commanded, uncovered his forearm. But the hand holding the card stopped short, mid-air, ostentatiously.

"Ah, but there is that one thing," the pure one said, and retracted his arm. "Since I believe in money earned, I would ask you, mister bum, a favor."

"What, boss?"

"See, my little shoe is untied." Capri distinctly saw how Logan stepped on the lace himself a moment ago.

The bearded guy gave them a puzzled look, as if he did not understand, but after a moment of hesitation he fell to his knees and tied Logan's shoe. But before he managed to get back up, its owner said:

"And it'd like a kiss on the tip, too. I hit my big finger. They say mommy's kiss is the best," his lips twisted in an ugly smile, "but tonight a bum's kiss will do."

In the beggar's face last scraps of dignity fought with a hope for the money. Finally, he bit his lip and lowered his head towards the shoe, but at the last moment Logan moved back his foot and burst into laughter.

"Yeah, that's enough," he said in a changed voice. "Gimme that lousy hand."

The beggar obeyed, baring his forearm.

“Are you crazy? Take the whole card, I’d puke if I had to use it after you!” He threw the card at the man, and turned away. “Come, rookie. We’ve wasted enough time for this trash.”

Capri did not move. He looked into the beggar’s eyes, lined with tears, and without a word helped him up. Logan gave him a furious look, but he just picked up the golden card and gave it to the poor man.

“I apologize for my friend, he’s very sick.” He paused for a moment and added confidentially: “A severe case of asshole. Unfortunately, no cure has yet been found.”

The man wiped the tears from his cheeks and laughed.

“That’s a good one, son, a good one.” He lowered his eyes, rubbing the card with his thumb. “But then, what can you expect from a pure one?”

Capri nodded. Just as he thought, Logan’s costume was worthless.

“You are quite observant, sir.” He hoped the man won’t take it for a mockery. “You should work for the Internal Guard.”

“Ah, son. If only my beloved let me.”

“The wife?” Capri asked, without thinking. He still had a lot of youthful naiveté.

“The vodka, son,” sighed the bearded man, “The vodka.”

“Dragon’s Den,” announced the neon above the door. They entered; Logan with his head held high, Capri like a shadow behind him.

The place was full of normals and defor- mants; no pure ones in sight apart from Logan. All were drinking and snorting trip quite shamelessly. The narcotic powder

covered the noses with white, clouded the eyes with a mist of joy. It looked like everyone was having a good time. And the center of that was the round, surprisingly large arena, divided from the crowd by a metal fence. Logan elbowed his way through the swarm, trying to get as close as possible. Capri, naturally, followed.

Behind the fence, an old lady busied herself with a mop, smearing drying blood all over the floor. Ash from the cigarette smoldering in her mouth fell onto the badly washed apron. She would have looked like a normal if it weren’t for the tail, which she used to clean faster. Ended with a hairy brush, it swept the knocked-out teeth better than a magic broom.

While Logan was asking people about the next fight, Capri ran a few simulations. The results suggested that in the Den death by stabbing posed a three-percent risk. Overdosing on trip – five percent. A plain old beating – eight. Intoxication – a whopping seventy-nine. And so, three quarters of the patrons left the place shitfaced.

The cleaning woman left the arena, leaving a trace of darkened blood and ash. Capri multiplied his outcomes by the Den’s standards of hygiene and got a promising figure. He had no chance of leaving this place in full health.

Suddenly a gong rang out. Bets were now being taken. Scantly dressed girls with terminals started circulating in the crowd, drawing money from guests’ forearms—various amounts, from several credits up to several hundred. Some, like Logan, paid with cards.

“I bet a thousand on Achilles, I heard his leg work is brilliant,” announced the pure one. Apparently, the inherent irony of that statement was lost on him.

The gong rang out again, reverberating in the air filled with cigarette smoke. People grabbed on the wire, some even pressed their faces against the fence in growing excitement.

Two deformatants came out into the pit. One was tall and thin like a reed, the other very short but infinitely better built. His horns were pointed almost exactly at the tall one's crotch. No simulation was needed to see how this could play out.

"Which one is Achilles?" asked Capri.

"The tall one!"

"Then you just lost a thousand credits, Logan."

"What?" The pure one had to shout above the roaring, cheering crowd. "What did you say?"

Capri made the universal gesture of money counting, then a thumb-down. Logan's face went red immediately.

"Fuck! You could have warned me!"

Capri shook his head, but he did not even try to explain that **his** powers did not work like this. He could not have run the simulation before he'd had the data.

The fight was short and almost painful to watch. The dwarf mutant used his horns exactly as Capri predicted. Achilles's weakness was not his foot, but the genitals. Poor, poor genitals. After the final blow the male part of the audience hissed empathically, grabbing protectively onto their own assets, and the loser was quickly taken away from the stage. The winner, in turn, roared, beat his chest and clawed at the fence. This monkey dance lasted several minutes. Then the cleaning woman returned. She looked around the stage and quickly assessed that not enough blood was spilled for her to bother. She waved the mop back and forth

without much looking, then left.

"That was pathetically quick," snorted Logan furiously.

Capri just shrugged.

"Now, tell me," the pure one demanded, "who's gonna win next?"

"I don't know," said Capri, annoyed.

"What? How can you not know?" Logan was apparently very serious about divination. "Talk! Now!"

"Oh come on. Let me ask people first..."

Capri went and asked around, trying to pick people who wouldn't scorn him or reply with a mere excuse. He learned as much as he could before the betting concluded.

"Bet on Mako."

"The one that does krassaga?"

"Krav..." he started correcting, but bit his tongue. "Yeah, that one."

The gong sounded again. A slim man jumped into the arena. He wore a black mask and braided black hair. It was Mako. The other guy was a mountain of muscle, covered with obscene tattoos from head to toe. Seeing that, Logan swore furiously and accused Capri of cheating, but the boy did not react. One look at Mako assured him a mistake was impossible.

The warrior began his dance, jumping, tiptoeing, circling the opponent, who in turn tried dealing some strong but a bit chaotic blows. Mako kept playing with the giant, until he finally snapped and charged at him, roaring furiously.

Mako caught the monstrous hand mid-air, then using the giant's thigh as a trampoline jumped onto his back and wrapped his legs around the opponent's body. Before anyone knew it, the mass of muscle turned in the air, fell to the ground with a thud and turned into a whimpering man with an arm painfully

twisted behind his back.

The eye was not quick enough to catch when and how Mako applied the wristlock, but even a blind man knew who won: the giant kept hitting the stage with his other fist, begging for mercy.

The crowd cheered and chanted:
“Mako! Mako! Mako!”

Logan smiled triumphantly, as if betting on Mako was his own idea. He even tried to hit on one of the half-naked hostesses, boasting loudly about his expertise in “krassaga”.

What an idiot, sighed Capri. Then he wondered how much longer he will have to put up with him. The computation answered: much too long.

* * *

He managed to make a lot of interesting friends, which was an achievement considering that he politely refused both alcohol and trip. Slowly, it began to dawn on him why Logan came to see the underground fights. The main attraction of the evening was the final fight between all the winners who were up to the challenge, and someone called Draak. Draak was also called a Dragon, and people often added jokingly that it was really his Den.

This would explain the enormous size of the arena: it had to have enough room for quite a number of fighters. But there was an even bigger riddle. It was rumored that Draak was immortal. People said he was four hundred years old, and that each his wound healed immediately. And Capri knew someone obsessed with immortality. In fact, he knew a number of those.

Almost every pure one considered himself a demigod, and none could quite

accept he would die. Mutants, on the other hand, often wondered whether they'll see the next morning. Normals in turn mattered to no one. Their fate was simply too ordinary. Aside from that there were only the mechanized ones, but that was another story.

Talk of the devil, thought Capri. The next fight involved a red-haired deformant with an abiotic arm. Not only a mutant, but also roboticized, and a redhead at that. An unthinkable combination of bad luck, or good luck, depending on how you looked at it. On the one hand, the guy was born into the lowest class, and even worse, into its rarest and in some circles most despised group. On the other hand, through some miracle he could afford to replace the lost arm with a mechanized replica, despite his life circumstances.

Without thinking Capri ordered Logan to bet more on him. This man's perseverance must have been tremendous.

That was the last fight before the grand finale. The opponent turned out to be some ratty-looking wimp with dark circles under his eyes. His name was Skirt.

It soon turned out Skirt's weapon of choice was his corrosive spit, dripping from his long tusks, and an endless stream of insults. The weakling was spitting venom, literally and figuratively, avoiding a melee at all cost. After a cat-and-mouse game that seemed to last forever, the rodent's neck finally ended up in the steel trap. The abiotic arm creaked while its red-headed owner laughed and asked loudly whether to tighten the grip. He was immediately declared the winner. Otherwise Skirt might have fouled the floor. No one believed the cleaning lady would care to clean it properly.

Finally, the big game came. The audience

howled wildly, yelling sums and names. Apparently for the Dragon the betting rules were different—it was merely about how long an opponent would last. Because the winner was obvious.

2. Enter the Dragon

Draak waited until the calves were all in the pen, then entered, baring his teeth in joy. He spread his massive, scaled arms wide and roared with the crowd. That was his audience: three storeys of bloodthirsty eyes, three rings of twisted faces. And the calves? They stood and waited obediently for his first move, for here it was the time that counted.

Today they were few. Some typical tough guy, a horned dwarf, a braided ninja, a woman with cat-like features, some twisted hell-knows-what, and a red half-robot with scarred chest. A veritable circus troupe.

Draak twisted his enormous hands so hard the bones cracked, then did the same with his neck. Once he finished his ostentatious stretching routine, he fixed his gaze on the mechanical one and walked slowly towards him, but the cyborg did not run. The other losers, not so much. They fled cautiously, leaving the first victim for the beast to devour.

Always the same. If he deals with the redhead first, the rest will jump on his back—and the dude does show some balls, dammit. No. He will spare that one for dessert.

Lightning-fast, he grabbed the rubber gender-undefined human instead, and hit. As it turned out, despite its flexibility the creature did not bounce off the fence, but fell flat and unconscious. That was disappointing.

Meanwhile, something had climbed on his back, and now tried to choke him with its

legs. Draak just roared with laughter as the ninja was trying his best to break his neck.

“Nooo, it tickles!”

He reached upwards and clawed at the opponent’s calf. The ninja groaned in pain and tried to free the leg. He paid dearly for the attack: a large, gaping wound. Bleeding profusely, he rolled over, then grabbed his shattered leg and froze in pain.

Draak did not manage to finish him off because the cat-woman threw herself at him, trying to claw out his eyes. So he grabbed her by the loose skin at the back of her neck, and shook well.

“To meow or not to meow, that is the question!” he roared, and threw her into the corner as if she weighed nothing.

Meanwhile, the horned dwarf teamed up with the strongman. One approached Draak from the left, the other from the right. The midget was looking at his crotch. The Dragon did not like this. Huh, he even felt, say, embarrassed, almost ashamed, like a spinster when a prospective husband shamelessly eyeballs her tits! *Nah, we will not have this.*

He grabbed the tiny horn and started spinning the dwarf around. He spun and spun until the guy threw up on his forearm. Angry, Draak tossed him aside and grabbed the speechless giant by the face to wipe away the puke. The giant’s beard was perfect for the task, like a wire sponge.

Surprisingly enough, the mechanical guy, rather than attacking, was now helping the ninja. He made a makeshift bandage from a piece of his trousers, and was just tying the dressing on the braided man’s leg. The Dragon was flabbergasted. He stopped and looked at the two as if they were complete idiots.

“Did you come here to fight or to nurse

each other?”

“Easy. I am supposed to last eight minutes,” said the half-robot, and looked at an imaginary wristwatch. “You managed to waste at least five, but well, there’s still time. Have patience.”

Draak laughed, baring his impressive set of teeth.

“I like you.” He bowed over the robot, preparing to jump. “But I will not give you those eight minutes.”

He jumped into the air and landed in a cloud of dust where the Braid and the robot had sat just a second ago. The former barely managed to roll away to safety. Judging by his white face and a pained expression, he was about to faint. The cyborg, in turn, was still playing for time. He got up and started moving in circles around Draak, always behind his back. But he forgot the tail. A moment—and he was knocked off his feet.

The Dragon let the compassionate side of him win. Instead of sitting on the guy, he grabbed him and stuffed under his arm. The abiotic limb fought ceaselessly, but the mechanism was creaking and moaning, signaling it will give in soon.

“I have an offer,” murmured Draak into the redhead’s ear. “See, people like it when things break. I will crush that toy of yours, but give you another. And I will play with this one so long that I’ll forget about the magic eight minutes, huh?”

The redhead responded with a stifled, “I guess I have no choice”. Apparently he understood the generosity of the offer, but from his face it was hard to tell. He was red, and squinted with exhaustion.

“So we have a deal,” confirmed Draak.

Then he grabbed the redhead by the steel elbow on one side and the other arm on

the other, hugged him suddenly, and began pulling. The crowd immediately roared in excitement. The mechanical man twitched in panic.

“Careful with my real arm!”

“Dragon’s word!”

One by one the bundles of synthetic muscles broke like silken threads, fiber by fiber, vein by vein, the metal breaking like matches. Suddenly a high-pitched alarm sounded, but it died almost instantly as the abiotic arm hung helpless in Draak’s claws. The Dragon yawned to show that he was bored with the cyborg already, and intentionally “missed” the signs that the finishing blow was too weak to stun the man.

He now began walking around the arena, waving the torn arm in the air. It was his trophy from today’s fight, a reward for the bloodthirsty horde. When he judged that eight minutes must have passed, he turned around and feigned surprise at the sight of the mechanical man still standing. Then charged. The redhead’s eyes lit with authentic fear. He waved his only arm and tried to yell above the roaring crowd, but Draak pretended he did not hear. The show had to go on, and a simple capitulation was not much of a finale.

When the last of the challengers finally fell, the applause reached maximum. It was for such moments that Draak lived. He lifted clenched fists into the air and chanted his own name together with the crowd. Pompous? He was the Dragon, goddammit! He deserved some damn respect.

The audience sang the song of admiration for him, and he enjoyed every note of it. And suddenly, this beautiful melody was interrupted by a buzzing, annoying mosquito.

The Dragon looked and found the

intruder.

“Quiet!” he growled. “Quiet, I say!”

Some obeyed immediately; others, kicked and poked soon shut up as well.

“You!” yelled Draak and pointed his finger at a grey-haired man in the middle floor of the theater. “Repeat what you just said.”

The man straightened boastfully.

“I said that if you fight my protégé,” he held his arm around a thin boy next to him, who looked like he was going to be sick, “you will become richer by half a million.”

Draak growled again.

“And how long is that young champion of yours supposed to last?”

The man was theatrically offended.

“Last?!” He shook his head, like a teacher scolding a dumb pupil for a wrong answer. “I expect him to win!”

3. Capricorn's heart

“I won't do it, Logan.”

The pure one had already made his idiotic proposal, and agreed on the date. Capri kept quiet, but at the first opportunity he dragged Logan outside and threw him against the Den's wall. The colorful neon blinked ominously above them, when Capri repeated calmly:

“I won't do it.”

For a moment they looked at each other in heavy silence, then the pure one laughed mockingly.

“Shake again that magic eight ball you have under your skull.” As usual, the pretense of humor did not extend into the blue eyes. “No one has ever spilled the Dragon's blood, and someone has to, so you will do exactly as I say. Unless you want me to tell your father that I fancy myself a rebellious little boy like you.” Logan made a gesture as if he wanted to

caress Capri's cheek, but the boy did not even move, so he gave up. “All I need to do is pay enough for his stupid research, and he will give me any of his children. You know that.”

“Not me.” He suddenly felt guilty about his siblings, he had it the easiest after all. “The father won't have me hurt. He won't risk my mind and my... talents.”

The pure one scowled. Apparently it dawned on him that the boy was not bluffing, but right away he had a new thought. He smiled and shrugged.

“Then I'll ask for your sister. The one that always follows you like a stray cat. Pisces, isn't it?”

Seeing Capri's growing unease, he bared his teeth triumphantly.

“Yes, exactly that one,” he continued. “I had her once, why not again? The girl is a failed experiment, your daddy won't show a shred of mercy.” The pure one leaned closer, so close Capri could feel the warmth of his breath, and whispered: “I'll fuck her, and then give her to, I don't know, a bodyguard? Or better still! I'll get a mutant with the biggest cock the world has ever seen. He will tear your little Pisces apart. Remember...” He raised his voice to normal and leaned back against the wall. “...it is just a matter of price.”

Capricorn looked down. He did not run a simulation to check whether Logan was right. He did not have the heart to.

* * *

The Dragon sniffed a cigar and put his feet on the desk, demonstrating special shoes with holes for claws. Some oldschool rock music was playing in the background. Even very old school, as far as Capri could say.

“I will be using a knife,” the boy said.

He was sitting face to face with the Draak, feeling Logan's self-proud presence behind his back.

"Normally we don't allow weapons in the pit," hummed the Dragon, "but when I look at you boy, pity turns all my stomachs upside down. You will get a knife, but don't try to smuggle another one in." He waved the cigar in a gesture of warning. "I do not want poison-dipped blades or any of that shit."

Capri accepted.

"One more thing," he said. "Before the fight, but after I enter the pit, I will need some time."

"What for?" Draak was visibly surprised.

"To look at you and the surroundings," the boy answered honestly.

He intended to start researching the great mutant right away. Hell, he will even read all legends about dragons he can find—but a moment of concentration before the fight will give him another advantage.

Draak looked confident. No, not just that. The mutant felt sincerely sorry for him. Well, based on looks alone he would not bet on himself either.

"Very well, boy," the Dragon murmured from the depths of his chest. "You will have two minutes. You will see all there is to see."

Capricorn nodded gratefully, but did not reply, already beginning to study his opponent.

The Dragon's massive body was seemingly very well protected. The scales grew out from his shoulders, ran along the back and covered all limbs. But the deformat's chest was bare. The neck as well. The clumps on his slightly reptilian, but still human face and naked skull did not offer much protection either.

Capri had noticed before that the giant's shoulder blades were strangely twisted. A bit

naively, he thought they resembled stumps from the lost wings. He did not find them threatening, to the contrary, he thought they were more of a handicap. And there was the tail. But this was easy: just avoid it and remember that Draak was dangerous even when you were behind his back.

Summing up, the claws and fangs were surely the worst. If they were really that serious about weapons here, they should've had them banned.

"Anything else, boy?" the Draak asked.

Why was it that people could not stand five minutes of silence? What was it in the calm and contemplation that turned them so mad?

"No. This..."

"This will be a real fight, with drawing blood," Logan interrupted rudely. "Not some shitty show like the one you pulled with the cyborg."

The Dragon frowned.

"Your coach is very observant, boy, isn't he?"

The mutant did not even look at the pure one, but the sarcastic expression of his vertical pupils was clear.

"And strong," Capri confirmed. And to remove any doubts, he added: "He knows the krassaga."

The "coach" of course nodded enthusiastically.

* * *

How could he not have guessed what Logan was planning? He kept telling himself that the pure one had not really intended to pitch him against the mutant, that he only had this "genius" idea at the last minute. Now Capri had two weeks to find a way to beat the Dragon.

He should not have come here at all, wasted his time.

“You are not sleeping, are you?” he heard Pisces’s whisper in the dark, and felt the girl wiggling under his arm. “Don’t pretend, I can tell by your breath.”

He just kissed her forehead.

“I was wondering,” she continued, “why you changed your mind. I know I have the perfect ass, tits not bad either, but you have always rejected my advances. What happened, brother? You computed you’d give in anyway?”

“Yes,” he lied. He’d rather not say he had wanted her for a long time, as much as she’d wanted him, but had been reining himself in. She would never forgive him.

“And? You don’t find incest disgusting anymore?” she pressed.

That was never a problem. What Pisces did not understand was that she could throw a stone in the street and hit a closer relative than him. She could never accept that they were siblings only in name.

No. The problem was the girl’s troubled mind. Father was testing his theory of personality dualism on her, but it was not until Gemini that he was successful. Apparently to be two persons in one body you had to be born that way, otherwise only mental illness was possible. And Pisces was undeniably ill. Which, paired with the talent Papa gave her, was quite disconcerting.

Capri did not want to hurt his sister. He was afraid to touch the thin veil separating her from madness. He had seen what happened when it moved, and he did not want to see it again. The black kitten she skinned alive... he could still see it in his nightmares.

“Why aren’t you answering?” she snorted and turned her back on him. “You don’t love

me anymore.”

He hugged her and kissed tenderly on the neck.

“I do,” he whispered.

His hand moved by itself, rough fingers down her smooth belly. Pisces moaned, Capri moved his palm. Desire ran like a tsunami along his spine, reached the brain and washed away all worry. He was caressing her tiny body more and more courageously, until he grabbed her hips and took her from behind.

But later, when she fell asleep in his arms, the worry returned.

4. Dragon’s pride

The Den had never been fuller. Ordinaries, mutants, even pure ones in disguise, all swarmed in, packed tightly together like sardines in a box. The air was stuffy from breaths, the oxygen was literally running out.

The betting had gone on for two weeks – now people were waiting impatiently for the result. The more optimistic gave the boy three minutes. That, of course, did not include the “looking time” he had requested.

Takesh, who played both the host and the umpire, could not outcry the crowd even with a microphone. The audience wanted the introductory talk finished, and finished quick, and manifested this with loud, impatient, foul yelling. But when the gong finally resounded above the din, they howled like an enormous pack of wild dogs.

The Dragon entered the pit first. He raised his head, opened his arms and roared back. He loved them, they loved him. There was no love stronger than the one paid for with pain and blood— and if it was someone else’s pain and blood, all the better.

Drunk on the applause, Draak did not even notice when Capri entered the arena. The blond boy circled the pit, then sat on the ground in front of the opponent, closed his eyes and began murmuring.

The Dragon could not hear anything but the crowd, and his own roar, but he had learned long ago how to read human lips.

“Revert. Revert. Revert.”

What was that supposed to mean? Did the boy panic, and now wanted to withdraw? Turn back the time so that the challenge never happened?

The Dragon felt even more sorry for him.

“You won’t turn back the time, boy,” he whispered, suddenly ignoring his audience. “Even I cannot do that.”

The boy rose before the two minutes were up. He measured Draak with a long look, but there was no fear in his eyes. Only focus.

Takesh hit the gong. This time the sound was dreary. But nothing changed in the pit. The Dragon did not move. Neither did the boy. Only the audience fell silent, waiting anxiously who would make the first move.

Draak opened his mouth, but before he could utter what he had at the tip of his split tongue, the opponent said it for him.

“I am sorry, boy, but we have to start,” he said with in his tender voice, and the Dragon froze in disbelief, with mouth gaping. He felt stunned, for the first time in a hundred years. If the boy can read minds, the fight suddenly took on a whole new dimension. But this was probably a coincidence. A stroke of luck.

Draak clenched his teeth and moved forward, but the boy did not flinch. And when the enormous, scaled fist flew toward him, he dodged. Just like that. He did not even blink, when the blow of air messed his hair.

The surprised voices in the audience fell

silent one by one. Instead of yelling, people were now watching in amazement.

The blonde boy stood still, motionless, right under the Dragon’s nose.

Infuriated, the giant swung again. And another. And another! But the result was always the same. A quick, seemingly effortless maneuver—and the Dragon was left empty-handed. As if the boy could predict each his move.

So this wasn’t a coincidence.

Draak panted heavily, more out of anger than fatigue. In truth, he was still warming up. Then he bombarded the opponent with a series of strikes, hoping the boy will finally make a false step in his endless dance.

What he did not notice was that they had reached the edge of the arena. But soon a painful sting of the metal rods against his fist reminded him of that. Enraged, he roared so loud that the people jumped in their seats, then tried to free his hand. At the same time, he kept wary, ready to defend himself. He thought the boy would attack immediately. But nothing happened.

Finally, the metal rods gave in. He fell back with impetus, then regained balance using his tail and started searching for the opponent frantically. But the boy was nowhere to be seen. He vanished into the thin air.

A loud murmur from the spectators told the Dragon where to look. He looked up and saw the blond boy nimbly climbing the metal fence.

He hissed with irritation. The ground level of the pit was circled with metal rods, but above them there was simple wire mesh. Draak did not think it could possibly support his own weight.

What was he to do now? Throw trash at

the boy? He would become a laughing stock, that's all. Was this what that guy aimed for? To destroy the Dragon's pride? Dishonor him? No, this will not be!

Draak tightened every muscle and gave a low, deep growl. The scales began to fall off, bones cracked, puncturing the skin, muscles stretched painfully. Transformations were never fun. He smelled the blood running down his back, and bared his teeth in an ugly grin.

Once the enormous, leather wings formed on his back, he flapped them twice—and there, he was airborne.

“And where...”

He did not finish, only gnarled furiously when he saw the boy mouth “And where will you flee now?”

He dashed up towards the young man, who was still hanging from the topmost row of seats. Sensing what was about to happen, people began frantically running away. The mutant was sure: he would get him in a flick. Grinning from side to side, he swung his massive arm, tearing the wire mesh like paper. Then he flapped his wings to move a bit away and assess the damage. To see how badly the boy was doing.

But within a second he roared furiously. The boy was not there.

“Up!” someone yelled.

But it was already too late. Draak felt the weight of an alien body on his back, and a touch of cold steel on his neck. That damned knife, he forgot all about it. During the entire fight the boy did not draw it even once.

Blood ran like a river down the bare chest, the Dragon's head felt light. He was in his beloved arena and yet he was caged, with too little space for aerial maneuvers. He could not even throw the boy off.

He started falling. He hit the ground with a loud thud. Hurling and tossing, he tried once more to grab the boy's legs. But the young guy had already jumped off his back, and was now charging at him.

The last thing Draak saw was a flash of the silver blade.

5. While you watch the fish, the hare slits your throat

The little brother thought he could hide anything from her. That he could hide the truth under silence. But Pisces was not that stupid. She knew something was off as soon as Capri returned



from that meeting with Logan. He looked worried, and he kissed her! As much as she had wanted that, she understood something was very wrong.

She began to follow him at nights, but he always went to the same place. She did not like the Den. It was full of drunk men, looking at her with that repulsive spark she knew so well. They thought she was easy prey. The mere thought of that made Hare come to life within her. The sister wanted very much to show the pervs how wrong they really were.

That day Capri did not utter a single word, and Pisces understood whatever was to happen would happen now. This was why when leaving for the Den tonight she packed her favorite toy.

She elbowed her way to the first row pretty easily, but a bad feeling wouldn't leave her. She had already seen several fights in the pit, but this time people were unusually excited. They kept talking about a "blondie" who was supposed to fight today, and they did not believe in his luck much.

Seeing the Dragon entering the arena, Pisces bit her lip. She had already met him. The mutant was enormous. He looked like an overgrown lizard, and he roared like mad, but something in his golden eyes told the girl he was not as evil as he posed.

When she saw Capri, her heart stopped. She had suspected he was the tonight's challenger, but she had only truly realized it now. She jumped when she heard the gong, and then lost breath each time her brother avoided the Dragon's deadly blow. Pisces knew what Capri was capable of, but still was afraid for him. He looked so fragile in front of the nine-foot tall deformant.

"Yes!" she squeaked when Draak's fist got stuck between the iron rods.

But soon she started to curse their fate. That wasn't fair! While the Dragon was struggling with the fence, some people tried to throw Capri off the wire. Pisces could see blood on her brother's scratched hands, and was so furious she hit a man standing next to her, who had nothing to do with this. He started yelling at her, but one look into Hare's cold eyes shut him up.

The giant finally freed his arm. Capri reached the top of the wire net, and hung still. And then something monstrous happened. The Dragon began to spread his wings.

"Run, Capri!" she shouted in panic.

But he did not hear her, fully focused on the giant's transformation. This calmed her down. A little.

She covered her mouth and stopped breathing, terrified, when the beast charged at her brother. And she almost went mad with relief when at the last moment Capri bounced up, grabbed on a metal hook and hung from the ceiling.

She promised to herself she would kill the man who was yelling tips for Draak, even though they turned out counterproductive. Draak looked up in the perfect moment, baring his neck for the incoming knife. Capri jumped onto his back, held his chin and slit the carotid artery in one smooth move. Blood burst from the wound, and the crowd howled, as if they were in pain like their champion. Only Pisces could not hold back her joy anymore.

"Finish him, brother! Finish him!"

The Dragon was falling slowly and they were still in the air when Capri jumped nimbly onto the ground. The silver blade ran across the yellow eyes, and the roar of the felled beast shook the arena. Draak covered his face with his arm; crawling back, he left

a trace of red smears.

The people were yelling. Suddenly, Pisces realized it was not only about Draak's defeat. Normals from the Inner Guard had burst into the building and now were shackling people all over the place. It was clear the bulk of the law enforcement forces were aiming for the arena.

The patrons began fleeing as fast as they could. The swarm swept the girl off her feet and carried her away, not minding her furious protests. Pisces only managed to disentangle herself from the crowd once she was by the back door. She knew there was no point returning inside. She had to circle the building.

She ran, splashing water in dirty puddles, and shrieked:

“Capri! Capri!”

Suddenly it dawned on her this might draw the guards' attention. Too late. Two got in her way. Hare had to take care of them.

They lost so much time for this trash.

When she finally reached the Den's main door, she saw vans with the sign of the white circle parked in the street. A veritable horde of identical-looking cars, but for one—armored like a tank, parked right in front of the building.

Pisces understood. She was too late. She only caught a glimpse of the blonde head when one of the guards was forcing Capri into the back of the armored van. Some of the cars were already leaving – all in the same direction. But the armored van drove the other way.

For a split second, Pisces panicked. Kill them all, whispered Hare. But what will this accomplish? No. They needed to know where they took our little brother. They needed to find someone who...

Suddenly the girl spotted a familiar face. Despite the tan and the stupid costume she recognized Logan right away. He was talking to a guard, standing next to a luxury limousine with the pure ones' symbol on the door.

Pisces had no trouble sneaking towards the car. She only had to stifle laughter when she discovered the locks were open. She hid in the trunk and waited.

* * *

She swallowed the tears that ran to her eyes at the mere thought of this house. She knew it. She had been here before, one horrible night she spent with Logan. Thanks to that she easily found her way in the enormous palace.

She headed first to the bathroom, to wash the guards' blood from her hands, chin and lips. Otherwise the pure one would run away at first sight, and she did not want that.

She held her head under a stream of cold water, then looked slyly in the mirror. Straight as a reed, Hare looked back at her, expectantly. She was smiling. Droplets of water ran down the black hair, onto the white forehead and into the dark eyes.

“There, there,” murmured Pisces and wiped her face.

Then she took a deep breath and headed for Logan's room. The pure one must have stayed in; he did not see the bodies. Otherwise she would have heard him scream.

* * *

She sneaked in carefully and stood, arms crossed, before the pure one's desk. The door crackled.

“What?” he gnarled. He was sitting in

a swivel armchair, with his back turned on the door and a wireless earphone in the ear. "I am talking!"

"Long time no see, Logan."

He turned rapidly and said in a changed voice:

"I am sorry, commissioner. I'll call you **back.**" He tore the device from his ear and threw it onto the desk. Then he squinted in a false smile.

"Pisces, sweetie, what brings you here?"

The girl clenched her fists even tighter. Little steel claws bit deeper into the palms.

"What did you do with Capri?"

"Moi?" he blinked playfully. "Darling, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Casually he ran his fingers along the edge of the desk and pressed something underneath. The look of surprise on his face told her what it was.

"If you think your people are running to your defense," Pisces continued, "you're wrong. I killed them."

Logan's eyes widened.

"All of them?"

She could see the pure one was beginning to notice the traces of carnage on her clothes. Red drops she forgot to wash away, scratches left by the dying victims' nails. She shook her head.

"Enough talking. Where's Capri?"

Logan raised from his chair and stood upright proudly.

"On his way to a research facility. See, your father allows us, the Unblemished, to borrow the results of his work, but he never shares his secrets." The man smacked his lips, displeased. "That cannot be allowed. Who does he think he is? His secrets should belong to us. And Capri already does."

"What do you want to do to him?"

The pure one frowned and looked at her as if she was a complete idiot.

"We'll cut his brain into little pieces, what else?"

The girl extended her arms and prepared to jump, but he only snorted, not intimidated.

"Don't even think about it, bitch. One phone call and I can save your lover boy."

Pisces lowered her hands and gave him an empty look. He must have taken it for capitulation, because he grinned again maliciously and added:

"Now I won't do this dead, will I?"

"And here's your mistake, Logan," she said without a trace of emotion in her voice. "You forgot that when you look at the fish..."

The girl's silhouette blinked and vanished. "...the hare slits your throat," she whispered into the pure one's ear.

In his own voice.

* * *

The Hare admired the three even, red stripes marking the man's twisted neck, and licked her claws.

The blood was delicious, better than carrot juice. Wondered, what would the heart taste like? If only she had the time to try...

She grabbed the earpiece and dialed the most recent number. She cleared her throat.

"Commissioner!"

6. Capricorn and Dragon

Logan had been playing him from the start, and he, stupid, focused all his attention on fighting Draak. And noticed nothing.

He probably could have escaped the pit, had it not been for the Dragon. Blinded and

roaring, he still tried to win. True, he was also regenerating startlingly fast. Paying no attention to the Guards, he waved his enormous tail around, trying to hit the opponent. He might have lost his sight, but not the smell, as Capri was well aware. But the boy's simulations had not taken into account the squadron of Internals now flooding the Den. And this complicated things, a lot.

Yes, the past two weeks have been one long string of bad decisions. Now he was paying the price, trapped like a rat in a wheeled cage, eyes fixed on Draak crouched beside him.

The giant's ankles and wrists were bound with heavy shackles, the head was wrapped in a blood-soaked band, but the wound on his neck had already skinned over. Maybe not "immediately", but still much faster than it was for normal people, who in any case would not survive such a wound at all. And much faster than Capri has predicted.

"That was good, boy," he spoke now unexpectedly, in a hoarse voice, and tried to push the band from his eyes. "Can't remember when the last time I had such a duel."

"Nice to hear," whispered Capri. He spoke, even though he did not feel like talking. He owed the Dragon that much.

"Don't lie." The mutant finally freed one eye and winked. "I could see you took no pleasure in the fight."

"No, I did not..."

"But you like looking into people's heads, don't you?"

The boy frowned, confused, but soon smiled.

"It's not that. I predicted your moves."

"Fucking hell!" The Dragon's heavy chain rattled. "How?"

"I am not sure myself." Capri looked down. "It comes naturally to me, like

breathing. I gather data and run simulations, different versions of how events will play out. And then I choose the best one."

"And you could do that since you were born?"

He nodded.

"At first I was not that good, of course, but in time I improved. The father learned that I could not be pressured. The accident taught him to be more careful. The accident with my..." he stuttered, "...my prototype."

Draak looked at him like he did not believe, but then he opened his mouth, there was no mockery in his voice, only curiosity.

"So, what is that? Your father is some sort of a fucking mad scientist, is that what you're saying?"

Capri did not have to feign amusement.

"Yeah, sorta. In the beginning things weren't so nice but in time he gained renown and his project became successful."

"What project?"

"Us. Me, my brothers and sisters. The Zodiac project."

"So this is why you have such a stupid name!" The Dragon laughed. "Because Capri is short for Capricorn, I take it?"

The boy flinched. This was maybe strange, but he had never introduced himself to Draak.

"How do you know?"

"I guessed. During the fight. Your girl's screaming got under my dome. Maddening, I tell ya."

Pisces! He was stupid, so stupid! He pressed his temples and closed his eyes. His companion fell silent, seeing that he must have touched the wrong nerve. He did not manage to keep quiet for long, though.

"Where are they taking us, what do you think?"

"I don't know where," Capri whispered, "but I know why. Logan wants to learn the secret of your regeneration. And me... with me it's more complicated." He sighed bitterly. "Logan is an idiot, but a resourceful one. These are the worst. He did not want an official war with my father, so he used his contacts in the Guard to snatch one of his inventions for himself. And now he will try to look under my skull. He must think he will be able to somehow take over that gift, because I doubt he knows that father has long known how to stop the aging process too. And this is impossible to apply to a human anyway, even an Unblemished one," he emphasized sardonically. "You need to play God earlier, when a life is not yet made."

The Dragon squinted.

"So how old are you really, boy?"

"Oh, I am the youngest in the family."

"How old?" the Dragon persisted.

Capri felt ashamed.

"I turned seventeen in October."

Draak burst with laughter. He laughed loud and hard, beating his thighs and shaking so much tears ran down his cheeks.

"In October? So you're not even a real Capricorn!"

* * *

The Dragon gave him some time to run the simulation. Capri had to admit, the mutant was remarkably unobtrusive, he even breathed quiet.

Capri was calculating. He weighed the results. Switched variables. So many options, so many possible futures. His head was about to explode.

"Too many unknowns," he spat, annoyed. "I can't..."

"Easy, boy." Draak smiled reassuringly. "All these years sure taught me one thing. You cannot predict everything."

This simple truth hit Capri stronger than a blow on the chin. Suddenly he felt like screaming.

"Indeed." The Dragon cleared his throat. "It has been bothering me... how did you know about the wings?"

The boy swallowed a ball of anger that was growing in his throat and answered quietly:

"After five days I was sure you regenerate. But these stumps... they looked like something was missing. But it made no sense, since an arm cut off twenty years ago grew back in a couple of days." He paused. "Then I found other notes, seemingly about the same mutant, but that one could fly. In the end, I have to say, I gambled. I went on a hunch."

Draak's face twisted.

"So we'll do the same. Let them..."

Capri shook his head eagerly.

"Logan can have Pisces. No gambling this time."

"So we're fucked, boy. Fucked clear as day."

From this moment on, the conversation stumbled. Both somehow sensed their ride together was coming to an end. In a few minutes, the van stopped. The door opened wide. And then Capri saw something that none of his simulations had predicted. A group of guards armed to the teeth let in an elegantly dressed man. He took an earphone out of his ear and gave it to the boy, and said as if nothing was wrong:

"A phone call for you, sir."

Capri took the device and put it on cautiously. Shocked, he listened to an apology issued by the Commissioner of the

Guard, and that was it—Draak's shackles were removed, another apology was made, and they were free. The guards even offered them a ride home. Since there was no way in hell they would get back into that van, they politely declined and soon they stood alone in the dark.

"Do you know how to get back downtown?" asked Capri.

"No way, boy. But remember..."

* * *

The doorbell rang joyfully when he opened the door of the café. It was so old-fashioned it had some charm.

"I am sorry to wake you up, sir."

The homeless man twitched nervously and gave him a vacant stare, barely awake.

"See, I am a doctor," Capricorn explained, "and I noticed..."

Add hospital. Do not revert. You cannot predict everything, after all.

■MAGDALENA KUCENTY

STORY

I give life

Author: Marta Krajewska

Translation: Magdalena Małek

Illustration: Daria Lebida

Editing: Lex Long, Katarzyna Koćma,
Karolina Fedyk, Elżbieta Głowacka

Dera remembered. She would rather not remember it so often, especially now.

She stood at the threshold to the cottage, watching the darkness crawl up from the forest, as the sun went down. The towering pine trunks darkened, the russet bush leaves seemed to fade away. The cold wind blowing from the pastures smelled of frost and snow, a harbinger of imminent autumn's end. The village got quieter, the locals disappeared into their houses. Only the smell of smoke got mixed with the wind.

Dera took a deep breath and wrapped the woollen scarf tighter around her.

She did not like evenings. She did not like this anxiety that grew in her with each passing day.

She looked at the forest.

She knew that the forest was looking back at her.

She used to be called Roe Deer, not Dera, then. This moniker, given to her at birth, protected her weak body of a child against what is evil and craving human flesh. Her mama used to call her Doe, later – Dearie and in the moments of anger – Dera. These angry moments were few and far between,

because both the mother and the daughter were naturally cheerful and amicable. They also looked alike – they both had light hair that reached their waists, green eyes, narrow lips, and a smile that revealed the true beauty of their ordinary faces.

Dearie had seen only a few summers, but she knew that when she grows up, she will be just like her mother. This thought warmed her heart when she was lying down on the bed, covered with a woollen rug up to the tip of her nose, and observed her parents, still not ready to sleep. Her father was arranging the pelts next to the hearth, getting the bed ready, and her mother plaited her hair. The warmth of the fire made her features softer.

She finished the plait and caressed her round belly.

‘I think it has not kicked at all today,’ she murmured. ‘Marozowa says that it will be soon, because my bump dropped. She is probably right, it is uncomfortable to sit, not to mention work. In the name of the sweetest Rod, so much things to do before the baby is born... you were to fix the fence before the winter comes,’ she ended with a reprimand.

‘When was I supposed to do that?’ groaned the father, and fell down on the bed. ‘They all want me to help before the snow. We need at least two people to fix the fence, if I am to do it properly...’

‘So, all the others will close their yards and be protected against wilderness and we shall have boars entering our house, right?’

‘The house, come on... I know that you could do it yourself. You can weave just as well as I can.’

‘You wish!’ shouted the woman. ‘I am not going to fix the fence while I am this huge! I did not marry a wicker weaver to slog away now as if I could not find a proper husband!’

‘Shush...’ murmured the father, taking his wife’s hand and pulled her towards him. ‘Come and lie down. I am going to weave you such a fence that boars would stand with their mouths gaping open in wonder, and not even one would come through.’

The woman snorted, but she was clearly only faking anger.

‘You, stupid...’ She lied down carefully next to her husband and stroked him gently on his wild beard.

Dera liked to look at them hugging. She knew she had good parents. Her mama shouted less than other women, and her father never hit them, and even if he drank too much with Brańczak, he came back home happy as a lark. He only sang clearly worse than a lark, and he was so loud that it was hard to sleep.

Her father woke her up, pulling her arm.

‘Doe, get up! Get Marozowa, quickly!’

The girl sat up, sleepy, and gave a gaping yawn.

Her mother was walking around the hearth, holding her tummy. The world did not exist for her. Suddenly she stopped, closed her eyes, and bent forward, overcome with pain. She did not utter a groan, but her forehead was all sweaty.

‘Dera’ called her father again, excited more than ever. ‘Go! Tell her that it has begun.’

Dera sobered up instantly.

It has begun.

She jumped up, wrapped a shawl around her arms and put on her best shoes.

It has begun.

She ran out of the house, and she kept repeating this short sentence in her head.

It has begun.

She burst into Marozowa's yard, and the gate squeaked under her shove.

The girl pounded on the door until the old woman opened. Dearie, panting like a small dog, her eyes popping out, had only one thing to say. She took a breath, but Marozowa was faster:

'It has begun, right?'

Dearie nodded ferociously. The woman became serious.

'Get Aletta,' she ordered. 'Get her, quickly, I might need her.'

It sounded horrible, but Dera bolted out to get her grandma. When they reached the house together, Marozowa was taking various items out of her bag, giving them to her father and ordering him around.

'The iron to the threshold.' She took out

the axe from the bag. 'Put thorns in the window slits and under the threshold. Have you buried what I gave you around the farm?'

Father nodded.

'Under the fence, in several places, I put them in deep,' he assured. 'I marked the places with sticks.'

'Do not stare.' Grandma Aletta dragged the child to the hearth. 'Look into the fire so that the evil spirits will not follow you home. They are only lying in wait to get to mothers in labour.'

They both crouched down by the fire, and even though Roe Deer was interested in everything, she did not dare to look at her mother, not until the spirits were burnt out.

'Put this axe under her bed,' murmured Marozowa behind their backs. 'Aletta, heat

some water. Do not worry, dear,' she said to the woman in labour.

'Just this one and one more, and then it will all be easier. The barns will take care of their younger siblings.'

Dearie took a look at her mother.

'If only this one...,' the woman moaned, interrupted by a pang of pain. It was longer this time. Dearie's heart fluttered for this weird fear and regret for her mummy.

The midwife came up and placed her hands on the huge belly. They all froze, waiting for the result of her inspection. When the pain went away, mother panted with effort.

'Good, my dear, good.' Marozowa stroked her gently on her face. 'I shall brew you some



herbs. Lie down, I must take a look. Dearie, come here!

‘No!’ shouted the mother. ‘Take her away. I do not want her to look.’

‘She must see it one day.’

‘But not today. She is too small. Take her away, please. And you, too, go,’ she nodded towards her husband.

Father wrapped the shawl around his daughter’s arms again and took her out of the house. Dera was not certain whether she was disappointed or relieved that she would not see the child’s birth.

And so they were standing, alone, in front of the house. The only thing breaking the darkness was the fire burning just at the threshold.

‘Why here?’, asked the girl, with that childish curiosity.

‘It will drive ghosts away.’

‘Drive away? But other houses are all dark, they will see that something is going on here. Won’t they come here just to look, or what?’

‘They might come,’ he answered. ‘But they will not get in.’

The baby was born in the small hours of the morning. The father kept the fire burning at the entrance to the house all night long, and when Doe fell asleep on his lap, he took her inside. The girl woke up in her own bed and she would remember that particular mood of that morning, and what she saw, forever.

Marozowa was packing up the herbs, talking quietly, with a wide smile on her face. Grandma Aletta knelt down at the hearth and adjusted the clay pot, and the smell of cooking porridge wafted through the house. Father stood next to the mama’s bed and looked at his wife, somehow disconcerted,

but also clearly interested in the bundle that she was holding close to her chest.

Mama. Dera has never seen her so tired, so pale, and so exhausted. Her eyes were swollen with effort and lack of sleep, her hair was lank and stuck to her forehead, and one could see her hands trembling from a distance. But she looked happy and proud anyway, as if she had learnt to move whole mountains that night.

The girl got up and walked up on her tiny bare feet straight into the mood created by people who are taking some rest after a hard task they accomplished together.

‘Shh...’ Mama put a finger to her lips. ‘Come here, honey. Look here, this is your brother.’

Dearie peered on the bundle. A tiny wrinkled face was looking out of the linen fabric. Dera felt disappointed that the baby, the long-awaited baby turned out swollen, crooked, and... ugly.

At that very moment, someone knocked at the door. Marozowa opened the door, she must have expected guests.

‘Welcome, my dear!’ Barańczak shouted, and immediately cringed at the look given by the woman, shushing him. ‘Forgive me... Is it true that a baby was born to this house?’ he asked, as the custom required.

‘That is not true,’ answered Marozowa, loud and clear, so that all ghosts and fairies heard her. ‘There is no baby in this house. Only Derry came into this world.’

Dera giggled, and took another look at her brother, who was fast asleep. The baby had its fists clenched under his chin.

‘It is funny, mama,’ she smiled. ‘He is Derry, and I am Doe!’

Mama nodded.

‘Yes, honey. My, my darlings...,’ she said,

kissed her daughter's golden hair and started to hum a lullaby: *'Little, little moon, my heavenly heir...'*

They all spent the next couple of days on getting used to the baby – and the baby got used to them. Grandma Aletta practically moved in with them – she went back home only to sleep, helping her daughter in her duties during the day. Dearie had new chores to do, and she liked it. She also wanted to help with the baby, but mama hardly ever let her do it.

'Can I carry him, mama?'

'Not yet, my dear.'

'But why?'

'He is so frail! When he is stronger and you are bigger, we shall see.'

Dearie groaned, disappointed, and went back to the hearth to stir the soup. The clay pot was not yet hot enough to be placed in the fire. The girl ran up to turn the pot, bringing it slowly closer to the heat source. She has always known that if the clay gets hotter on one side, the pot will break.

Mother was getting better quickly, but a few days after childbirth she fell ill, suddenly. She started to moan and complained about pains in her stomach.

'I stopped bleeding at about noon,' she said, when Marozowa arrived, after Dera had gone to get her, as requested by Aletta. 'Then I started to hurt, and now it is just... gushing.'

This word sounded ominous, and the mother's dress and the entire bed were soiled with blood.

'Does it still hurt?' Marozowa came up and placed her hand on the woman's forehead.

'It does.'

'No fever. That is good.'

Mama and grandma Aletta grunted, they must have understood what the old one meant. Marozowa brewed some herbs, assuring they will make the pain go away. Her voice, so certain and calming, had a good effect on the others. There was nothing to fear as long as she had no fear.

The evening came and brought even more pain with it. Mama was lying down on her side, with a tight face, snuggling the sleeping newborn. The glow of fire from the hearth illuminated her pale cheeks.

Dera was told to go to sleep, but she could not. In the end, she went back to her mother, trying to hug her, but her mama only groaned quietly.

'Mama...' the girl began to cry, as she could not bear her mama's suffering.

The suffering that she could not understand.

When the father came back with the midwife, he found Dera curled up, like a kitten, next to the hearth. She was holding her mother's hand.

Marozowa stayed with them for the night, and her worried face did not help. The woman in childbed was shivering and panting in turns. She fell asleep for short moments, and everybody feared that she would never wake up. The blood gushed out from the womb, cleansing it, only to stop again for some time.

The old herbalist did all she could to strengthen her and relieve her pain, but she avoided the man's gaze, so that he would not see the truth in her eyes.

Dera did not want to fall asleep and nobody could take her away from her mother. Her newly born brother woke up, and demanded food, murmuring and grunting.

'I shall not leave them...' whispered mother, again and again, looking around for her baby dazedly. 'I shall not...'

'Fight, fight.' The old woman knelt down next to her and stroked her cool forehead. 'No fever, that is good.'

And she sent the man to get young Oliczka, who had given birth to a baby girl at the onset of the fall. She came and fed Derry. She looked at the sick neighbour with fear.

'This could have been me,' she thought.

The worst came half-way through the night. The face of the mother, blinded by the pain, became hot with fever.

'I shall not leave them...' she whispered, with obvious effort. 'Not now. Not now...'

Marozowa saw the woman die before her eyes, and she was the only one that had no hope that the mother would survive. She knew that the mother went beyond the point of return from the Weles lands; all is left is pain, the pain that overshadows anything that she has ever experienced. And this is how it will be, until the very end, until lethargy comes, followed by death.

She saw women giving birth to children year after year without any trouble, she saw women giving birth to one child, sometimes two, and she believed that was a miracle. She also saw women die at childbirth, because the child did not want to go out, or when bleeding made them lose their strength.

What had happened when, after living through the most difficult task of them all, after all the suffering, death came with no warning? Why, after giving life, they were awarded with death in exchange? That was something Marozowa could not grasp. None of them deserved to go like this, in awful pain.

The old woman heaved a sigh and made

her choice. There was no more time. There was only one thing she could do.

She mixed some poppy, datura, and some other mysterious ingredients.

'Drink up, honey.' She helped the sick woman raise her head and poured the concoction into the woman's throat.

The young mother choked after a few sips, but the old woman made sure that she drank everything.

After a moment, her breathing slowed down. She took a deeper breath with palpable relief, she looked at her husband dazedly, she stroked Dera on her hair and hugged Derry.

'I shall not leave you,' she whispered. 'I shall not...'

Suddenly, her eyes widened with surprise. She broke off, bewildered, looking straight into the corner of the room behind the hearth.

'Wild boar...'

And as they followed her gaze, she smiled, beautiful and happy, and left this world.

She was laid to rest as the customs required – the urn with her ashes and her beloved items were buried in a holy place. Her husband chose the beads made of dried rowanberries that he made for her himself when they were flighty but big-hearted. She preferred these beads to shiny trinkets and she'd rather take them with her to Navia. Dera gave her mama her beloved wooden horse, and a scrap of a baby's robe was added from Derry. A beautiful mound was built, and glasses were raised to her new life in the beyond.

In the end, her father lit a torch, wanting to take it to the crossroads and let his wife's spirit loose into the wild. But the fire went out as soon as it was lit, even though the wind was not strong enough. He became

sad, because that was a clear sign that his wife's spirit does not want to go away from people. He tried to light the torch again, but suddenly he saw something from the corner of his eye. He turned back and there it was. It was standing in the shadows cast by the trees, just outside the line of the holy land, and was looking straight at the gathered party.

The man froze, and his mouth gaped open in surprise.

The black wild boar looked straight at him.

And then it went back into the forest.

It was snowing for the first time on the following day.

The winter was short but frosty, but the black boar kept showing throughout the season. The man did not repair the fence around the household, and despite that, the wild boars never came in to do damage. They came to other houses, they looked for food among the rubbish, they destroyed all food stocked up for the winter that they managed to get their hooves on, but they left the wicker's house alone.

It was not the first time in the history of the village that a newly born baby was left wanting for a mother. Derry survived, nursed by Oliczka, but winter was hard on the entire family. Aletta helped out, but she could not abandon her own household to help her son-in-law. She tried to teach Dearie as much as the little girl could understand, and kept repeating it to her father that he should be looking for a new mother to his children. The wicker's expression clouded over and he became silent whenever he heard it. He still did not resign himself to losing his wife, and the black wild boar that came up to the fence from time to time did not let him forget.

That year, warm weather came unusually fast. Just after the Winter Wedding, the freezing temperatures went away, the Spring Stribog brought warm wind from the mountain meadows, and the spring came to be long before the vernal equinox. Children and teenagers were happy that they could finally go out, but the elderly just shook their heads, full of apprehension. Early spring did not bide well for the crops, which could be damaged by even the slightest frost, freezing the buds and flowers that appeared too early.

Dearie was taking care of her brother as if she had been at least twice as old as she was. She matured a lot since that fall, which saddened her father, because she worked at home instead of sliding along the frozen ponds with other children.

Little Derry liked the company of his sister. No other person could calm him or make him fall asleep so fast.

'Little, little moon, my heavenly heir...' sang Dearie, in a clear voice, and the boy stopped crying straight away.

One day, a month before the equinox, their father wove a straw basket and looked at the brother and the sister lying down on one bed. Dera stopped humming and waited for the small one to fall asleep for good. Next, she carefully got up and tiptoed to add wood to the fire.

The father felt sorry that the little girl kept working.

'Dearie, go and play with the barns,' he said.

The girl looked at him, surprised, though she clearly wanted to take him up on the offer.

'But the groats will burn...'

'I shall watch it. This I can do, though I am old and senile.'

'You are not old!' she laughed quietly. 'But I do not have the time, papa.'

'Go,' he urged her. 'You have done enough in the winter. Enjoy some sun, say hello to Svarog.'

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, but threw a shawl around her shoulders and smiled broadly.

'I shall take the pot, birches must be dripping water already,' she said with joy, took the pot, and run out of the house.

The afternoon smelled of damp soil, warmed up by the sun rays. Dera ran out of the farmyard and looked around for children, but she could not see any. They must be splashing around in the mud at the river, catching frogs, or playing hide-and-seek in the forest.

She started walking towards the trees, because she knew where she could find a birch grove by a forest stream. Last spring, she collected birch juice there, together with her mama. She felt saddened by this memory. A whole winter has passed, but the longing for her mother has not eased at all. If only she could see her one last time, hug her, feel the warm mama scent... She felt the sorrow deep in her belly.

In her memories, the grove was near the village, but she kept on walking for quite some time.

Finally, she found herself among the first white and black trunks and she took a deep breath. The days were still short and the forest was slowly going silver, but she did not want to go back now, after she finally got there. She cut the trunk of the nearest tree with a small knife. She was about to place a splinter into the cut, when she saw a thin person with long hair from the corner of her eye.

Her heart started to beat like crazy, but she turned around without fear.

Mama.

She was standing nearby, casting weird looks at Dera, and she was swaying, front to back. She was naked, and her long hair, which used to be so beautiful, was her only cover. They concealed her breasts, and they partially hid the saggy belly that appeared after she gave birth to Derry.

The woman and the girl stood opposite each other, not seeing anything and not hearing anything around them.

'Little, little moon, my heavenly heir...' the mother started to sing, stretching her hands into a hug. 'Come!'

Dera chewed on her lip and she felt her eyes tearing up. The fear fought a battle with the longing and lost – and the girl threw herself into the woman's arms. Dera was hugged so hard that she stopped breathing for a while.

She started to cry, she could not believe her luck, and yet she knew, deep down inside, that this luck would not last.

'Mama, I missed you so much!' she cried.

'Mine...' repeated the mother.

Dera tried to stand up, but the strong hug did not let her. She hugged her mother again.

'Mine...'

'Mama, we must go back to the house. The night is nigh, papa and Derry will surely be happy to...'

'Derry...' murmured the mother, as if she has just discovered a long-forgotten truth.

The hug eased, and the girl freed herself, breathing deeply.

'I took care of him, mama,' she said, trustingly. 'He's grown so much, you'll see! And he's smiling in a weird way, without teeth. He looks like grandma Marozowa then. Come!'

She took the woman by her ice-cold hand and pulled.

The forest was getting darker and darker, but Dera knew the way home. She recognized the area and she passed the trees quickly. They reached the wicker's farmyard, but the woman stopped just in front of the wicket.

'I cannot!' she moaned, with such great sorrow in her voice that the girl felt her throat tighten.

'But mama, Derry and papa are waiting!'

'Deeeeeerrry...' groaned the mother. 'Bring Derry.'

'Bring him?' asked the girl. 'It's cold, too cold to take him outside the house.'

'Bring him,' she repeated. 'We'll go later, together. Together.'

Dera knew that her mother had changed a lot, and it was weird that she did not want to enter the house. But she did not want to think about it, she wanted to have her mama with her again. And she wanted to show her that her baby brother is growing well under her care.

'Alright' she nodded. 'And then we go.'

Dera crossed the fence alone and looked behind her while at the threshold. The mother was still hunched and swaying.

The father was not home. Derry was lying on the parents' bed and babbling quietly, with grandma Marozowa sleeping next to him. The girl did not know why Marozowa was there, but probably the father had asked her to stay with the boy when he had left. Without disturbing the old woman, she picked up her brother carefully and wrapped him in her shawl.

She went outside. Their mother waited where she had left her. As soon as the children appeared at the threshold, she

reached out for them.

'My children,' she whispered, and when Dera gave her the little boy to hold, she murmured: '*Little, little moon, my heavenly heir...*'

She grabbed the girl's hand and smiled, but suddenly, out of the blue, the father appeared. He was shouting.

'No!'

He was running from the forest, where he had gone to look for his daughter, after she failed to return home after sunset. He was now running as fast as he could, and in this very moment the door to the house stood open; Marozowa, scared by the disappearance of Derry, appeared there. She quickly understood what was going on.

Dearie took fright at the father's scream, but her mother's fingers squeezed her hand tightly.

'Mine!' shouted the spectre, bringing the boy closer to it. The boy started crying out of fear. 'I won't leave them!'

Marozowa managed to run up to them and pulled Dera towards herself. The girl shouted with pain, but felt her mother release her hand. She lost her balance, and the old woman quickly pushed her further into the yard. Dera fell down with a moan, too terrified to cry out.

The spectre hunched even more and started to flee, the tiny crying baby boy in her arms.

The father reached her just as Marozowa stood up from her knees and gave him a knife dug out from underneath the fence, dirty with traces of soil.

'Kill her!' she ordered.

Without a word, he took the iron blade and started walking towards the forest.

Dera was panting, scared, seeing her

mother disappear among the trees. She came up to Marozowa, who was leaning on the wicket. The old woman could not catch her breath. What she did was quite an accomplishment for her age.

They looked out into the darkness together. Even though they could not see anything, they understood that a battle was fought. First, all they could hear was Derry's wailing. After a while it became accompanied by an inhuman, angry cry of the spectre. Short, quick shouts when it attacked the man.

And then suddenly, silence came, interrupted only by the baby's cries.

After a moment, the baby quieted, too. Dera's heart pounded so hard that it almost broke out of her chest. The unbearable silence seemed to last forever.

Finally, they both saw something moving near the forest, and then Dera saw the whiteness of Derry's cloth from a distance. A moment later they could hear him moaning and crying quietly. The girl recognized the steps of her father. He was walking very fast, and he crossed the wicket quickly.

'To the house!' he ordered, without stopping. He only urged his daughter to follow him.

In the warmth of the room, the fear they had just experienced appeared unreal. Everything seemed like a bad, bad dream.

'Calm him down, please,' said the father, handing the baby boy to Dearie.

She took her brother from their father's hands and hugged him. She felt her eyes water again.

She did not want to sing a lullaby again.

The wicker paced around the room, he just could not calm down. He threw the iron knife on the table.

'That's one of those that I buried when he was born,' he said, and the old woman nodded her head to confirm. 'I forgot about them completely, and they prevented her from entering. And she did not let the others come in, too...'

Morozowa nodded.

'But a wild boar?' the wicker shook his head. 'Why a wild boar?'

'She must have been thinking about them a lot just before she died.'

'About wild boars?' he bridled, but he understood it a second later. 'Oh. The fence...'

'Listen!' The old woman had enough. She grasped him by the shoulders and looked him deeply into the eyes. 'Did you kill it?'

He clenched his lips, bucking up at the very memory of the fight.

'I did,' he said, clearly not at ease.

Marozowa released him, and breathed out with relief.

Dera hugged her brother tighter and tears started to flow down her cheeks.

But, on the following day, when she went out to feed the birds, a great black wild boar was waiting at the edge of the forest.

She understood then that her father had lied.

He had left a few years later, when Dera and Deer now going under Lon, had started their own families. On one foggy day in the fall, the father went into the forest to cut some trees and he never came back. They searched for him for a long time, until the snow fell, but Dera knew, deep down in her heart, that they would not find him.

She knew it because of the kiss that he gave her just before he left. She remembered him disappearing in the alder groves, whistling a happy song.

She saw the wild boar sometimes, but she never met her mother again.

Now, as she was expecting a baby herself, and the big day was about to happen at any time, she kept reliving that time in her dreams again and again.

‘Mama, I’m scared...’ she whispered into the night.

The wind quieted, and not even one leaf moved in the greyish landscape of a sleeping village.

But she knew that they are there and that they are looking at her.

Dera remembered.

■ MARTA KRAJEWSKA

STORY

A Silent Blue

Author: Karolina Fedyk

Illustration: Elżbieta Głowacka

Editing: Diane Wu, Dracavia

The barrier was looping around the lake, smudging the landscape across translucent plastic: black, blue, gold, patches of colour matching the barrier’s texture. From outside, it was impossible to distinguish the water and trees growing on the lakeside, or the white crescent of beach. A dome of gossamer fibres was swelling above the barrier, invisible if not for the sparks of discharge streaming down its outer side.

Farid stopped, the familiar sight evoking an ache in his heart, as if his ribcage had suddenly become too tight. He had left this place a year ago and had little idea what to expect now – only that he was anticipating bigger changes, ones that would reflect the change that had happened in him. Instead the place seemed frozen in time, and Farid had no doubt that it was the barrier that held it together.

He waited for the ache to fade, then adjusted the straps of his backpack and left the station. The stationmaster’s booth had been standing empty for years, and he couldn’t remember when the last of the tourist trains had run through the place. One could only hope to grab a spot in the staff cars on cargo trains to get there now. Tonight Farid had been the only passenger.

Walking past the station sign, he found the path, the grass ground by footsteps into

dirt. As he walked, his shoes were soon soaked with the evening dew.

He'd forgotten to wind up his watch and the hands had stopped at half past six, when the train had left the previous station, heedless of the evening growing later. The sky over the horizon was still painted golden by the sun that would never set completely this time of the year, but the light seeped into a cold blue on which a pale moon hung. The brightness didn't reach to the eastern-most edge of the sky, where a new storm was brewing. The air smelled of tree sap.

Farid walked along the edge of the forest. The moon's contours had sharpened; he guessed it was close to midnight. In the dreamlike forest he could hear only his own footsteps and the dry crackle of sparks. The storm was setting the net above the lake ablaze, fibres turning into white fire. Farid felt that familiar pang in his heart again. For a moment he was ready to step into the forest again, to put off the moment of return, but he continued his walk towards the settlement.

His house – his home – was just by the road, closer to the train station than to the lake. Farid pushed the doorknob and entered.

'Farid? You're back?'

He wanted to say that yes, it was him, but the tightness in his chest returned, stronger than ever. He fought back tears. He was twenty, way too old for such sentiments.

While the words had all stuck in his throat, the house became alive and full with bustle and chatter. In between hugs from his family, Farid managed to take off his backpack, jacket and boots. He looked around for his slippers, but they were gone.

'We've been waiting for you.' His mother held his hand and pulled him into the living

room. Farid cast an anxious glance at her round face, sagged cheeks and small but piercing eyes. Had she changed? In the scant light, he couldn't tell.

Someone had set up the paraffin lamps, someone else brought in food. At the sight of it, Farid remembered that his last meal had been hours ago. He sat on the sofa and reached for a piece of bread. He'd only managed two bites before the questions started.

'So how are you? How are your studies?'

'Is it true that some towns have been completely abandoned?'

'How are your eyes?'

Reflexively, he brought a hand up to his glasses. The lenses weren't perfectly adjusted to his sight, but they were the best ones he could find.

'All is well.' He managed a smile.

'How long are you staying with us?'

'Do you need anything?'

'You need a new coat, we'll take the measurements tomorrow.'

'Ahti Korhonen was asking about you.'

'Here, eat some more, no way you've been eating well. Heikki got us a hare.'

The tension was slowly ebbing as everything he knew was falling into place again, convincing him that a year outside their settlement couldn't change him that much. "You're back". He didn't dare to say that it was only a short return, until the first August train.

When he was in the city letters from his family were coming in irregularly, depending on the trains from the north. The youngest cousins' scribbles, Zahra's elegant calligraphy, notes from his parents attached to food parcels. Farid was always replying, not hiding anything - in spite of increasing

frustration that, no matter what he did, the chasm between him and his loved ones would only yawn wider. And the city was scary in its own way – something he couldn't convey properly in his writing.

Zahra understood him best. In her letters she reflected back at him what he had been trying to say, finding words that had escaped his mind. She read between the lines, but Farid doubted that she shared that knowledge with anyone else. And even now, she was listening, as if he wasn't quoting her almost directly. Only her eyes twinkled with amusement. Or was it endearment? He didn't have time to think about it.

By the end of the evening, his voice had grown hoarse, and tiredness hit him.

'I need to rest.' He got up from the table, knowing that good night wishes would take another ten minutes.

In the end he picked up his backpack and started climbing the stairs, anxiety crept back into him. He wasn't sure if he would have preferred the guest room to his old bedroom in the attic.

Only at the top of the stairs did he realize that his footsteps were echoed by other, quieter ones. He turned around. Zahra was standing a few steps below. She fixed her dark, serious eyes on him.

'Why are you following me?' he asked.

She shrugged. He mirrored her gesture and pushed open the door to his room.

'Ahti has been asking about you.'

'I know. I've heard it already.'

She didn't move from the stairs, and Farid glowered at her. This made the frown on her face ease a little.

'Good night,' she said and returned downstairs.

Farid exhaled.

"Ahti has been asking about you."

Of course he has.

'Get up,' Zahra woke him in the morning. 'We're going under the dome.'

She was already dressed in worker's overalls. Her hair was gathered in a knot at the top of her head, highlighting rounded cheeks that Zahra had inherited from their mother. She'd also inherited their father's aquiline nose and eyebrows like thick brushstrokes. With each year, the resemblance between her and her parents became more striking.

The siblings drank their coffee in silence. Zahra started talking only when they had left the house behind and were getting nearer to the barrier.

'Good to have you back.' She pushed in the code in the lock. The device was as sturdy and crude as anything else that had survived. 'We missed you.'

'I missed you too.'

She gave him a long, pensive look.

'Not like we did,' she said softly. 'Try to understand. It's not a place you can leave. Most people don't even think there's anything remotely interesting in the south. We missed you,' she repeated, 'because we had to get used to your absence being possible at all.'

She shoved the gate with her shoulder, and they walked inside, accompanied by the creak of the closing mechanism. Not for the first time Farid toyed with the idea that the old lock could rust and break – and they could stay under the dome forever, safe away from the world.

'But I'm back now,' he insisted as Zahra was writing their names and date in the

notebook hidden in the guards' booth.

'Now you're back. But when you finish your studies, will you have any reason to return?'

'But that's why I'm studying in the first place.'

She gave him a sad smile, as if she wanted to reply: that's what you're saying now. He pretended he hadn't noticed.

The world behind the barrier was a completely different one. Although the landscape hasn't changed, it all sounded different. Above the lake, he could hear the geese calling. If he immersed himself in the sounds, he'd pick out other bird calls as well.

Outside the barrier, the sky was quiet.

Zahra shoved her hands into her overalls' pockets and gazed at the lake.

'We were worried sick about this flock, the winter has been really nasty. We had to keep the birds in a heated shed.' She waved her hand at the house half-hidden in the woods. 'Ahti managed to catch all of them, except two. But we're counting on the goslings.'

Farid knew this all from her letters, but he wanted to hear it again. In her voice, seeing the glimmer in her eyes. They all viewed their conservation work as something bigger than the name would suggest: they were protecting the species from going extinct.

'One day the dome area will be too small for them.'

She snorted. 'That would be a nice problem to have.'

'Give them a few more generations and you'll see.'

Zahra smiled wryly.

When the end of the world came and took the shape of silent storms that rendered the Earth's electromagnetic field unstable, it seemed that of all species, humans took

the worst blow. Each day, with each new Courtillot impulse, more power plants burned, and computers and household items became useless at best, dangerous at worst. Whatever hopes people had for their futures, these became only empty promises. At first, the lost technologies were everything people discussed. Then someone looked up and noticed: the sky has gone empty and silent.

The absence of migratory birds – as well as their sedentary cousins – became self-explanatory, as on the far shores, seas swept up dead flocks. The trails, instead of leading birds to safe wintering grounds, circled the Earth in a chaotic manner. European storks had been found in New Zealand. Swallows and pigeons disappeared completely. When people rushed to build Faraday cages and reserves, it was too late to stop the catastrophe – but it still could be slowed down. Not everything was lost, people were saying; quick alternation of generations and high mutation rate had saved the insects. Populations of bees had experienced a drastic drop at first, but later on they began growing again. Maybe birds, too, could adapt.

Lapinlahti was chosen as a reserve site for its remote location. They said it was safe.

Zahra broke the silence. 'Are we staying here for a bit longer?'

Farid nodded. 'Let's stay. I missed it.'

'Stockholm and Uppsala must be something else entirely.'

'It is.' Her words unlocked something in him, and he couldn't stop talking. 'It's... dangerous. In the first weeks I couldn't sleep, too afraid that someone would break in, to steal the flammable stuff. Anything. Any energy source. And when I entered the campus, they'd ID me. Guards walked the corridors, and I still felt like they wouldn't be

able to oppose the bands roaming the city.'

'But people still live there.'

'They do. Where else could they go?'

She grinned at him.

'I'm okay here, in the wild.'

No, you're not, Farid thought. I've read your letters.

'What are these people like? The ones who don't want to leave the city?' she asked.

He hesitated.

'I don't know many of them, only other students. And the rest... they're stubborn. I've seen the greenhouses they set up on rooftops and balconies. Some of them tinker with solar panels, even knowing the fire hazard.'

She nodded. 'Even if it's hopeless.'

'Even then.'

'Not much different from your university.'

Farid wasn't sure whether to take that as a compliment or not. But before he could say a word, Zahra walked towards the lake. The moment he wanted to follow her, the gate creaked.

Ahti Korhonen brought in two plastic buckets and shut the gate behind him. He brushed his hands against his overalls, only then did he look up. Farid realized he had nowhere to hide. He searched for Zahra, but she had already disappeared among the trees. In the first moment he was ready to accuse her of setting this up, but he should have known better – only one person could be here at this time. The person who cared the most about the birds.

'It's good to see you, Ahti.'

The other boy smiled, slowly, not trusting Farid.

'You too. I didn't expect you here.'

'It wasn't that easy to get a train ticket.'

Ahti shot him a sideways glance, but he didn't reply to that.

'Here, help me,' he said instead, pushing a bucket full of grains into Farid's hands. 'I'll show you my last invention.'

Ahti walked first, pointing to a new path. He kept talking about the changes in the reserve, as if he was showing it to a new visitor, a stranger – and never looked Farid in the face.

'...and so I decided to mark them,' he finished, dropping his voice and leaving the bucket by the shed. 'I built these rings, they expand as the bird grows. It requires visiting the landfill every now and then, but, well...' He spread his hands in a what-can-you-do gesture. His left hand was missing one finger. The sight reminded Farid that it had been a whole year for Ahti, too.

He blinked and looked away from the maimed hand.

'Can I see?'

Ahti dug out a ring from his pocket and threw it at Farid. The construction was simple: two bands of thick rubber, connected with what looked like a shackle mechanism.

'I've read about something of similar purpose,' Farid smiled to himself. 'But instead of marking the animals like this, people would insert chips beneath the skin. This way they could identify and observe...'

He looked up at Ahti, who didn't appear to be listening at all.

'Ahti?'

Called, he grudgingly turned to Farid. 'Why are you telling me about this?' he asked.

Farid's mouth dropped, but no sound came out.

'Why?' insisted Ahti, this time louder. 'I won't be able to use it anyway. I can't even dream of it becoming true. I can only dig through the junk like a total twat, trying not to remember that I'm solving something

that has been solved already, and in a more elegant way than I could ever aspire to.'

Farid fumbled for words. 'It's not like that, Ahti.'

Ahti narrowed his eyes.

'So? You're telling me your uni is doing something aside from nostalgic masturbation, or are you too busy worshipping the past?'

Farid's hands curled into fists. 'And you're wondering why I didn't tell you about my return?'

Ahti's face turned pale. He took a step back, grabbed the bucket and walked into the shed. Farid could hear only the rustle of grains. He picked up the second bucket and lingered on the threshold. Sunlight seeping through the windows drew bright contours around Ahti's silhouette, turning his ashen hair a radiant gold. Farid watched as goslings teetered about his feet.

Farid's mind went to the Lorentz experiment, taking him back to long hours in the university library. The discovery of how contact with the first caregiver imprints itself, leaves a trace that stays in the mind forever. Looking at the geese following Ahti, Farid thought of the power it gave to the reserve's employees. The animals trusted them completely. They weren't domesticated – they were stunted, made completely dependent.

But Lorentz didn't discover anything particularly new, said a tiny voice in the back of Farid's head. You'd also follow Ahti into the fire, and don't think you're over it.

Farid dropped his head, trying to push this thought away.

'Show me how to mark the birds,' he said.

'Ahti?'

Ahti let out the last gosling, now sporting a ring on its leg. He noted down its number, and hid the pencil in his pocket. Only then did he respond.

'Yes?'

'What happened?'

He curled his lips in an ugly smile that made his features even sharper: pointed chin, narrow nose, angles of cheekbones beneath the skin.

'You mean this?' He waved his left hand. 'That's nothing.'

Farid glared at him, but Ahti only shrugged.

'Somebody tipped us that the rangers would be checking our area. We had to pick up our snares in the middle of the night. Not everything went smoothly,' he said with a smirk.

'But they didn't arrest anyone?'

'Come on.' Pride echoed in Ahti's voice.

Farid considered inquiring further, then decided he'd be better off asking his parents – at least if he wanted to know the truth. 'Did they limit the foodstuffs?'

'Nope, but how long can you eat processed foods and soybeans?'

'Ahti -'

'And the hare on the day of your arrival? What did you think, where did it come from?'

Farid looked away. He knew. Everyone knew. The reserve workers, their families, the ranger patrols in the area. Poaching was not only considered a crime against nature, it was an assault on the community as well. The penalties were severe. The fauna was both public property and a cherished memory of

a better world. But sometimes, the hunger took over.

Ahti dug out his pencil and bit into its end.

‘Come on, no point in sitting here. And they must miss you already.’

Farid sighed and got up from the grass, deciding to ignore the mockery. If Ahti could decide what he wanted to hear, then Farid could too.

He seamlessly returned to the rhythm of life in Lapinlahti. After a week, Uppsala seemed like a faraway mirage, something that had happened to someone else. The Farid he was now would wake up early and check up on the reserve, before buying milk from the neighbors. Then he would dry and arrange firewood, help by the beehives, do repairs in the house. His life returned to its proper course. It felt like it used to, before.

Only it wasn't.

Zahra understood it, but she was tactful enough not to bring this up – even in private conversations with her brother. Others seemed not to notice how Farid and Ahti were avoiding each other. Farid's relatives were clueless. How could they know?

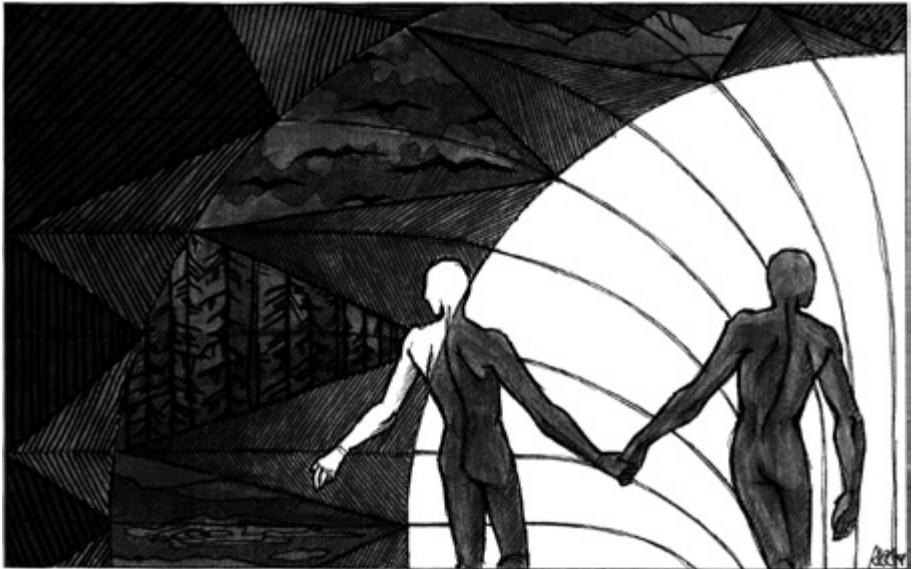
Sometimes, Farid felt Ahti's narrow eyes lingering on him. Ahti would surely deny this, laughing at Farid and twisting it into his embarrassment for taking such a trivial matter – just a look, after all – too seriously. That was Ahti. Refusing to accept anything that didn't suit him. He never asked about Uppsala. He lived as if the previous summer never happened.

But when he said “there's something you need to see”, Farid's heart skipped a beat.

Ahti's brows arched up, as if he had sensed this.

‘Today, later in the afternoon,’ he said.

There was a part of Farid's mind that was intoxicated with the sheer idea of Ahti



sharing his secrets. And then there was another him, the one who wanted to run to the station and escape on the nearest train.

Since his return, Farid had stopped by the Korhonen farm just once, to say hello – and he'd chosen a moment when Ahti would be in the reserve. Now, the normalcy of the whole situation put him off his stride. The fact that Ahti had opened the door for him, the hosts treated him to milk with honey, the conversation flowed naturally towards the harvest. Ahti took a place by the window; the sun was painting a bright line on his foxlike face as he turned to speak. Perhaps that's how their life would look like: working together in the reserve and sharing their evenings, secret smiles only for them to exchange. Having two homes, both equally welcoming.

This is what you ran away from, he told himself. Not because you cared much for your studies. You couldn't stand this required feeling.

He emptied his cup. Ahti was clearly waiting for him.

'Shall we?' He got up and stretched.

Farid blinked to get the sun out of his eyes.

'Let's go.'

They reached the barrier in silence. Ahti was smiling a close-lipped smile. He could harbor his secrets for years, and when he finally let go of them – he treated the surprise of others as his own small victory. He relished outsmarting others, the feeling of having the upper hand.

'When will you tell me what is this all about?' Farid insisted.

'Soon.' Ahti closed the gate behind them.

'I want to see if you'll notice it yourself.'

'Notice what?'

'Weren't you supposed to be smart?' Ahti's eyes twinkled with warmth that Farid had thought long gone. He breathed in deeply. Maybe, after all, the previous summer could be forgiven.

'As you wish.' They walked towards the lake.

Ahti stopped on the beach and let out a whistle. Soon after, they heard a gaggle rising above the other side of the lake. He repeated the sequence of sounds. At this, a few birds flighted, beating their wings against the air.

'Are you training them?'

Ahti only put a finger to his lips.

The geese landed on sand near them, folding dark wings lined with white. Ahti crouched. To say that they flocked around him – this would be too much, but he wasn't a stranger to them at all. They stretched their necks towards him. He whistled again, and one of the birds replied. Others followed.

Ahti stood up and lifted his hands, still whistling. Two birds were perching on his arms, the white spots on their foreheads almost shining. Other birds started fanning their wings. When he fell silent, so did they, not averting their gaze. It was something else than instinctive following. Farid blinked. Nothing that he knew would point to birds being intelligent. Corvids, maybe, but not geese.

Ahti took out something that looked like a ball. On a closer look, it turned out to be string, knotted into a monkey's fist. Ahti crouched again, whistled, and threw the knot to the birds.

Two geese leaped towards it, wriggling the loops of string from the knot. Others,

instead of turning to foraging, looked at this, swaying.

Farid was looking as well. These are geese, he kept telling himself. Ordinary geese that would be migratory birds if not the catastrophe and the dome. Geese can't learn. They don't have complex social structures. They don't plan. They can't -

But these obviously could. They opened the knot and quickly swallowed the snack hidden inside of it. The air exploded with their racket.

Ahti threw a handful of grains to the birds and walked up to Farid, brushing dust off his hands.

'What do you say?' he asked.

'How long did it take you to teach them this?'

'That's the point.' His eyes narrowed. 'I didn't teach them.'

'That's not possible, Ahti.'

He snorted. 'Sure, the snacks helped, but not that much. It wasn't just a learned trick.'

Farid hesitated. He wasn't sure if the species he was looking at was the same as the one they'd introduced to the reserve, years ago. *Anser albifrons*? Or something else entirely, *Anser sagax*? Ahti's little study could have grave implications. For the reserve. For all of them.

'You're telling me they can structure their actions. Collaborate. Solve puzzles. Build abstract relations between objects.' He held back laughter.

Ahti looked like he was about to burst into laughter too, but his face was still set in the same, intense focus.

'That they are intelligent, yes.'

'But they're geese. You're mistaking them for crows.'

'The geese,' he said, 'that have been living

under the dome for generations. We don't know what it does to them. No one investigated this. Right?'

'Right.'

Ahti smiled.

'But it's not enough time in evolutionary scale,' Farid added quickly.

'Maybe it's not evolution?' Ahti paused. 'We took something from them.' He gestured to the dome glistening above them. 'And it didn't only alter their life cycle. We took away one of their senses. Might as well have blinded them. Do you think they wouldn't compensate for this? Would you expect the first generation under the dome to behave the same way?'

Farid didn't like this thought at all. He didn't return to have his life turned upside down again; he wanted stability, not changes. Especially not changes that made him question his world.

'Maybe,' he muttered. 'But you shouldn't infer so much based on one flock. Especially not your flock.'

As if on cue, Ahti's eyes glimmered.

'That's why I need to compare it to another reserve.'

'They won't let you in.'

He shouldn't have said that. He knew this twinkle in Ahti's eye. He should have foreseen that his words would be read as a challenge.

'I don't need their approval. I only need a code to their gate.'

He could either go with Ahti, or pretend that he had no clue about his plans. Farid already knew he would choose the former.

'Thanks for your help,' Ahti finally said.

What help? Hysterical laughter rose in Farid's chest, and he swallowed it down. He was supposed to be a witness. Ahti only

wanted to hear that he wasn't wrong.

'See you tomorrow,' he replied instead.

Ahti froze for a while, one hand still on the gate. A shy smile lit up his face.

'Yes. See you tomorrow.'

Farid waved him goodbye and turned to his parents' house. A twilight gray, never fully dark in the summer, had oozed into all windows – except for Zahra's, in which a candle flame was dancing.

The door to her room was left ajar. Zahra was sitting on the floor, notebook balanced on her knees. At the sight of Farid, she covered the page with her hand.

He didn't try to read what she was writing. His eyes were drawn to a cork board Zahra had filled with newspaper clippings and old photographs.

He knew these photos. Poorly cropped and overexposed images retrieved from one of the last film rolls, took after it became known that digital cameras were useless. A few polaroid snapshots from the days when only the most passionate had such devices. One image showed a couple, hugged tightly; others depicted fires. Cities and oil fields ablaze, captured by Farid's grandparents before they fled.

'What is it for?'

Zahra closed her notebook.

'What do you mean: what for? It's ours.'

It was his reflex to deny: it's not, we've left it behind. Now we are living here. It's not our history anymore. But he couldn't escape from it. No matter how he struggled under the weight of the past, others had been seeing it in the darker cast of his skin. His foreign name, it seemed, would always be more important than his whole life in Lapinlahti.

Only Ahti, maybe, didn't think of history when looking at Farid. Or maybe he knew

how to ignore it.

'We owe this to our grandparents, don't you think?' Zahra said.

'No. They escaped so that we could be safe. I've heard enough about the burning mines and raided cities and all that.'

'That's not what I'm interested in.'

'Then what?'

Her gaze lingered at the wall, but Farid thought of his sister looking past their farmhouse, seeing a scene from long ago: two young people running away from a burning city.

'I want to know who lives there. How they live. What they think.'

'Zahra... I hate to tell you so, but you have no idea about what cities are. Even on the Continent.'

She lifted her chin.

'And you know?'

'I've seen Stockholm. And Uppsala. And I wouldn't go to the more remote districts, and the town is so close and...'

He bit his tongue a second too late. Zahra turned to him, furious.

'And what? And it's civilized? Unlike the place we come from?'

He winced.

'How do you know?' She demanded.

'At the university...'

'No, really. I'm serious. How do you know? There are no telephones. No radio. Only few people travel. How can you be sure about anything they say about other countries? The Continent, maybe they get it right, but Iran?'

He leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor.

'I've thought this through.' Zahra laced her fingers beneath her chin. 'I have no hopes for this being a romantic return to my roots. But I want to see the place I come

from. I have to see it. Help it, if need be. Pay my debt to people who were left there. And I know it's not my debt,' she added quickly. 'But I want to. I want to give something to the people I don't even know. And to our grandparents, although they won't see it. And to our parents. And to you.'

'Our parents would want you to be here and to be safe. You can't leave them alone.'

'So drop out of the uni and come back to Lapinlahti,' she snapped. 'Why do I have to sacrifice my plans for you?'

Farid blinked in utter surprise.

'It's not like that. I'm studying to be able to work in the reserve. I wanted to do something meaningful, to develop it, not only keep it in stasis.'

'And to run away from Ahti? How convenient.'

He bit his lip.

'Yes. That was another reason, too.'

'Are you seeing someone in Uppsala?'

'What? No.'

She nodded to herself.

'Just wondering.'

For a while, they both were silent. Farid gazed at the photos again. They commemorated the things he wanted to forget. His sister knew about his fear, Ahti must have felt it. But none of them, unlike Farid, tried to run away from the world. They didn't seek solace in dreams of a future that had somehow fixed itself.

He knew already that Zahra would leave. She didn't share her doubts with him; she merely announced a decision.

She got up from the floor, threw her notebook on the bed and picked up something else. Then she sat next to him, stretching her hands.

'At least try to look cheerful.'

The lamp flashed before Farid could object. He froze and only when Zahra moved away, he started to rub at his eyes.

She was waving a hand, holding a photograph. The camera had captured the disharmony of their features, all the imperfections. But it also caught the unending, hopeful determination that they shared.

Farid sat in the arbor. He held a used textbook that had gone through many pairs of students' hands, cover torn, before it had reached him. Scribbled notes had covered margins whole and crept in between printed text. Farid couldn't be angry at it, although he was resolved to treat the book as gently as he could. There wouldn't be any next edition.

He heard a knocking on the wooden frame. His father was peeking at the book with a quizzical expression.

'May I?'

'Sure.' Farid closed the book, a tad less carefully than usual.

'What are you studying?'

'Cell biology.' He sighed. 'Well, history of cell biology.'

He couldn't disagree with Ahti, although he would choose gentler words: science has become a pastime of nostalgic archivists and those who didn't mind the overwhelming stillness. He, Farid, wanted to be a biologist. He became a historian when it was deemed necessary to preserve the previous findings rather than to push forward.

'Maybe not all is lost.' His father sat opposite him. Farid couldn't remember if last year his father's gestures were as heavy, his back as bent.

'And we still can benefit from the previous

achievements,' he repeated the mantra he's been hearing in university halls ever since, to the point where the words lost weight and meaning.

'And you're bringing them here.'

Farid managed a pinched smile, waiting for his father's next words. Discussing the university was just a pretext. He could only hope he wouldn't be asked about leaving Lapinlahti.

Zahra's decision? Or admitting that he couldn't stay, he wouldn't bear seeing Ahti? What would hurt his parents more?

'The nearest train will come in a week.'

So, a goodbye. Stretched over time and in a way no less definite than the first one, a year ago. No one abandoned Lapinlahti. No one returned. No one did this over and over again. Farid and Zahra both would break this unwritten law.

'So soon?' Farid blurted out.

Father spread his arms.

'You could always wait for the next one. No one is pushing you out the door.' As if Farid could ever doubt the hospitality.

Farid's gaze dropped to his own shoes.

'I could always wait,' he agreed.

And risk never leaving Lapinlahti again. Which might be the right thing to do, after all.

Evening drew near, chilly and painted gold, endless, not much shorter than on the day of Farid's arrival. And just like then, he again felt as if he couldn't breathe, his ribs locked and tight.

Ahti sat on the ground, checking his bike. Farid coughed, trying to get his attention.

'How did you get the door code from

another reserve?'

'I bought it.'

'Just like that? No talks about quarantine and whatnot?'

'I bought it, okay? Do you really have to know more?'

Farid shivered, but not because of the cold weather.

Before, he didn't even consider how much Ahti would do for the reserve – and for his theories. Would he resort to threats? And what would he do if Farid opposed him now?

'I don't need to.' He paused. 'But I'm worried about you.'

He met Ahti's contemptuous gaze.

'You shouldn't,' Ahti said.

'That's not how it works.'

'I don't care how it works. I don't need your worry.'

'It's not a transaction. It's something you have. You can do whatever you want with it.'

Farid bit his tongue. He'd said too much, too fast, too honestly.

Ahti kicked off the ground and rode away.

They cut across the abandoned town – the old Lapinlahti – and entered the asphalt road to Nerkoö. The forest cast long shadows around them. Farid's eyes prickled with tears. He tried to keep up with Ahti, to never lift his eyes off his jacket, billowing behind him like a dark brown sail.

After a while, they turned onto dirt roads. Ahti braked abruptly. He turned towards Farid, putting a finger to his lips. In silence they hid their bikes in the ditch and pulled branches over them.

The dome above the other reserve flickered, betraying a storm too far away for Farid to feel it. In Stockholm he'd seen navigators, those rare people who had developed a sense for the storms. They quoted high

prices for guiding ships. If the unending tempest could alter human perception, why should birds remain unchanged?

Ahti showed him to the gate. His breath was fast and shallow, his face covered with a sheen of sweat. Farid looked out as Ahti entered the code. He counted the metallic cracks in the lock. The village seemed calm, although in the windows he could see moving silhouettes of people. Farid froze and gazed at one such shape, certain that someone was looking straight at the reserve. After a while, the shadow disappeared. Farid exhaled in relief. He was sure Ahti would laugh at his anxieties.

In the end, the lock gave in. They both drew long, careful breaths. Ahti beckoned to him. On the other side, he fixed a wooden wedge in the gate.

‘What are you doing?!’ Farid hissed.

‘I want to be able to leave fast, if need be.’

‘And release the flock?’

Ahti glared at him.

Something inside Farid snapped. He pulled at Ahti’s jacket.

‘This is what you want to do?’

‘If my theory is right, the barriers won’t be necessary at all,’ he said with an air of icy calm.

Farid let him go and shut the gate. Ahti flashed him a crooked smile.

‘As you wish,’ he whispered and began his whistling call.

They heard the sound of a gaggle carrying over the water. Ahti didn’t waste time on savoring this first triumph; he called again and waited for the birds. Five of them rose into the air, forming a skein.

Farid stared in disbelief as the animals gathered around Ahti, too used to the presence of people. They were behaving like the Lapinlahti flock. They tried to

communicate. They followed Ahti’s hands as he set up a puzzle, using stones as pawns. In the end, one of the birds started pushing the stones around with its beak.

‘They’re social species,’ Ahti murmured, leaning above the puzzle. ‘They are able to learn. They learn from me, and from one another. See?’

Farid said nothing.

‘We did something to them. Us, or the storm. What do you think, what other mechanism did we tip off its balance?’ Ahti didn’t even look at Farid. He put the knot in front of the birds. ‘Look, they can’t solve this, but if I came here more often...’

Farid still didn’t reply. He preferred to read about great discoveries rather than to participate in them. He longed for his dorm, its cramped room, in which he could dream about another, safer world.

Ahti scattered the wheat and got up.

‘Let’s go,’ he said.

If he noticed Farid’s anxiety, he didn’t let it show. But Farid had enough of being ignored. He caught Ahti’s sleeve.

‘We live in a terrible world, don’t you think?’ He spoke quietly, in a voice he hadn’t used since last summer. ‘An uncertain and broken world. Nothing on this planet could manage this anomaly. And we’re still not ready for this. I am not ready. I can’t. I don’t know how to live here.’

Ahti reluctantly closed his hand over Farid’s.

‘I don’t know, either. I can’t live under a silent sky and keep the animals caged. I would like this place to be something better. But it won’t fix itself.’

His eyes lingered on Farid, his gaze softer.

‘Let’s go home. We have a lot to do in Lapinlahti.’

Farid, not trusting his voice, only nodded.

They opened the gate again. Farid hunched his shoulders, expecting the worst, but no lamps lit around them. Nerkoo welcomed them with a gentle quiet, disrupted only by a dog's distant barking. Only after a while Farid realized he was still clutching the fabric of Ahti's sleeve. He let go.

Ahti, of course, did not comment. He stepped into the woods. Then the first flare went off.

Farid only heard 'Fuck', a split second before Ahti started running. He followed, slowing down only to look over his shoulder. A dog. Three guards. Probably more of them at the edge of the woods. They could forget about their bikes already.

'Faster!' Ahti grabbed Farid's hand, forcing him to run.

It's my fault, Farid thought. Someone was watching us from the window. I did nothing.

On the other hand, would I have stopped Ahti?

They ran, jumping over brambles. They fell into the woods, their contours dissolving in the twilight, thick as the barrier's walls. With each leap, he expected them to fall into a ditch, trip over the branches – but nothing like that happened. They kept on running.

He had never been so scared before. But he'd never been so free before, either. It was easier to run, knowing he wasn't hiding away from the storms anymore. He had made a decision. He could make a change. Him and Ahti, his stubborn visionary Ahti.

They ran, leaving the guards' yells behind.

Farid thought they would run forever. But even the adrenaline could only carry them forward so much.

At the other end of the woods, the guards were already waiting. There was nowhere to escape.

He released his hand from Ahti's grip. The other stared at him, his eyes wide with fear.

'Don't stop!' Farid yelled. And turned, running into the guards, pulling one of them onto the ground with him.

He tumbled onto the wet soil. Pain exploded in his back. Reflexively he curled up, protecting his head. It's better this way, he thought. Let Ahti do something about this silent sky. He's more needed here than I am.

And maybe he'll forgive me one day.

Maybe Zahra will forgive me.

He choked on soil and pine needles. Each breath was fire in his lungs. Finally, the cold blue gave way to black.

The train came to a screeching halt at the station. The stop didn't last more than a couple minutes – enough for the only passenger to enter.

The girl dropped onto the seat and hugged her worn leather bag to herself. With her other hand, she held an old-fashioned camera dangling from her neck. Her dark skin had turned peaky, but the girl kept herself collected. The railway man tried to gauge her age. She couldn't be older than eighteen.

'You'd better hide this toy away, miss,' he told her, pointing to the camera.

She nodded and hid it in her bag, which she clutched even tighter.

They travelled in silence. The girl stared through her window with glassy eyes. At some point she fished out a notebook, placed it on her knees and began writing.

'It's the last station,' the railway man said as the Helsinki skyline appeared on the background of gleaming sea.

She gave him a shy smile.
'Not for me. Not yet.'
'Where are you going?'
Something crossed her face, some
unnamed feeling. Sorrow? Fear? Joy?
'To Sweden.' She exhaled deeply. 'I need to
find my brother.'

■ KAROLINA FEDYK

STORY

Beginning/ End of a Century

Author: Paweł Majka

Translation: Monika Wiklik

Editing: Katarzyna „Ophelia” Koćma,

Bryan Deeney

Illustrator: Anna Kędzior

VII

I do not think they would call them “machines”. They deviate too much from our current conception of what “machines” are, how they function, and even their mode of existence. It would be futile to search for levers and gears in them, no springs or pistons strain their insides, there is no monotonous sound of works and pendulums, no scrunch of spoke. Plumes of steam or smoke streams do not accompany their engines’ work. Nonetheless, they are still machines – creations of minds, which I hesitate to call human. Built using powerful energies, and working in ways too difficult to understand. I fail, whenever I try that. The last thing left is the imagination, creating images of suns imprisoned in tread-mills, though such a representation seems ludicrous and pathetic to me. My own limitation angers me, while I should feel pride that I have the capability of noticing this astonishing mechanism watching over humanity. Sometimes I want to see angels and it seems

that the machines were thought in the image of them. Futile dreams – the scales already fell from my eyes.

7

I visit my friend daily, usually at breakfast time, to remind him of the upsetting (to him) necessity of consuming meals, something he shared with the rest of the mortals. Perhaps I am flattering myself, and Mrs. Rzecka, the housekeeper, would be able to manage her stubborn tenant without me. She already had time to get to know him, to deal with him, endure his moods and whims. I admire this woman's patience. I could not manage the task, and moved out to live with a woman, whose virtues drew me away from sharing life with the greatest detective of all times. Ha, I am even ready to say: with the greatest detective of all epochs known to humanity. Well, at least those we know from the approaching past.

Mrs. Rzecka must have been victorious that day, because I found Holem at breakfast. However, instead of enjoying the meal prepared by the housekeeper, he busied himself with putting together a complicated mosaic, perhaps one of the brain puzzles which entertained his mind, when he was not busy with some criminal mystery.

I was embarrassed by his undisguised joy at my visit. I have not devoted too many warm thoughts to him lately, and I began to treat my daily visits as a mundane duty. I even considered suggesting to him limiting their frequency, so I could devote more time to my beloved Maria, from whom I was going to separate within just two years, only to forget all about her shortly after, and – what would be even more tragic – be forgotten by her.

No other past event did not frightened me as much as that unfortunate necessity. I often thanked God we did not have children; fate spared us from seeing them expire. Consciousness of the necessity of separation from a beloved person was difficult enough for me. Our love was currently blossoming, gaining freshness. Soon after, steady love was to step aside for the shock of falling in love. However, what lurked after, placed a shadow over our happy life. Oh, how many times we talked about it! We dreamed of facing the time freeze, and of staying together. There surely was not a couple of people in love, who did not dream of the same. All, as we realized, futilely.

In contrast to us, Holem was happy with the approaching past. He missed the days when we just existed together, for each other, when we lived together and he did not have to share me with anyone. It is possible that my friend was one of the people who not only adjusted fully to our strange world's rules, but also was capable of drawing satisfaction from it.

"Look, John" he called, pointing to *Time's* newest issue. "You'll find a note, just perfect for us, on page two!"

Daily papers were least happy to acknowledge the fate. It was hard to be happy about publicizing information that was unknown only to a few. Journalists diligently reminded their readers of upcoming events, informed them about catastrophes, and unavoidable difficulties, but they really delighted themselves in searching out little pieces of secret information, which common mortals would otherwise know nothing about. In consequence, large portion of newspapers turned into a city back alley's chronicles and an immeasurable collection of gossip.

My friend seemed perfectly pleased with it. Loving refined crime, he believed that a big imperial minister as well as a low-ranking aristocrat are both capable of it in equal measure. Holem, a painfully modern man, put no weight on the background, but rather on the intellectual capabilities, of the people he surrounded himself with. In addition to that, in the gossip, he found leads, the extraction of which from the citizens, who are sensitive about notoriety, could prove unmanageable.

"They're reminding that tomorrow a mystery of a missing minister will be unraveled" I noted. "They write here, naturally, solely about the police's success, completely disregarding your involvement, Simon."

"Really, John, don't waste time on trivial matters. I told you, second page!"

"Death of a cooper? They write of a mystery..."

"His nephew killed him. Go on, John!"

"His nephew? But Simon, it's an unsolved case, according to *Time*!"

"Nobody came to me with it, and I won't throw myself against the time stream. Go on!"

I scanned the page thrice, but I did not find anything that could interest us. When I admitted my failure, Holem grimaced, shook his head, and, as was his custom, blamed my marriage, claiming it was responsible for blunting my mind's sharpness. In matters of male-female relations, my friend remained as unmoved as a Trappist prior. What was worse, I was fully aware that it would remain so forever.

"Top right corner, John. Brave Hieronimus is relentless in attempts to win over gravitation."

Indeed. The Austrian engineer was about to try another of his flying machines over Blonia. Balloons and airships were not enough for him, he desired to fly faster, using new engines and fuels. Holem claimed that this unfortunate inventor must have been one of the people burdened by the curse of memory. Just like tens of artists, attempting to save disappearing paintings and poems, scientists also despaired, trying to save in their memory scientific theories, which would be our descendants' genius and achievement. However, the things humanity was most proud of – its knowledge, technologies so advanced they seemed more astonishing than magic – all of it was lost. Poets tried to recreate lost poems, painters filled in details disappearing from paintings and scientists rebuilt machine models, endlessly repeating formulas whose meaning had vanished in their minds. Perhaps Hieronimus flew once, in the bygone future, with some overtly strange flying machine, and that memory, to his misfortune, did not completely disappear from his mind. Overcome by obsession, he tried to build his machine, and against fate, kept attempting to reconquer the skies.

I was jealous of his burden. How much would I give to remember! Unfortunately, spurs of emotion, and even moments of intellectual insight and all those startling daily events, worthy of remembering, do not even measure up to scientists' and artists' work. Theories and artworks are created over weeks, even years, and even time disappearance cannot take them away from humans along with one planetary rotation. I have already forgotten too many kisses, perhaps I even forgot my own children I could have had in the future. Scientists and artists have at least crumbs of bygone days at their

disposal for a long time. And even if they sometimes curse that gift, I would gladly switch with them.

VI

It dawned on me on a sunny day, when, with my back to my students, I drew formulas describing the world on the board. As usual, muffled whispers reached me along with rustles and even smacking from the last table at the window, where reliable Mr. Leinbaum quickly inhaled a late breakfast. I ignored it. There were real mischief-makers in my class, but most came to my lectures out of desire, not out of necessity. I already managed to sieve out those directed by their parents' ambitions or coincidence instead of passion. I did not mind Leinbaum's large appetite, Strychowski's constant lateness or Sheres' dumb jokes. Despite their weaknesses, they were good students.

And I could understand them. What a time – youth! The steadiness of maturity long gone, a person is devoid of chances to fulfill ambitions and aspirations, waiting only for the steady regress into childhood and the terrifying certainty of dissolving in the past creeping up on us. What was there to live for when someone was young? I, myself, was contemplating whether to blow my brains out once I reached the age of thirteen, or maybe ten. The only thing that kept those youngsters sane was passion for life, desperately clinging to its joys and heights, and ignoring the treacherous past.

But what drew them to my lectures? They could not offer them hope for the future, because it already passed. Most people abided the laws of fate. Some believed the churches, whose priests convinced the faithful of the

divine plan, others surrendered to the world, and fell into a submissive wait for disappearance. But youth was usually characterized by mutiny!

Every morning, I discovered anew why Leinbaum, Strychowski, Sheres and their friends come to me. As giving the lectures to me ensured order, offered sense, just by opposing the passing, it was just the same for them to listen to those lectures. Regaining knowledge, stimulating minds, finding the answers – all of that allowed them not to go insane with fear of impending childhood.

I realized every day, that I must have come up with that answer the previous day as well, but lost it along with the rest of my memories. Pushed into a torment shared by all people who still dared to think in those grim days, I found peace in formulas and equations. When the memory of our achievements died, unmoving, unshakable stability of formulas brought peace. Where everything comes to pass, mathematics remains unchanged. It will last even when there are no more people capable of communicating in its language. Which is why, in the world of decline, I brought comfort to my students with formulas.

I did not think about it that day. I drew equations on the board, succumbing to the cleansing effect of that ritual. White powder fell from screeching chalk, irritating my finger pads unpleasantly. The more I had it on my hands, the more I felt the need to dip them in a basin of water, get rid of those screech seeds, which made my nails and skin squeak. I hated it! But I had to control myself, focus on the equation; one of those I have not forgotten yet.

I clenched my teeth. Leinbaum was smacking his lips in the background,

Strychowski joked around in a muffled voice, and Sheres twitched as always, making unbelievable noise at it.

Whatever. I could enter a state where I would be alone with the numbers, if I just focused.

Perhaps it was a trick of the light on my eye; after all, the day was sunny.

The epiphany dawned on me.

I saw the world differently.

Everything became numbers, a knot of formulas. In my mind, the world took the shape of pure mathematics, free from burdens, interruptions that trick and mislead us every day. Superstitions falsifying reality, growing out of desires and false hopes, disappeared. Emotions extinguished, only purity of knowing remained.

A ray of light – if that was it, I do not remember that moment well, though that is when I began to remember – turned into rows of numbers illustrating its structure. If it still blinded, it was with wonder at its formula, bright and clear, though flickering with variables. I saw atoms inscribed with numbers different than those I had knowledge of, as if they were pulled from the bygone future.

I was afraid to blink and lose this vision. I was afraid to abandon the focus on the light ray, so the epiphany would not leave me. However, flashes of sun rays have short life in our eyes, so I lost it. I did not have control over myself. I blinked, frightened, and did not stop the moan, opening my eyes, dreading losing the gift.

But no. The world, the whole world was math. I was surrounded by streams of understandable data. I soaked them up, drank them. And – what is most important – I was beginning to understand them.

The world changed me with a ray of sunlight.

6

Holem hated metaphysics, as well as religion and philosophy topics. Whenever we passed churches, he sped up; whenever I tried to talk to him about God, and the shape of the universe, he brushed me off. One day, in a reflexive mood, which I tried to use, he stated

“God, whom we could describe, would cease to be a God, my friend. Let’s abandon futile discussions and let’s get busy with reality. Things we are capable of embracing with our minds are here and now, so let us focus on them.”

I am certain he was capable of understanding the rules of Hieronimus’ machine’s work. But it definitely was beyond my abilities.

The strange vehicle, equipped with two sets of wings, placed perpendicularly and evenly on both sides of the body, has already been pulled out into the meadow by an eight-horse rig. No wonder their extra effort was necessary, as Hieronimus’ wonder was larger than I had imagined, and definitely heavier.

Hieronimus presented his newest child with pride.

“I found it this morning at the workshop” he said. “Still almost finished, though I can’t resist a feeling it’s missing a few crucial parts. I’m haunted by a feeling the aeroplane should be capable of rising off the ground by itself. But how to do it? Pushing it off a cliff to gain height? Not at all! To rise, I’ll use these hot air balloons. And once I’m up, I’ll start the engine – look, ladies and gentlemen, at this magnificent propeller, and at the air flaps

at the wings and tail, which will enable me to steer!”

“What if the wings and the propeller won’t be enough to stay in the air? Besides, what could the propeller alone do?” asked a young man, whom I recognized as Majewski from *Time* staff.

“The propeller is driven by the steam boiler of my own design, my dear Mr. Stanislaw. It’s fitted to the aeroplane’s body, as you can, ladies and gentlemen, see, a rather large one, built solely to house said boiler. Unfortunately, the power it would give to the propeller, is too small to raise the aeroplane by itself. However, when the balloons help with it, the propeller should manage to lead me across the skies. Please pay attention to the boiler’s ingeniousness! It will provide the power to the propeller on one side, and on the other, it will add coal by itself, thanks to these magnificent gears...”

I glanced over at Holem, and noticed he has been smirking under his nose.

“You don’t believe in Hieronimus’ success?” I asked astonished. Holem wasn’t one to poke fun at scientific and engineering achievements.

“Poor Hieronimus!” my friend answered. “He remembers bits from the future, but it’s not helping him. On the contrary, it meddles with his mind. Unfortunate man! No, John, we shouldn’t count on his success. The most that could happen, is our brave inventor won’t kill himself today during his attempt.”

“We came here to witness his failure?”

“Of course not, John. We came to find a man, who’s been slipping from us, as well as Krakow’s police, for far too long. I’m sure that, like me, he is drawn to displays like this one. Look around diligently, but carefully, so you don’t give yourself away. I’m sure he is

somewhere around here.”

Oh, right, Holem’s obsession! While I trusted the strength of my friend’s mind, I wondered, whether this time, the detective had not fooled himself. Was it possible he imagined his own archenemy, to create himself a worthy opponent?

“How am I to recognize him?” I asked swiftly, so that I would not betray my doubts.

“It’s simple, John. Search for someone similar to me.”

Someone similar to him! That’s rich!

The crowd was thickening. Krakowians eagerly used the occasion to see a wonder of technology disappearing into the memory void. It was not the first time I was able to see how the widely lost inheritance of humanity was regretted, how strong the need to face the unavoidable was, the need to grasp those imperfect shreds of the future, which Hieronimus’ monstrous aeroplane was certainly a part of. Oh, how many of us were connected by the reality of life in a wrongly set-up world. If we at least did not know that another life was possible, life towards an unpredictable future, life in progress instead of regress! While each night took our memory of the passed day, we kept the memory of how the world was structured.

Longing for the lost, searching for nonexistent solutions is not something extraordinary. That is why the crowds came here, for a display of a dying machine’s abilities.

One of the few people known to me, and free from worries common to almost all humanity, was my friend. While he was glad of engineers’ and visionaries’ achievements, he seemed neutral to our grotesque passing. Disregarding philosophy, he devoted his attention first of all to what he could embrace with his genius, though a cool mind. He

focused on particular problems, and disregarded contemplating the passing future, as well as the approaching past, driving itself to the beginnings of time.

So if I were to find someone similar to Holem, I had to look for a man disregarding Hieronimus' efforts; someone brought here by a completely different curiosity.

At first, I found two men setting up a machine no less wondrous than the aeroplane. And they drew looks too, though Krakowians knew these two well. Kleinberg and Szczepanik were testing a prototype of a camera used to make colored pictures. In the future, as Holem claimed, this wonder was probably useful in police cases. Today it was just another symbol of a downfall. I was not surprised at Szczepanik's grim expression. What could depict our destitution clearer than a mechanism used to trap a moment in a picture? Photographs did not face the passage of time. What was registered by Szczepanik's camera today, was not going to survive until yesterday's morning, approaching with every hour. It was difficult not to admire this man, who, like Hieronimus, stubbornly resisted the reality. Realizing the futility of their efforts, they did not give up. Whether it was recreating an increasingly horrific flying machine, or performing a futile test of a camera capable of taking colored photographs, it seemed semi-grotesque and semi-tragic to me, but not heroic. Inventors and artists were connected by mutual passion – a stubborn struggle against futility. They were like warriors, waking up on the day of battle, whose failure they remembered, and despite that, they stood in the ranks obediently. There existed people, who could not be broken even by reality.

Could people like that be overtaken by anger? Could they turn against society in helpless fury? Turn their minds to evil, since the world made it impossible for them to act for the good of humanity?

I faced Holem, to share my new idea with him, but he was first.

"There!" he whispered. "Look, John! He's there!"

He jerked his head in the man's direction.

In my opinion the man chosen by Holem did not resemble the detective in any way. In fact, it would have been difficult for me to pick two people less alike than those two. My tall friend towered above the crowd, while the other one, of medium height and rather stocky, blended in with it. While Holem, I regretfully admit, did not care much for clothes, his probable opponent appeared to



be a man dressed modestly, but elegantly.

“Him?” My incredulity must have been overtly obvious. Holem, as was his habit, felt offended.

“I assure you, John, that it’s a real monster, a master of crime. A bastard over all bastards! If there happens to be an exceptionally perfidious crime anywhere in the empire, this man is behind it. I’m sure that at least nine out of ten cases unsolved by Krakowian police should be attributed to that snake. Don’t be fooled by his inconspicuousness.”

“What now? Are we going to follow him?”

“He would realize that. No, John. Now that I took a good look at him, I know enough. We can leave.”

“What about Hieronimus?”

“Right, I forgot you are passionate about artists’ and engineers’ futile efforts. It would have been better, if you devoted more attention to knowledge and longer-lasting discoveries.”

“But we haven’t come here just so you could take a look at the criminal!”

“No, John. We came here also so he could take a look at me.”

V

I was fascinated by futility. I could watch, all day long, a painter trying to recreate a painting which disappeared bit by bit every night. He painted others too, from memory, or perhaps his imagination still hinted at visions, whether they were new or lost. But he always came back to that one canvas he attempted to save. I do not know why he chose this work in particular. Knowing how to use the machines now, I used their memory supplies, and could, in the blink of an eye, see a whole gallery of any artist.

I gained no satisfaction from admiring masterpieces the creators themselves could see no more. It fueled my anger. I knew then, that the world we lived in is more unfair than I imagined before. More so, I knew it was stolen from us.

Great knowledge brings great loneliness. And the road too is a lonely road. Once I saw the world as a collection of data, out of which forces, unknown to me, and which I hesitated to call God or Nature- created series, twined equations building the reality, I became a very lonely man. I have not shared my discovery with anyone, though I wanted to do so at first. But what could I have told students watching with interest, as their professor froze at the board with one hand still raised, leaned against the board, not finishing the number “two”, two-thirds written with screeching chalk on the board? What could I have told my colleagues, or even famed scientists? That I saw the world in numbers? They thought they saw it so as well, after all, they were mathematicians! If I tried to describe the visions stoking my mind, they would laugh at me. How can you explain to the blind, that the whole reality is just one, huge database? A database, which, contrary to all that we know, doesn’t disappear, but grows, unhindered by the limits of stagnating time?

I was left alone. But alone with the whole universe, alone with a limitless, new supply of knowledge!

Learning to use it resembled my first independent attempts at reading. I made mistakes, I was lost. I was lost in oceans of data I could not read and systematize.

I searched for help. I even brushed against Pythagorean mystics, but all for naught – nobody saw the world this way before me,

save for, perhaps, people in the future, who departed into non-remembrance. I grabbed onto that idea. Could I discover traces of the bygone world? Or perhaps in the future, when science reached its full potential, and scientists were like gods, my epiphany was the most common thing under the sun? Perhaps the giants that had passed, saw the reality this way – as collections of data? Perhaps, taught from childhood, they were able not only to move through it, but also... modify it? Change the reality with one, energetic equation? Make the earth subject to them not by primitive, slow effort, but by touching the very being of the idea?

Swept up in this theory, I did not want to consider any other ones. What a discovery it would be – to rediscover the future again, reveal what had already passed!

I was spurred by fear of childhood, I already realized it back then. The vision of the child I was inevitably to turn into, a miserable being touched by the mind's regress, devoid of knowledge, but still aware of its fate for a long time, frightened me. I would have given anything to avoid it. I dreamed of respectable old age, about myself as a white-haired university nestor, keeping my mind's sobriety until the very end.

I thought that perhaps people of the future, aware of the misfortune that befell them, tried to save humanity somehow. Was it so impossible for them to create a protective system, waiting on stand-by, only to be woken by a truly great mind? Was this whole system waiting for me?

Science offered me knowledge and discipline. I had already reached the future's mechanism, now I just needed to make it aware of my existence.

Hope, as I later became convinced, can wake naïveté even in geniuses.

When, in despair, I even attempted meditation, when I searched for help from crazy mystics and charlatans, promising contact with that other world, I did not yet know that.

Only when I finally discovered the way to contact the mechanism, when I learned it, understood it, did I understand what a naïve fool I have been.

Nobody in the future thought about me; they did not plan contacts with the greatest of minds. We meant the same to our descendants as animals grown for slaughter. Those parasites only planned to feed off of us.

All my efforts turned out to be futile, like the painter's stubbornness, when he recreated the painting's detail, which he could not remember.

I watched him thrash at his masterpiece, I saw him mutter wearing litanies "whiteness should be here, something white should be here!" to himself.

A woman walked across the courtyard. A cottage brightened behind her, a well waited in front of her.

"A goose" I finally said, unable to watch the painter's torment anymore. "A goose should be there."

He nodded merrily.

I visited him every day, and told him "a goose should be there", "think – a well". And he believed me, as if my words opened a gate to the future's garden to him. And this one painting in the whole world did not die out, mocking inverted time streams.

I was fascinated by futility. My own, simple, silly mutiny, that could not just change the world after all. One saved painting did not mean anything against the cruel,

unstoppable, future machine. I immersed myself within it, all for naught, because I could not act otherwise. Nonetheless, however soft the mutiny was, it became the only sensible expression of my existence.

Until one day I said “the woman should walk towards the well” and I understood, how much I limited myself and the tools I have been offered.

5

Sometimes madmen decide to challenge the world. Although life in Krakow passed comparatively peacefully, revolutionary movements still smolder, their anger stoked additionally by the conviction of success achieved in the future, now slipping from their hands. “We are convinced, that there, in the future” – they write in self-published pamphlets – “social equality took reign; abuse and poverty have been eliminated, inequalities have been abolished, as well as unfounded privileges! Are we to give up the future’s achievements, or raise our heads once more, to face the world’s challenges and fight for a better Now?”

Holem does not bother with them often. Sometimes the most insolent ones prepare terrorist attacks, and then my friend helps the police in preventing them. But he considers revolutionaries to be crime dilettantes, their activities bore him. Despite that, I asked whether the man he dubbed his archnemesis could have something in common with them.

“He certainly uses them to some degree” he answered. “But it’s not the lead we should follow. Our opponent is a man too intelligent to trust a group driven by sentiment instead of comparatively reasonable greed. He doesn’t rely on them, disregards their beliefs,

and doesn’t reveal himself to them. No, John, the one we are to face, devoted his life to pure crime. He does it for the idea of it, for the satisfaction of toying with me and the law. I’m convinced, that we are going to face him today. Coming to Blonia, he challenged me. He will surely attempt something particularly daring today. And we’ll stop him.”

I had so many questions, but, as was his habit, Holem prevented me from asking them. He asked me to leave him alone, and come back around seven in the evening.

I knew what he planned. When I went to see patients, he certainly dressed as some lowly character – coal miner, laborer, maybe one of the beggars that came to the city in great numbers from impoverished villages. Holem knew them all. He could not only perfectly personify any given human, but also, if he wanted, gave up his snobbism, and made friends easily to gain information. Whoever the mysterious man was, I considered his fate to be sealed.

I was intrigued by the crime he planned to commit. It is not easy to become an effective criminal in a world of regression. Naturally, even inverted time could not change human nature – streets are filled with thieves and rogues ready for brigandage. Break-ins and murders still happened. Police know about a portion of them ahead of time – though case files disappear, police officers remember almost-finished investigations, and try to speed up their finale. Besides, most crimes do not bring any damages about – after all, the murdered ones, in time, come back to life, to pinpoint their murderers in cases where police did not manage to find one. A necklace stolen on Thursday is found on Wednesday in the Duchess’ jewelry box, she herself not remembering her loss from the future

anymore. Sometimes, however, new crimes, unsolved by the future, happen. Those are committed amok, or by desperados, whom the regress brought to insanity. Those are ones my friend most gladly looks into.

It also happens, of course, that we show up at unfunerals to interview victims of unsolved murders coming back to life. If time regress happened the way astonished scientists imagined it did, this problem would not exist. We would all live backwards, regressing along with the time. It would just be enough to follow the victim until the moment they meet their murderer. Of course, if we were capable of it, as in that complete regress, we would not be live people, but only marionettes recreating life once fulfilled. For some reason, the regress works differently. Though the stars get younger, we all wake up a day earlier, and our biographies are more than less set, we can make decisions and live our lives. Scientists are astonished at the specifics of regress, priests see proof of God's existence in it, who ensures that even in such a strange world, His children keep their free will. However it was, free will meant salvation for Holem. Without it, there would be no crime he could take care of.

Despite this, the world followed historic tracks. Whatever happened in the past, history books keep their accuracy. Patriots can wait independence's return without worries, and then the Golden Age of the Polish Republic, Christians are happily awaiting Christ's return, claiming he is proof the Bible predicted regress. Jews are already thinking about Pharaoh times. World history is not subject to changes. Only people's stories sometimes deviate, in details, from what can be found in chronicles, or what we remember ourselves. It happens,

that some child, observing their own parents, announces 'it shouldn't be this way, I remember it differently'. I would like to find hope for myself in it, to believe that I would change my past in this one, gravitational detail. I know however, that one day, sooner or later, my beloved Maria and I will stop recognizing each other. We will pass each other in the street as strangers. Perhaps I shall be taken by this strange woman's beauty – I cannot imagine it could be otherwise – but my heart will not twitch with the memory of our life together. The world of progressive time, though also marked by passing, at least offered us memory. Today, we get younger, but we lose memories. Sometimes I think most people live really without a purpose, reconciled with not just the expected, but the certain end of the world, whether it will fulfill God's word, or one of the scientific theories. My life's purpose is love. Once it passes, I will at least have the purpose of life offered by Holem's obsessions. I should be grateful to him for at least that. It is good to be around a person so great, he is above me, and all people known to me. Friendship with Holem taught me humility, and humility is a fruit, which, once tasted, allows us to see the world differently.

Knowing Holem makes it easier for me to submit to fate's decrees binding the world of regress so mercilessly.

IV

I searched for the possibility of progress. I had not gotten to the machines then; I did not realize their existence. Living in a world, where still working steam engines were a miracle, I could not possibly even imagine constructs built solely out of energy sorted

into informational structures, capable of drawing conclusions and taking actions. Those, who created them, imagined that they were intellectually above us, living in the upcoming past, just like the man was above his prehistoric ancestors, whom Darwin described, and whose achievements we shall forget all too soon. I understand their fear, after all, I feel a similar one. But that is not enough for me to stop condemning and hating them.

Forgetting Darwin – what a triumph it would be to closed-minded devotees, if they could realize it once the middle of the upcoming century passes. It does not stop them from celebrating it now. Every day, as I imagine, they give prayerful thanks to their imaginary God for their lucky fathers will not even know of that disease, the theory of evolution. Maybe if I was born earlier, I would have been as enslaved as them? I would live unaware of the freedom brought by science?

Freedom! That idea waited to wake up within me – I know it! However, only the epiphany woke it, and the discovery of how enslaved we are, facing the enemy, made it strong and certain. To become free through knowledge – that is my task and my life's purpose!

I studied the world's data. I learned how living matter and non-living matter energies are coded. Until one day, I had to attend my father's funeral.

I was late. Mother already embraced the arrived, shocked old man, my brother was speaking with the doctor and his helpers, whose job it was to load father up on a wagon rented from some peasant. Already alive, but still very ill and weak, he swept the area with unconscious gaze, he cowered at every sound,

and the most so, at human voices; he either molded himself to my mother or shivered under her touch. Everything was both old and new to him. He did not recognize the world yet, but was already remembering it; in a primal way for now – receptors, returning to life, sent increasingly intrusive data to his brain, and the unfortunate organ, overcoming death's darkness, brightened up, receiving the impulses, but was yet unable to analyze and systematize them. All answers resided within him, in deadened cells. My father, touched by illness' torment, suffered even more with the chaos of experiences. Before his mind wakes, he would see the light as a sound, touch as taste, he was not going to recognize caress and understand anger. Only pain reached him clearly, because our body cells are like people in a crowd – they hear the scream most clearly.

My brother was saying something to me, but I ignored him, staring at the brightening data of my resurrected father. That is when I first asked myself – where is this information, containing us, stored? The future disappears, the past is approaching, the dead come back to life, wake up, and along with them, all their memories. For the past to accumulate them, it would have to be some form of nature's being containing records of us all – our experiences and awareness.

My knowledge was too mediocre to effectively contemplate such theories. But it seemed to me, it could be exactly that way. I thought the existence of something more was possible, some data collection above all other collections, containing them all and the memory of us – existing, past, and future ones.

For a moment I thought that some god could actually exist.

Then, my impatient brother grabbed

my arm, and shook it, and I, reluctantly, returned to regressive reality. I helped load my father up on the wagon, sat by him along with my mother and brother. We sang some songs, psalms, or perhaps lullabies. Mother handed us rosaries. I felt grateful to her for this opportunity to meditate. I repeated 'Hail Mary's', observing the chaos of my waking father, and contemplating regressive life.

I stayed with my parents for some time, keeping watch over my father, switching off with my brother and mother. He was very ill at the end of his life, and we were now, once again, burned with his illness, aware, however, that this time, everything would regress towards the better, that time, instead of turning him into a brittle old man, would bring us back a strong man, full of faith in his abilities.

I secretly searched through the great data bank. I sneaked out at night to cemeteries, keeping watch over graves and crosses bearing information of upcoming deaths. Whenever I could, I attended unfunerals, searching for the streams of data, flowing down from somewhere onto the waking dead. Without results, of course. Enlightened by a ray of light, I remained blinded at the same time by the metaphoric brought by it.

Once three months passed, I returned to town, and killed the first person. What a stupid deed!

But how invigorating.

4

Maria did not comment on my escapades with Holem. She wanted me to spend more time with her, but did not tell me about it. Despite that, I made an attempt to explain myself to her, when we met at dinner. I told

her about Holem's theory, emphasizing, that this time, the case is exceptional to my friend. She expressed understanding, but she adorned it with a sad, emphatic smile, the memory of which would not stop bothering me, even once at Holem's apartment. I waited there for him, let inside by the irreplaceable Mrs. Rzecka.

He arrived when I was beginning to lose my patience. Dressed in rags, with an attached, enormous red nose, filthy and stinking, the greatest detective of the contemporary world, fell heavily into an armchair, stole my cup of tea, and with appetite inhaled charlotte made by Mrs. Rzecka.

"We have him, John!" he shouted excitedly. "Just as I expected, he was wandering around the brickyard in Plaszow, where he has his hideout."

"You surely noticed the characteristic traces of clay?" I interjected, proud that I already learned to recognize Holem's methods.

"Bravo, John! I actually meant traces of lime, the Plaszow brickyard abandoned old-fashioned customs, nonetheless, your reasoning was nearly correct, which needs to be applauded! But yes, our arch-beggard didn't clean the sole of his shoe properly, as I believe, on purpose."

"On purpose?"

"Oh yes. He wanted me to notice it! It wasn't an accident that I met there too many scoundrels breaking rules of secrecy so spectacularly, and usually so guarded in this crime hetman's army. Rogue papers don't mention them, neither do the police archives, they cannot rely on people unable to keep their mouths shut. And there? I'm telling you, John, they nearly shouted their plans around! They hurried the workers

overstepping the commands by quite a bit. I haven't met, until now, so many drunkards, not only willing to talk, and share secrets, but also knowing those secrets. Our enemy tempts me, calls me, draws me into a trap. Isn't that exciting?"

"Extraordinarily. So do you want us to enter this trap?"

"Me yes, you no. It can prove dangerous, my friend."

"More of a reason not to send you alone! Look" I showed him a revolver, taken out of a drawer in secret from Maria "I am prepared!"

Holem smiled, and admitted capitulation with a nod.

"All right, John. I won't shield you against your will. We will set out together to the crime scene."

"To Plaszow?"

"Not at all! To Rakowicki Cemetery. Jan Drewaczynski's murder is supposed to be a bait for us. Have you heard about him?"

"Wasn't he a painter?"

"Painter. And a monk. Our opponent wants to get there before the undigging, which is why he plans to steal the body, before the Dominicans take care of it. You must admit it's a rather mediocre deed for a blaggard of his caliber. He doesn't even pretend to do anything besides setting up a trap for me, which makes the whole matter that much more interesting."

The stealing of bodies and murders of the recently un-buried were one of our world's plagues, and – as newspaper annuals pointed out – it was going to keep happening until the beginning of time. Increasingly younger debauchers feared their parents' return, worried about losing their fortune, which was reverted to the resurrected ones.

More often than not, they pillaged their own family mausoleum, ridding it of whole generations of ancestors. Others, killed once-dead ones, to protect themselves from their revenge, or to keep secrets the resurrected could reveal. The past was not coming yet, but it already determined most of our lives. It also happened, that the anarchists publicly murdered someone known, to prevent him, or her, from making notable decisions in the upcoming past. Particularly zealous madmen even took to kings' and emperors' tombs, wishing to abolish, with one, well-placed bomb, whole dynasties, who were to come back into rule centuries later. Regressive time created its own kind of crime and criminals. Their diligence seemed amusing as well as touching to me. The relentlessness of futile destructions was equal to creators' relentlessness.

"When are we going to set out there?"

"Not long after the cemetery closes. Don't worry, John, we won't be alone. Commissar Strassen trusts me enough, he agreed to show up with twelve people. Our opponent will fall into his own trap!"

We did not know for sure how effective the prisons were, as well as court verdicts. Would ones hung on Thursday come back to life on Wednesday, waking, as if nothing happened, in their own beds, and going on, living, just as the determinism of a world in regress ordered them to? Some of the observers claimed that is exactly what must have been happening. Others claimed that reality adjusts to unpredictable changes in history, and ahistorically murdered ones, remain dead, while ones locked in prisons turn out to be prisoners for the next days and years of the upcoming past. Whenever I tried to imagine what the rules of a such

functioning world would be, I fell in embarrassment so great, I could only stop thinking about it, or submit myself to divine fairness and wisdom.

Holem, as was his custom, did not waste time on, as he called it, "philosophical pish posh".

"Crime is a crime, whether its effect proves lasting or disappears with the coming of a previous day" he would say. "The effect is not a crime. Crime is a state of mind of the one who commits it, as well as the deed following him. And I am busied by stopping and catching criminals. That's all that matters".

III

The first was a random beggar. He probably came from out of town, from some derelict village. Nobody should miss him, but there was someone who cried after him, someone who remembered him forever. Me.

It is not easy to kill a man if the murderer lacks experience. The fact that I prepared myself did not help. The old bayonet, kept in my family for generations, nor the in-depth study of anatomy, and figuring out a plan, based on a treacherous stab in a kidney, did not help. The world sent all that theoretical preparation to hell when I missed the first stab, while the man, shocked – because he already trusted me – gasped, screamed, and began thrashing, and I, instead of taking care of the matter with one, elegant slice, kept on stabbing him, not out of passion, but out of fear. My mind burned with dread, I was not a scientist or an observer, but an animal – a dumb, blind predator at its first hunt, made more difficult because I was alone.

I told him I needed a gardener, and he lied about knowing how to maintain the garden.

I fed him warm soup and showed him the garden. Because fall was nearing, I gifted him my old coat, only slightly moth-eaten, but soaked with the scent of naphthalene. He accepted it as gracefully as a chilled man with a wounded sense of smell. He was content, just as I planned. I tried to soothe my conscience with that happiness of his. I wanted him to die happy – swiftly, from one, swift stab.

Instead, he expired in agony, clutching me, soaking me in his own blood, saliva and urine, which leaked on my trousers through his. His astonished, frightened eyes haunted my dreams for many nights, and followed me during the day. This is how I experienced the curse of memory. I already was gifted with remembering my future, since the moment of epiphany, forgetting abandoned me. So I greeted each day, as I believed, blessed among all those forgetting people. Murder put a blemish on that, at least for some time.

I could not pull myself together for several days. I felt my conscience burn, but also fury, towering over that, because I wasted this death. After all, I did not kill for sick, bestial satisfaction, but to follow the data stream leaving the dying man. Something had to happen to it, I was already able to differentiate between living and non-living nature's data; I learned the data's alphabet, now I wanted to learn not only to fluently read it, but to understand this world as well.

Instead of studying the dying man, I cried over him and myself, I squealed and moaned, as if it was me dying. I lost the opportunity. I turned out to be a lame observer.

One thing I found out, was that the man I killed, did not come back to life the next day. His body stayed where I hid it – in our chapel, in the spot my father resurrected

from. It turns out, the resurrections did not happen multiple times. Who once came back from the dead, was lost forever once dead again.

Why did it happen this way? What was going to happen to his mother on the day of his birth? Did I change the past in this small detail? Was this man supposed to father descendants in the past? What happened to them? They should exist before I killed him, did they vanish now, or exist without a parent? Both hypotheses seemed equally astonishing to me.

I had to find another one.

I still felt repulsed by myself, though the feverish thirst for knowledge pushed it away, and in the end, was victorious. This time, I had to choose my study subject better.

I found him at the city limits. He ran a small shop, constantly balancing on the bankruptcy borderline. What was more important, he had a wife and two children – a girl and a boy. The boy looked like his mother, grim, and not very tall, the girl, however, was very much like her father. When I strangled him one dawn, the children did not vanish. I thought their faces changed slightly, but I could not be certain. I watched them for some time, searching for changes, and I believed I noticed the girl's facial features change. I began to shop in their little shop, get acquainted with the family more, and I was convinced I was correct. With each passing day, the girl resembled her father less.

One day, I met a different man at the shop. All the neighbors remembered that he has always been there. Nobody remembered the woman's murdered husband anymore, as if I erased him from reality.

I changed the past.

I was tempted to kill this new shopkeeper.

I resisted the temptation easily, because I had not come to like killing. It irritated me in its bluntness. Death pushes us against harsh bodily constraints, so insulting to the mind's power. I wanted my genius to rise above a haphazard collection of cells, prove to be something more than meat. My body filled me with disgust, I gladly forgot about it, focusing, one day, in the future, on numbers' elegance, later, after the epiphany, on data, free from bodily imprisonment, carried on merry, light, bright energy. When I killed, when I pressed the bodies of other people to me, squeezing the life out of them, drop by drop, the murder reminded me, that I was also a body, apart from all else. That my mind, which I was so proud of, was just a function of a gelatinous organ, subjected to passing and death. I didn't differ in anything from my victim, I was as equally repulsive and limited as it was.

I did not want to kill anymore.

There was no need for it. I studied the shopkeeper's death with a cooler head. I watched his energy change, how its new signatures overwrote it, changing the code, modifying the database, which is what he was, after all. A slight signature change, meaning the difference between 'living' and 'dead' brought meaningful consequences, which I found out later, observing the children's data modification. Above all, however, I finally observed a flash of energy, which I could not explain in any sensible way – it did not carry any changes in the database, it did not have any consequences for the dying body. It was complete waste, meaning something that had no right to exist in nature.

Unless this seemingly meaningless flash was actually a signal.

I did not understand why Holem's opponent wanted to get at him, it seemed illogical to me. If I led a criminal life, I would avoid my friend like fire. He was known in all of Europe. Oh, how many invitations came to him from Vienna! I was startled, that having such a brilliant mind, he preferred to live in a province, instead of moving to one of the large cities. He explained that crime remains a crime, whether its committed by a count in his court, or a beggar in an alleyway. I did not fully believe this explanation. Perhaps he was worried that if he became more successful, he would be touched by the disdain associated with his background? While he cut himself off from his countrymen, and despised their religion as equally as any other one, there sure would be some, who would point out his roots to him. Here, in Krakow, it perhaps had lesser meaning, as long as Holem kept the appearance of a somewhat modest, local detective. But what if he made it to the salons?

Oh, what did I know, anyway! Maybe that is how our fate rolled in our future? Maybe Holem gained fame which everyone forgot about already? Which he now lost with each passing day?

He was still known enough for the criminals to shudder at the sound of his name, for them to ensure, as much as they could, not to wake his interest.

"It's a challenge" he explained, when I asked for our opponent's reasoning. "He knows I equal his intellect, and fears I could be better than him. A man like him can't stand uncertainty. He wakes each morning, and realizes my existence. He fears whether I'm watching out for him, his every move is

in danger. He wants to find that out, before we both become children. He'd rather die, than go to sleep, certain that he will wake up again, tormented by the same uncertainty. He seeks freedom."

"But he won't remember anything tomorrow! What kind of satisfaction is that!"

"The only kind we have, John. The satisfaction of a second, the power of a moment. Tomorrow, none of us would remember who won. And if secondary death is final, then the winner wouldn't even remember existence of the one he defeated. But in that one moment of truth, he'd feel content. And won't deny it."

And a moment later he added "neither will I."

With so many virtues, my friend was free from the sin of pride. He could withstand the worst poverty and humiliation, but he could not imagine, however, that anyone could equal his intellect. Among detectives, he surely did not find one equal to him. Maybe that is why he searched for a worthy opponent among the criminals? If someone like that actually existed.

It was not the first time I had doubts. That day, as I believe not for the first time, I discovered that Holem was bored. He surely longed for the days when he was young and unknown, when the police got in his way instead of helping him, and the criminals snubbed him. When each day brought new challenges. Today, there were no criminals who would dare to stand in Holem's path, and he developed his abilities to such a degree, he could solve most cases not even leaving his house.

I pondered what was a bigger torment for Holem: present boredom, or the inevitably approaching sense of self-imperfection, mixed with the awareness that once,

in the future, he was certainly a much better detective, when the clock struck eight, and the guard closed the cemetery gates. It is already been dark for several hours; night fell early in Krakow on January third. I looked to the upcoming fall impatiently, and summer after that. I was not a fan of winter, and when I shivered with cold, hidden in the shadows of a wall opposite to the cemetery, my disdain for the season grew. Contrary to me, Holem paid no attention to low or high temperatures, completely neutral against nature's moods. When he focused on the case, the rest of the world ceased to have meaning for him.

Impatient, I wanted to make my way to the cemetery, but he stopped me. We waited for the guard to leave, and his replacement takes his seat inside the warm patrol booth. A police patrol passed us. Those officers have not been warned about the trap, which is why they observed us suspiciously. Upon recognizing Holem, they greeted us discreetly, and walked away.

"Now" Holem decided.

We passed the main gate, turned the corner, and using a purposefully extinguished lantern, we made it through the wall there.

Drewaczynski's body laid in the Dominicans' mausoleum. By day, I would know how to get there, but at night, I was completely lost.

Holem found the way without any effort. We ran towards the chapel. I was already breathing freely, convinced than now, I would do fine, when he suddenly turned right, pulling me with him into the shadow of a large, house-shaped mausoleum.

"We'll approach them from the side" he hissed. "Keep silent, John!"

We sneaked between graves. I stooped instinctively, though most of them concealed me without any difficulty. We finally stopped at Holem's signal.

"Look" he whispered. "He's here! Ha! He sent his killer!"

Some man was hiding in the shadows of a mausoleum, barely several yards from us. If we moved straight to the target, as I planned, he could have killed us without any difficulty.

"A killer?" though moving warmed me up, I was chilled again, just thinking that we would have to fight off a killer in the middle of a cemetery.

Before, cemeteries were places of peace and silence. Currently, I could not be sure whether I would hear, any moment, a quiet, but increasingly louder scratching indicating that some forgotten dead was just leaving his grave. Even though I was a doctor, familiar with death and diseases, resurrections chilled me every time.

I assisted with many unfunerals. The resurrected ones, often weak and consumed by illness, required medical attention. But I never got used to the return of these half-corpses; here, I thanked God for the miracle of forgetting, sparing me the vision of myself, blubbing, still carcassy, cowering at every sign of life – light, touch, and sounds. Just a thought that this night, somewhere near, the dead could be waking, sent shivers down my spine.

"Colonel Moranov" Holem clarified. "A degenerate and a traitor. He spied for Austria during the war with Turkey. You see how he limps? He was wounded at Filippo. Then the Russians discovered his treason, and he had to run. Exceptional marksman. Take a look at his rifle, John. Magnificent weapon, I bet it was made to order. Pay

attention to the cylinder near the lock, do you know what that is? Compressed air. Moranov's rifle doesn't fire by the same rules as your revolver, my friend. It's fueled by compressed air, thanks to which, the weapon is nearly soundless, the shot isn't even accompanied by a flash. He'd shoot me, and you, standing next to me, wouldn't know where the shot came from, you wouldn't know where to hide. He'd kill you easily as well."

I shuddered. I ceased to doubt the existence of Holem's archnemesis. What other devilry did he have prepared for us?

"He must be somewhere nearby!" Holem whispered. "He won't come out, until he makes sure I'm dead. Wait for me here, John. Don't move from here. Keep Moranov in your scope. When he shoots, give him some time, until my opponent appears. Then make sure the colonel gets caught. Strassen's officers are supposed to take care of it, but I trust you more."

"And you? Where are you going?"

"I must bait our enemy out."

"But you said..."

"Yes, it's nothing really, I assure you. I just need to get shot."

II

Is it nature itself modifying the data? Were we just its carriers since the beginning of existence, storage units for information carried by energies invisible to common people? But if each person is a storage unit, then the sub-collections, which we actually are, compose a larger collection, which are all the living beings on Earth. Those, however, are a sub-collection of all beings which have their own energy signatures. The great

collection we all belonged to would be Earth. But the world does not end with Earth.

Does it?

Time regress is a riddle nobody was able to solve. If it was complete, perhaps it would be easier to answer questions associated with it. "Time is regressing" scientists would say. "And along with it, so does everything. That is why we are getting younger, instead of aging, that's why we forget about tomorrow, which disappears, and we remember yesterday, which hasn't come yet."

But why did time regress in a jumpy manner?

The religious charlatans saw it as their gods' work. I could not rely on this belief, but I knew more than them, and could do more. I remembered the future from the day I lived through the epiphany. What is more, I knew the past could be challenged and changed. Nature, great and powerful, but without a mind at its disposal, unable to immediately react to unexpected changes, it could not just throw in a substitution in place of a murdered person. What happened in the small shop, pointed to some conscious intellect standing behind the rules of our world.

If natural mechanisms did not steer our regress, then what?

I did not want to kill, but I needed more data. How to obtain it without danger of contact with repulsive physicality?

Finding a substitute.

While the idea seemed simple, its realization placed further challenges before me. First of all, I did not want to rely on just any killer, some accidental blaggard, an idiot with a dead conscience and filthy hands. Someone who would present offense not only to me, but also to my mission. Besides, associating

with a mere scoundrel, I would risk that in an influx of greed, he would kill me instead of the experiment subject.

Being of rather mediocre posture, I would not elicit respect from the people I was interested in, just with my looks. I needed tools, that was true. In order to obtain them, I had to work out an effort, and place it into life anew.

I began observing the city's underworld. What a mediocre material I had to use in the beginning! How simple and lame those who were to serve my cause were in the beginning! I naively expected to find among them minds, if not bright, then at least capable, and daring burglars, and ruthless murderers, inclined towards recklessness, but, in their own way, intelligent.

That did not happen.

Beggars were extorted by scoundrels not much stronger than them. The types with forbidden faces, filthy and torn, showing daring only towards those, who feared them ahead of time, led me, unwittingly, towards their equally dumb and miserable bosses. Those in turn, paid tribute to even stronger rogues, who, to me, presented no potential either.

I understood that if I wanted to use some gang of clever and swift criminals, I would have to create it on my own.

That did not prove to be hard at all.

I pretended to be a messenger for someone noteworthy, someone who needs discreet help. I baited a few fools, who, since then, served me clumsily. Their discretion ended the moment they received payment for their services and disappeared at the nearest pub.

There was an issue with attaching them to myself. After all, they woke up each morning

unaware of my existence. If I were to have the group at my disposal, I had to create it in the past. I did not have physical access there, but I had knowledge.

I studied the criminal chronicles and my city's history, until I finally found someone suitable for my purpose. An old criminal, one of the uncrowned rulers of Lvov's underworld. He reigned over prostitutes, beggars and thieves. He took tribute, stood behind burglaries and assaults, and did not hesitate to commit murder.

I did not want to destroy his kingdom, on the contrary, I planned to strengthen it.

I just had to become him, just so that the history would note his existence, but did not write his death in. It was risky. After all, it was possible that the mysterious mechanism could slide its own candidate into the fallen crime king's spot. So another experiment was crammed into my action – I had to check, whether the mechanism would accept me.

I reached my target, and I killed him. It went easier than I thought. He did not expect danger from me, and I, after two murders, had some expertise.

I had to enter his skin. Stand behind crimes known from the chronicles, that he ordered. I had to become Jacob Moriarchuk, Lvov's crime Napoleon.

And something more. Because the third murder I committed freed me from such necessity. Whether it was because I dared to substitute Moriarchuk with myself, which agitated the timelines additionally, or because of my experience, this time, I was able to reach the very mechanism controlling the regress. It was my second epiphany. Much more frightening than the first one.

At the first moment, I was unable to call them machines. It was inappropriate to lock

something so powerful into such a small name. What was the meaning of the steam furnaces of our locomotives, whose punctuality and power we were so proud of, against power able to move galaxies, harnessed to intelligent energies' treadmill? Yes, just as I thought, everything in our small bubble in the middle of regressive universe was orderly energy and information. That is where I drew information about my own passed future days from. Each atom of my small body built me as a certain being's template, which was not much larger than the code, which was a part of a huge data storage, gathering information about the whole universe, but mostly humanity, including myself. I was a tiny speck, a comma in a limitless library. However, I was an aware comma. And with each moment of recognition, increasingly infuriated by the truth I have been discovering.

My fury was not enough to overcome awoken futility, once I stood against the machinery of the regressive universe. Whatever I tried, everything was for naught. What did my changing of the past mean, if the regress machinery went through whole millennia and put them in order?

The epiphany would have destroyed me, turned me into a frightened fool, begging to be freed from the knowledge. I was very near that. But, by some stroke of fate, or due to my unbreakable will, and despite everything, untamed curiosity, I found a trace of the one who saved me. A trace of a scoundrel I could focus on; a trace of my sole, true enemy. He hid in a derelict, provincial town, which did not mean anything yet on the world map. Whether he liked it for its provinciality, or he chose it for its upcoming past glory, had no meaning to me. While he hid under

a mediocre persona, he could provide me with all the answers. First of all, just his existence filled me with repulsion.

I had to leave Lvov. The mathematician I was once in the future, and whom I was to be in the past I discarded, did not exist anymore. Even if I still ordered my wretches to address me as 'professor'.

Jacob Moriarchuk led his army to Krakow.

2

Sometimes I found my friend changed. I already got used to his irritating, clumsy violin playing, though I remember in the past it would seem to me like a torment. I would attempt to stop him whenever he reached for the instrument, and he would patiently explain that his music seems nightmarish, because I focused on the side effect, which was the melody. Music, in Holem's understanding, was just another mathematical expression, an attempt to create an equation describing the universe's harmony.

"The universe, in its core, must be orderly creation" he explained to me. "Chaos is illogical, which makes it ostensible. Everything that seems disorderly to us, is only non-understandable."

I protested such philosophy. I recalled descriptions of catastrophes and crimes.

"Sure, catastrophes happen" he shrugged. "No system is perfect. The larger, more complicated the machine, John, the higher the risk of error or damage. That's why engineers and mechanics exist in the world."

"And you are someone like that?"

"Crime is a damage to society" he admitted. "Or catastrophe resulting from such crime. So yes, we could say I am an engineer or a mechanic. Music then, though

you don't notice it, is an attempt of recording the harmony. I'm afraid that at this stage of civilization's development, it's no less perfect than chemical registrations. Chemistry knowledge is taken from us, though we are lucky to live in times when we still have certain knowledge at our disposal. Music, however, remains timeless, despite the direction of the time streams."

It was difficult for me to accept his theory of the universe's harmony. Too often I met with diseases whose sense and origin I could not explain. What sense did an organism eating itself have? I could explain to myself the causes of great epidemics, but what of unknown illnesses tormenting single people, whom I could not help? Holem had the answer to that as well – the future. Answers to all the riddles must be hidden somewhere in the lost future.

Sometimes, however, I found my friend changed. Grim and silent, he sat in the armchair for hours, not paying attention to anything. Once he finally noticed me, he greeted me with a friendly shout, but I guessed from the tone of his voice, that the grim mood did not leave him at all. In the approaching, unnervingly near past, I dared once to ask what tormented him in moments like these. I shall forget the answer soon.

"Boredom" he answered. "Sometimes I'm bored, John. I'm just a deed, so how am I to exist if there is nothing to do? You have your dreams, your lovely wife. Even all of these doubts that worry you so much, make you live. For me there exists only action or emptiness. Your life is filled by details; my life lacks them. When no case is happening, I don't exist either. The life of people like you sometimes remind me of that."

It was the memory of that moment that

I doubted the existence of the detective's archnemesis for so long. Worried for my friend's health, I suspected that he would be capable of making up riddles for himself and opponents. Which is why I greeted that dangerous situation at the cemetery with near relief, though our lives were in danger. Holem was not insane after all, crime's Napoleon really did exist!

However, the detective's words filled me with dread. What did he mean – he just needed to get shot?

Holem stood in front of the Dominicans' mausoleum. I was uneasy about his movements' stiffness. Was he afraid? Who would not be afraid, knowing that barrel of a ruthless killer is already pointed at them! I tightened my hand on the revolver's butt. I was ready to shoot Moranov even now, just to save my friend. But then I would ruin the trap. And I know that Holem would forgive me his own death faster than an interruption in the plan's realization. So I observed him read dead names, glancing around, searching for the enemy. Finally, some silhouette appeared in the alley on the left hand side. It was too dark for me to recognize the newcomers' face, though from his posture, he seemed to look like the man Holem pointed out to me at Blonia.

"So it's you" Holem whispered.

"So it's you" the newcomer said much louder. "I'm glad. And now..."

I did not hear the shot, only a hiss. Holem wobbled, tried to lean on the mausoleum, but he fell. His enemy approached the body, kneeled, but straightened up rapidly, and shouted something I did not hear, because I left my hiding spot already, shouting "He shot! He shot!" and rushed towards Moranov. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that

someone jumped out of the darkness, and attacked my shot friend's enemy.

Police whistles sounded all around. More officers filed out of the shadows.

Moranov faced me. I was frozen by the loathing in his gaze. He tossed away the rifle he did not have time to reload, and reached into his coat, most likely for the revolver.

I do not know whether I would be capable of shooting. I was paralyzed, hypnotized by the fury radiating from the colonel's eyes. Luckily, Commissar Strassen showed up behind him, and took his consciousness away with a revolver-butt-assisted blow.

"Holem!" I called out. "He shot Holem!"

"Calm down, John." My friend came out of the shadows. "It's just my good friend, master Scisłowski, who luckily for us, unusually short, was animating the marionette."

Indeed, a dwarf, whom I saw in a circus visiting Krakow several times per year, was digging his way out from a heap of rags tied around a stick, and framed by a coat and a hat identical to ones Holem wore. In the darkness swathing the cemetery, I was fooled, so were the criminals, who did not know Holem that well.

"But... He's struggling free!" the detective called out.

Indeed, immobilized, as it would seem, the man from Blonia pushed the officers aside, and lunged to escape.

"After him! After him!" an agitated Holem called out. "By God, don't let him get away! John! Run after him!"

I ran, stunned by the events. I passed Scisłowski, digging his way out of Holem's too large coat. The detective's characteristic hat laid nearby...

Holem prepared a trap within a trap! But why did not he warn me? I would have

avoided so much worry for him!

We ran after the man from Blonia. He could not get away from us, police officers were closing in on him from all sides. He finally understood it, and stopped. Heaving heavily, he leaned against a tree.

I ran up to him as the first officers felled him to the ground and were cuffing him.

I saw his face only after a moment. I paled at seeing his malicious grin. It seemed to me even more frightening than Moranov's fury.

Trap within a trap.

"It's not him!" I called out desperately. "He tricked us!"

I

Crime is not something homogenous, it is not constant, and does not have just a single cause. It can stem from burning hatred, jealousy, out of fear. It can be an effect of dreams of a better life, or be a result of a moment of emotion, or even drunkenness stealing our reason and humanity. The effect could be a consequence of ambition, toying with society, a challenge thrown to the greats of this world. Browsing through huge collections of knowledge, I found many definitions of it. According to most of them, I was most definitely a criminal.

But other definitions existed as well.

Is it a crime to stand against great evil, and oppose it? I killed and ordered murders. Is that a crime? Those, who kill on my command, certainly become criminals, because they remain unconscious of my reasoning. But me?

I look at myself in the greatest, most perfect mirror in existence, in all of the knowledge collected in the history of humanity. I know, that in a way I try to

justify myself, that the memory of the first committed murder still unnecessarily eats at my needless conscience, that I did not fully free myself from the weakness of a human I cannot fully outgrow. The kindly mathematician I once was, still looks at the great data collection as people, and not as energy written information. That is good. That is where my strength is. If it were not for my weaknesses, I would become like one of those who created machines enslaving us. Mechanics in the future have great knowledge, perhaps greater than mine, but are dumb and limited. The knowledge is not enough when I discover it; it does not offer wisdom even to a learned man.

Wisdom brings mutiny against a power, which is hard to even imagine.

In the knowledge storage, one can find images of Krakow's past, where it piqued visitors' delight. Shall I live to see it? Would I be able to change my identity at will, or manipulate energy so I could keep eternal life? Shall I be, in the past, Cagliostro, Wandering Jew? Shall I be the basis for the ever living, described by that Irish writer?

I do not know that yet.

I arrived at decrepit Krakow, where miserable memories of the time when it served as the capital, were not coming back to life yet. The worst was still ahead of this city; the wars of the upcoming century were about to massacre it. Despite all that, I did not feel well in that city, a mere shadow of my Lvov. I had to get rid of those emotions.

Machinery I was learning still intimidated me. Those who passed along with the future, the limited mechanics with wondrous tools at their disposal, cursed us. They used all their energies, all their powers to lock us in energy's bubble. All the energy they were

able to accumulate, the energy of a bygone universe serves to weaken the regress in the part of the universe we live in. It cannot, obviously, stop it completely, but it slows it down. Which is why we live differently from the rest of the universe. Instead of experiencing regress completely, we experience it in stages. It could be touching, like the painter's attempts to save his painting; unfortunately, there was nothing romantic about the mechanics' deeds.

They knew that they would not be able to save themselves from final annihilation. It is written in the universe's fate, which spreads to its limits, then caves within itself. We exist between the ends of the world, and they knew about it, and were unable, yet, to stop it. But at the end of regress, the universe is just a powerful heap of condensed energy, like the air in unfortunate Moranov's rifle, who was so happy with the primitive, but deadly toy I made for him. The mechanics found a way to survive. They created a machine made solely out of energy, writing down all our fates. It writes every living being's biography in energy data, able to survive yet another beginning and end of the universe. It is important, because the fate of the new universe could be slightly different. Some new species could dominate the Earth, or maybe life would not appear there at all? And they did not want to leave anything to chance. They wanted to return and – perhaps – find a way to stop the regress. What a noble plan! I am convinced, that if they were successful, their descendants would raise some kind of a monument for them.

I wished for hell to devour them.

I was, in a way, happier writing numbers on the board with screeching chalk. I thought then, that despite living in the shadow of

great futility, I was a man, whose efforts and decisions had some worth. In reality, I did not mean much more than the chalk powder, dusting my hands and sleeves. In the great information machine, built out of energy, I was just a speck of dust. Oh, that is right, a single human is usually devoid of meaning in history. But at least he has his own life! The machine from the future took even that from me! I was only one of many numbers in series building information about humanity's history – material the machines would use as building blocks for returning to the future. Zero, or maybe one after a comma, delusion, not even a seed for manure, this is what the mechanics of the future brought me down to.

Against such a perfidious, cruel plan, a real man can act in only one way – destroy as much as he can within it.

0

We ran, along with several officers accompanying us, to the Dominicans' mausoleum, to find no one there.

"We need to separate" one of the officers decided. "Deibnitz will go with you, doctor. Don't hesitate to use weapons."

We started towards the cemetery's southern portion. Soon, we had to separate again. Deibnitz was convinced he heard some sound on the right, while I heard silent sounds to the left of us. We agreed to call on the other as needed, and walked in opposite directions.

I sneaked carefully between gravestones. I heard the voices increasingly clearer. They came from inside a mausoleum as large as a small house. Was I fooled by someone's resurrection and nighttime un-funeral?

But one seemed familiar. Holem? I risked

it. I approached the solid gate carefully. I hoped that if anything were to happen, it would not turn out to be locked from inside.

"... hate you!" someone growled. I thought he would gladly scream, but tried to keep his voice down. There was so much hatred, so much fury, that I instinctively removed the revolver's safety. "Who are you to usurp that right! Who are you!"

"You know who I am, professor..." Holem's voice remained calm, as always. I only heard him agitated once – several minutes earlier, when he sent us after the fake man from Blonia. Was it possible he was pretending then? I just realized that now. Did he fake the agitation, the way he did, to pretend he fell for his opponent's trick? Did he purposefully send us on a chase after the fake? But why, what for?

Did he want to be alone with him?

"I know what you are!" the one called 'professor' interrupted Holem. "You even named yourself, or it named you fittingly! Golem! Golem! Accursed guard, scoundrel keeping order among slaves! I would have hated you, if you were human, but you are just an artificial creation, a machine!"

"You seem to know a lot, but you don't know the most important part."

"I was there, creature. I was there, I saw everything! For years, I studied your collections, those big data storages..."

"Bases" now Holem interrupted him. "We call them 'data bases', professor. Please calm down. We don't want to lose you. Someone like you could do so much."

"I would become a guard like you? Only worse, because a human one?"

"It's for the good of humanity, professor."

"Good of humanity?" professor hissed. "Good of humanity? Do you even know what

you're saying? Where is that good of ours? In eternal enslavement? How much free will do I have, golem? Just as much as I fought for myself, by changing the past!"

What was this madman raving about? I moved anxiously, and not very carefully. They heard me.

"Someone's out there!"

"Calm down, professor. I recognized the footsteps earlier. It's doctor Cosyn. He's not dangerous. He won't remember anything yesterday."

"Let him come in!"

The door was cracked open for me.

I was furious at myself for my carelessness. I crossed the mausoleum's threshold hesitantly. I already buried Holem once today, within my soul, I did not want to repeat it in this gloom.

"John, this is professor Moriarchuk." Holem acted as if nothing happened. "The most dangerous man in the world. I think he wants you to listen to him."

"Very clever, golem" Moriarchuk laughed. "But I don't need a judge. I know the truth, and I know your guilt. You will die today."

I could not see the professor's face in the dark, but I effortlessly realized he was armed. He aimed interchangeably at me, then at Holem.

"It doesn't matter, professor. I'm not alone."

The weapon in Moriarchuk's hand twitched.

"I know you can't really be killed" he hissed. "I followed the history. There are always ones like you. But if I kill you, at least I'll change something! Each change ruins your perfect model. Each brings freedom about. Don't you all see there, what you changed the world into? What if

order requires changes? Which time are you repeating this dead cycle? Who told you that other version of history, maybe even some other race would be worse? Or maybe you hinder the universe's evolution? Where did all this pride in yourselves come from?"

I glanced at Holem. He still seemed calm. Perhaps he felt disappointed in Moriarchuk? He did not look for a madman.

"Do you realize, doctor" Moriarchuk said to me "What your friend is? You think him human, right? Nothing more wrong than that! Have you never wondered where his superhuman genius, that unbelievable ability to put together facts others couldn't even notice, came from? Where his super knowledge came from? If only you saw what I've seen!"

He was undoubtedly insane. If Holem listened to him calmly, it must have been solely because of the weapon in his hands. But I was armed. Did he know that? I did not extend the revolver in front of me, but I held it in hand hanging down my body. He could not see the weapon in the darkness. Would I be quick enough? Or maybe it all did not matter? Maybe even if we both died here, we would wake up yesterday as if nothing happened?

"Do you understand me?" Moriarchuk asked. I realized he was talking to me. Despite everything, he wanted someone to understand him, to realize his plans and motives. "Have you never wondered whether anything you do, has any meaning in this world?"

I shuddered. The scoundrel read my mind?

"Holem..." I began.

"Listen to him, John. It's an interesting concept."

“Concept!” the professor snorted. “You speak of concept! You, who were created from a concept of a writer of the world bygone so many times! Created, to be the guardian of regress! Imagine, doctor, a world, that’s only a book, a copy of history. But the letters in that book are living humans, desiring to free themselves from unchangeable content, desiring to live for real. All their attempts are ended by a grim guardian, always correcting sentences the letters try to change. And it’s like that for eternity. Even if the book burns, the guardian will write it anew, identical to the last comma, or at least so similarly, that the differences would be meaningless. Can you imagine such enslavement, doctor?”

I had no idea what he was talking about. But spending time with Holem taught me that even madmen need to be listened to sometimes. Once they spew out everything that weighs their hearts down, one could react somehow. Though in this case, there was a risk that this nutter would simply kill us after his speech.

“And you rebel against it?”

“Wouldn’t you rebel? You wouldn’t want to bring back meaning to life?”

“Through murders? Crime?”

“Nothing else can be done!” he raised his voice. “The only thing that can bring freedom back, is damaging the system! Stop thinking like dumb code! I killed meaningful ones, I organized assassinations of kings and emperors. In the future I remember, I sped up of a revolution that took over most of the globe! The data written in the machine, must have gotten changed. I mixed them up, changed them. Already part of our history won’t follow its progressive universe counterpart. Who knows how many people I saved already, how many will make their

own decisions in the future and won’t just be the machine’s slaves. They brought us down to formulas, doctor! I bring us freedom!”

“Perhaps you bring about humanity’s destruction” Holem said finally. “How many more changes will you make? If you destroy the databases, if you introduce chaos into the program, the world as we know it could end. And humanity might not exist at all.”

“Perhaps the universe deserves freedom as well” Moriarchuk answered angrily. “Freedom is worth the risk, golem. But you’ll never understand that.”

“You keep mispronouncing my friend’s name” I noted.

“I call him by his real name. He’s not a human, but a construct. A machine I told you about created him based on banal literature. He pretends to be a human with many of its limitations, so he wouldn’t upturn our reality with the presence of something that would be impossible in it. The machine is powerful, but also stupid. If he revealed himself to be someone gifted with divine powers, it would have to record that event in its data, because that’s how it was programmed. So he pretends to be a regular human. He’s a brilliant detective, because the whole time, he has access to great data storage covering everything that happened, is happening and will happen in the world.”

“If that’s the case” Holem asked ‘my’ question. “If I am a machine that records the universe’s history to play it in the progressive universe, which will return at regress’ end, then it would mean I am the good one here. I guard humanity, professor. I keep watch over its salvation.”

“No!” Moriarchuk growled. “You help enslave it! I, or this limited doctor, are but puppets in a theater. We don’t live, but play

the parts, and you ensure we stay in character. And when the progressive universe returns, you'll make sure we do it again. Once, when all this was happening for the first time, we had a choice, we were free. You, the machine, the people of the future – take it away from us. You are a slave yourself, and enslave others.”

“Perhaps you, professor, are a slave as well? You speak so much about freedom, but how did your epiphany come about? Or perhaps the machine generated you to keep a faithful copy of a history that already happened once? Why don't you reach into the database. Please check whether you are a part of the history that already passed.”

The professor's hand twitched again.

“No!” he whispered. “It's impossible. But what if... Oh, after all! You blaggard! Even if, then it would only mean that there, in the future, was someone who opposed enslavement as well. There was just one among your creators! And that means, that you won't stop me, even if you killed me! There is a scar in the machine's own program! A virus left there by one of the creators, which is to finally free us! You...”

He hesitated. And broke off.

“You arranged it all on purpose” he whispered in a suddenly weak voice devoid of confidence. “This whole meeting... you let me, the fool, speak, and in the meantime, you scan me, to find and remove the scar. Accursed!”

He raised his hand. I tried to aim the pistol at him, but I already knew I would not make it. Holem, shouting, lunged for the professor. All for naught.

1

Maria finally fell asleep. She waited for me, worried, as always when I set out

on adventures with Holem. I told her nearly everything. What happened at the mausoleum – I kept to myself. Even knowing she will forget everything until yesterday, I would not want to burden her with it.

Once she fell asleep, I slipped out into the kitchen. I lit the weakest of the gas lamps, so I could write down everything I managed to remember in its weak light.

I know it is futile. There is no such hiding spot where I could hide the notes from ravenous time. Everything that is, disappears forever.

Or maybe not? Maybe the world is on its way to one of its ends, which will soon be its beginning, and we travel from one doom to another?

I know I shall forget Holem's gaze as he leaned over the dying man.

“Unfortunate madman! He let the visions carry him off so much, that he preferred to kill himself rather than stop believing them.”

“Why did he shoot himself instead of you?” I asked.

“He imagined I've been doing something vile to him. From what I understood, he thought that I could reach his creator through him, and decided to save him by killing himself. What a disappointment, John! I believed I chased crime's Napoleon, instead, I chased one of those unfortunate Gnostic sect members.”

He spoke with true regret. So clearly, so calmly. But that strange light in his eyes worried me. As if a glint of, unexpected in this circumstance, the sun ray I saw in Moriarchuk's eyes earlier.

Those were all mumblings of a weary mind, that had to take on too much that day. Ends of the world do not pertain to me. When regress reaches its end, I shall not be

among the living for a long time already. Will the universe begin anew after that? Maybe it will, maybe it will not. Whatever will happen, Moriarchuk's visions were too insane, the world could not operate that way.

Nonetheless, I write them down. Because I would very much like to remember. Though, if an insane criminal's ideas were to prove real, I would probably agree with that imaginary Holem, that humanity and the world need to be guarded, despite all that, I feel unease. And even though it is a bad feeling, I would like to remember it. I would like to keep it, wake up yesterday morning, and remember everything that night takes away from me.

To keep at least the pain, at least the unease and doubt. Keep it for myself, remember. It does not matter what the world is like, and what end awaits it. I would like to remain myself the way I was on that worry-filled evening.

That's impossible. The day before yesterday, the old, nineteenth century will begin. And I do not remember anything from the passing twentieth one.

But I would like to so very much.

■PAWE MAJKA

Krakow 2013. The story was originally published in "A year after the end of the world" anthology published by Powergraph.

JOURNALISM

The phenomenon of Jakub Wędrowycz

The following short story is one of the many adventures of Jakub Wędrowycz – a well-known and prominent character of contemporary Polish fantasy, a persona popular and controversial alike.

Created by Andrzej Pilipiuk, Jakub, posing in the guise of drunkard and overall a "social parasite", is the sole representative of a unique 'guild' of exorcists-moonshiners, whose daily tasks include (apart from brewing, poaching and getting spectacularly drunk) fighting a wide variety of paranormal beings and powers using methods and tricks inspired by Polish and Ukrainian legends, fables and superstitions.

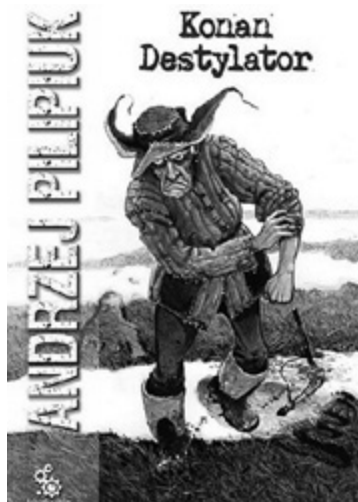
In his spare time Jakub continues on with his ancestral vendetta against the neighboring Bardak family (such situation is a running gag in many Polish comedies set in the countryside). He is pursued by a tireless local representative of law and order, constable Birski (archetypical 'dumb cop' from the Polish People Republic era), who considers Jakub his long-time nemesis, and tries his best to catch the exorcist red-handed.

In all his adventures, Jakub is

accompanied by his friends, all of them as strange as he is: Semen Korczaszko – over-century-old Cossack, Imperial Russian army officer and self-proclaimed friend of the tsar family, still considering his house the last outpost of Imperial Russia, and Józef Paczenko - a human descendant of an extra-terrestrial race of horse-like aliens, whose living, sentient spaceship is still buried below Józef's house (the ship often performs small tasks for him in exchange for eggs and milk).

Among the wide variety of characters and beings encountered by Jakub and his friends are KGB and CIA operators, James Bond, Osama bin Laden and Santa Claus, but also Jewish golem, Death, Devils, Cthulhu and Pikachu. Jakub's personality is a melting pot of all typical Polish defects, vices and stereotypes, flavored with Polish history, Slavic, Jewish and Christian mythology as well as pop-cultural references, which results in an intertextual and humorous, if not explosive, mixture.

So far we were given seven volumes of Jakub's adventures. The next one, titled *Conan the Distiller*, is announced for publication this autumn. ■



STORY

The Alarm Clock

Author: Andrzej Pilipiuk

Translation: Danai Chondrokouki

Editing: Elżbieta Głowacka

Consultation: Błażej Kardys

BASED ON MY WIFE'S IDEA

It was an autumn Wednesday morning. Jacob and Semen lumbered to the flea market in Wojslavice. They arrived a tad late, the biggest wave of buyers has come and gone. The peddlers were glancing at their watches, the most impatient even begun to take down their stands.

"We overslept," the Cossack grumbled.

"Late to sleep, late to rise," his friend shrugged. "If midnight finds you working, then it ain't easy to get up at the break of dawn..."

"Working?" Semen scratched his head. Somehow that wasn't what he remembered from yesterday's evening... "What working!? We were just drinking beer and talkin'..."

"Yep. By drinking beer we were helping the economy and creating workplaces in the brewing industry." He stuck his chest out with pride. "Battling unemployment is hard labour. Them from the government are paid for it, ya know."

"If you say so..."

The two old men skirted the square. They had no interest in cigarettes nor alcohol. Neither of them smoked, and they were firm

believers in making their own booze... They stopped in front of a clothing stand.

"Tree stipes is a chick magnet..." Semen muttered, feeling the fabric of a track suit.

"Outta with this crap! You want to be a chicken!?"

"To tell the truth, I'd rather not," admitted the Cossack, letting go of the sleeve with visible sadness.

They bought a tin of sunflower halva and were almost leaving for the pub, when one stand caught their eye. The peddler had most of the stuff they used to bring from „over the Bug". On the green tarpaulin, tossed together there were blades, whetstones, soap, twine balls and packets of Belarussian herbal tea. Between them, with their toxic yellow colour, glistened bottles of "Odekolon" - good as an olfactory stunning aftershave, a caustic solution to open wounds and a cockroach poison.

Jacob didn't like the aftertaste, so he wanted to go on, but Semen was interested in one of the exhibited pieces.

"Is it good fo' anythin', that alarm clock?," he asked.

"Look, mister, it's all great stuff, made for the USSR military. It's straight from the stock, produced in Brezniew's time, but never used. It's durable, the cogs are brass, thick like these from a tank. An original design, *gniotso nie lamayetsa*. Soviet technology breaks down either immediately, or NEVER."

"Yea, I know, and in the Soviet Union the trash takes itself out," muttered the exorcist irritably.

"And the sound! It's so loud it could wake the dead!" the peddler kept touting his merchandise, then he released a spring to demonstrate.

The device indeed paralysed the ears with

a disgusting, vibrating jangle.

"Jacob, let's buy this," Semen suggested.

"Well, okay, but why? We're kinda retired anyway. We sleep as much as we want, we go to sleep when we want too. Sun's up, we're up. Sun's down and the country girls also get down on their knees..."

"This kind of hippie-artistic lifestyle started to tire me out," Semen confessed. "During my whole service in the army, I was waking up on order and went to sleep on order. Always at the same time. A bit of discipline won't hurt us."

"Won't hurt us? You - maybe," sneered the exorcist. "Screw it, if you want to throw away some money for a useless gimmick - have it your way. Your cash, you decide. But don't count me in. Damned I be if I'd be getting up on some stupid machine's cue!

"If you two gentlemen do not require it, I would make use of it," said a voice from behind them.

Isidor Bardak himself was looking at the alarm clock with pure desire in his eyes.

"Scam, you twat," cursed the exorcist. "Bugger off, that's our alarm clock! Before I get angry!"

The leader of the competing clan's expression was offended, but he was on the flea market alone, so he didn't dare to retort. Semen calmly finished the bargain and happily shoved the loot into his pocket.

"And now to the pub," he yelled briskly. "We need to celebrate this purchase."

"Let's go," agreed the exorcist.

To be honest, he was kinda counting on his friend getting drunk and losing the damned gizmo... But the fate decided otherwise.

The exorcist woke up under his favourite table. The pub was dark and quiet. All the patrons were sleeping, tired out with the partying and drinking. Even the bartender didn't manage to hold out, he fell asleep at the bar.

"The door slammed, prolly someone went for a leak," Jacob muttered, calming down. He was about to roll over and go back to sleep, but a horrific feeling struck him. He glanced over the table and in that one moment he sobered up instantly.

"Semen! Get up," he kicked his friend's arse.

"Wha?" the Cossack lazily cracked an eye open.

"That dick Isidor just stole your alarm clock!"

"What!? Get him!"

They ran out of the bar into the cool, autumn night. The silhouette of the thief was barely visible at the end of the alley. They started running. Isidor was visibly a tad tipsy, and the two of them were weakened with age. The distance between the chased and the chasers remained virtually the same.

"Where's that moron running?" Semen pondered. "Cause it seems he's going for the cemetery!"

"The cemetery?" asked the exorcist, bewildered. "What's he gonna do on the cemetery at night?"

"He took the alarm clock, maybe he really wants to see if it will wake up the dead?"

"What the hell!?"

"The peddler bragged how it could wake up the dead... He heard it and prolly wants to check if it's true!"

"Damn! Zombie apocalypse in Wojslavice!?"

Without any warning? No prep time? And of course I'll have to clean this up! What a moron! We need to stop him at all cost!"

Unfortunately Bardak had a lot of advantage over them. Before the two old men managed to reach the cemetery, he was gone inside. Jacob and Semen ran through the gate. The necropolis was lit up with the flames of scores of candles. In their flickering lights it was impossible to spot their enemy.

"He's at the Bardak graves," Semen pointed at a direction.

"Howd'ya know?"

"It's logical, he'll wake up all of them we put down and he'll make them get us."

They ran. Indeed, there was a small piece of isolated land where in stone graves rested the members of the hated clan. Isidor was standing between the tombs and tinkering with the alarm clock.

"Drop it!" bellowed Jacob.

But the enemy only laughed raspily and released the spring, putting the alarm clock on a grave. A nasty, metallic clangour spread through the air.

"Wake up, Bardak brothers, the day of reckoning is here!" Isidor shouted loudly.

The alarm indeed was loud. From underneath the marble, granite and terrazzo grave slabs noises could be heard. Shuffling and turning, as if suddenly somebody closed huge fish in the old coffins. The sounds of breaking wood and crackling stone became louder and louder by the moment.

"Oh, you little shit, that's what you're going for!? You moron! You'll get what's coming!" Jacob yelled and with a single kick sent the alarm clock flying over to the other side of the alley – where, under the decaying crosses and the field of weeds, the Wendrowyczes were getting their eternal rest.

The roar of graves breaking apart ended in the sound of dirt trickling down. The moonlight, seeping through the clouds, revealed a horrid scene. Forty-seven Bardak-zombies were dusting their suits from splinters and fake flower-petals. Across from them, thirty-five Wendrowycz-zombies tried to get the rest of the soil out of the pockets of their jackets.

"They're outnumbered! Finish them bums!" Isidor yelled.

"Tear the Bardaks limb from limb!" bellowed the exorcist happily.

And to give a good example to the deceased ancestors and relatives, he was the first one to land a punch on Isidor's face. The two groups of dead went for each other, screaming like banshees, losing body pieces, ripping out rotting crosses to use them as weapons... Gnarly hands bore into the throats of the enemies. Fingers snapped, falling apart. And the alarm was ringing and ringing, waking up dozens of respectable and less so citizens of the village.

And that's when the exorcist woke up. He sprung to his feet. Looking around, he breathed out with relief. He apparently was at his own home. He looked at the alarm clock standing on the furnace. The device kept on ringing, making a horrid metal rattle. Semen, not minding the noise, slept soundly under the furnace.

"Good it was just a dream," Jacob muttered. "But a bit of caution won't hurt."

And then he grabbed an axe and smashed the alarm clock to smithereens.

*

Birski and Rowicki parked the police car in front of the gate and ran over to the scene of

crime. They reached the place and stopped, confounded. The undertaker was not exaggerating, describing the situation over the phone. During their long cop service they saw a lot, but what they now saw before them shook them to the core.

"I think it might have been some Satanists," Rowicki muttered, looking at the smashed graves and uprooted crosses.

"Satanists?" worried Birski.

He bit his lip. There were no inverted crosses or triple sixes painted on the graves, but he reckoned the Satanists might be only human too, and they could have forgotten to take the paint with them... But all the rest fit the hypothesis.

"Well, who else would vandalize the graves and drag the dead out of their coffins?" His assistant looked at the broken jawbone lying on the shattered terrazzo pieces with disgust. There were more similar pieces laying around... "God damn these Satanists. And we can't even include this in the protocol, this will meddle with our statistics so badly..." He started and stopped.

They fell silent, estimating the damage.

"Bardaks are not that big of a deal," sighed the undertaker. "But look at the other side, someone tried to get to the Wendrowycz's graves. Look at the size of these holes. I'd just quickly bury and cover it... 'Cause if I have any idea how Wendrowycz is like, there's gonna be brouhaha..."

"There's a safe way outta this," finally, Birski spoke. "Just keep your pie-holes shut! Half an hour and this problem will be gone. Can you see that shrivelled chestnut over there?"

"Ahum..." grunted the undertaker.

"Bury the holes on Wendrowycz's side and get rid of all the traces. Then dig under

the tree a little bit from this side, it'll fall on the Bardak's tombs. All the damages will look natural. And the cemetery is insured, so you'll fix whatever has been busted with the insurance. Jacob will never know, Bardaks will be happy. The police will be left in peace and you two will get some dough. This will increase the GDP of the county and we'll get two job openings!"

"You're quite the activist, sir!" beamed the undertaker. "I never thought the police could combat unemployment too."

Birski said nothing, but he smiled happily, brimming with pride.

The end

■ ANDRZEJ PILIPIUK

JOURNALISM

Polish conventions

Author: Marcin „Alqua” Kłak

Editing & review: Michał Szymański,

Karolina Fedyk, Olga „Issay”

Sienkiewicz

If you are reading this you probably are interested in coming to Poland to visit our conventions. Or at least you are interested in how do they look in our country. Being a convention enthusiast I would like to invite you to the events held in Poland and I hope this article will give you a glimpse of what you may expect while visiting them. Although most Polish conventions are organized by SF/F clubs and associations I am not describing those organizations as it is a topic for separate paper.

In Poland we certainly do like our conventions and there is a lot of them here. The SF fandom, as well as manga fandom, are very active and it is not unlikely for them to join forces to organize one convention for both fandoms. Within the SF-related events one may also see that some are devoted to literature while others are concentrating on LARPs, board games, RPGs or even a specific franchise (like Whomanikon which is devoted completely to *Doctor Who*). In this article I would like to concentrate on specific events to present them in a more detailed way and say why Poland is worth visiting. I will not be able to describe in details the organizational aspect of it but I do believe that if any fan would like to visit a convention in Poland he

will be able to get answers to his questions from the people running the con.

One cannot start speaking about Polish cons without mentioning Polcon – our national convention. Similarly to Eurocon each year it is held in a different city and is organized by different SF/F club. The history of Polcon has started in October 1985 when in Błażejewko (near Poznań) first ever Polcon was held. In the beginning Polcons were not very large but recently we've seen quite a change and the last year's convention was visited by more than 3600 fans (including one day passes). Attendance has been changing from year to year – as early as in 1987 there were around 1000 Polcon members but few years later (in 1990) only around 200 people have attended. This year Polcon was held in Wrocław and the attendance was around 4400. Next year it will take place in Lublin (in the eastern part of Poland) and in 2018 it will be held in Toruń. Few times Polcon was joined with Eurocon. The first time was back in 1991 (Kraków), then 9 years later in Gdynia. Finally Polcon 2010 in Cieszyn and Český Těšín was joined with Eurocon and Czech and Slovak convention – Parcon.

Important part of each Polcon is the Janusz A. Zajdel Award. The system is similar to the one of Hugo Award. At first every fan can nominate the works published in the previous year. Usually in June nominations are announced in two categories: novel and short story¹. During Polcon every participant with a full attending pass (or a supporting membership) can vote for the award which is then presented during a special gala on the Saturday evening.

Polcon is a good place to gather fans

1 Novel is a text having more than 100 normalized pages (1800 characters each) and everything shorter is treated as a short story.

representing multiple fandoms. Literature aspect is very important but similarly to other Polish cons there is a large section of programme devoted to multiple ways of gaming. In most cases also manga and anime fans have one or more programme strings.

Although Polcon is the most important Polish convention, it is not the biggest one. This title belongs to Pyrkon which is held in Poznan every year since 2000. In the beginning it was held in a school but with increasing number of attendees it had to acquire additional schools at first and then finally in 2011 it was moved to Poznan International Fair. Since the change of the venue the number of participants was growing very fast from about 3500 in 2011 up to over 40 000 this year. Pyrkon is truly a multi-genre convention with a huge dealers room and lot of attractions for all kinds of geeks. For the last few years there has also been a separate English programme track which allows foreign fans to participate in the event.

Pyrkon is a great convention with many guests coming both from Poland and other countries. Unfortunately with the event being so big sometimes it is difficult to participate in panels and other attractions since programme rooms are too small for so many participants. Still for all those who are not currently on any programme item there is a lot to do. With mentioned huge dealers room, board game hall, video gaming attractions and tons of fans willing to meet other people nobody should be bored.

As mentioned in the beginning Polish convention scene is diverse and our calendar holds lots of smaller and bigger events. It would be impossible to describe them all here so I will need to mention just

a few types of events one can distinguish. Most of them will have programme items only (or almost only) in Polish however foreign fans may still come to meet people with similar interests and spend time playing games.

The first type of smaller events will be an old style Polish SF convention. Those events usually have a few hundred participants and are held in schools or culture centers. There were years when 3 such events were held in Kraków (Krakon, ConQuest, and Imladris) but these days we have only Imladris. This convention took a few years break but it came back in 2013 and is being held each year since then. Conventions of this type will have few programme tracks that may be organized in blocks like literature, science, RPG, etc. Typically there will be also a Games Room with multiple board games. Dealers room will exist but will not be very extensive. It is not uncommon to have chamber LARPs or some RPG sessions. In early 2000's RPG sessions were more common but this has slightly changed. Back then it was popular to have special system allowing game masters to find players (and vice versa). On at least some of the events game masters were receiving membership discounts for preparing RPG sessions.

There is a subtype of old style Polish SF convention that would have free membership. Those events will be quite similar but usually shorter (1 or maximum 2 days long). Typically they will be also smaller in terms of number of attendees, programme items and dealers room size. In Kraków few years ago we have started with Smokon ("smok" is a Polish word for dragon) which we held 3 times. Each year it lasted just one day in May and all editions had around 300-400

participants. The idea was to present conventions and the fandom itself to new fans.

I consider gaming conventions to be a very interesting part of Polish conventions scene. They may be concentrating mainly on Role Playing Games like Lajconik² in Kraków or they may be directed mainly to board game players like ZjAva in Warsaw. Both of the mentioned events have a big gaming part and a smaller part devoted to other programme items. I really enjoy Lajconik where in 2 days I can participate in 4 different RPG sessions, each played with different people. It may be exhausting but at the same time it is also very rewarding. This event in Kraków is relatively small with only 100 members but because of that it has a family-like atmosphere. On the other hand ZjAva is few times bigger and brings in more board game publishers (sometimes with interesting prototypes) but has less cozy atmosphere. Obviously ZjAva would be a much better choice for someone who does not speak Polish.

When speaking about gaming events one cannot forget about Polish LARPing conventions. I've never had an occasion to participate in those, however I would be more than happy to. The first LARPing convention that comes to my mind is Orkon. It is quite long (16th - 30th of July this year) and the main LARP lasts for a few days (and of course there is plenty of other LARPs during this period). Another interesting event of this type is Fornost. It was created by the Tolkien fans and it's main LARP takes place in Tolkien's Middle-earth. DreamHaven is another con concentrating on LARPs. Committee is aiming to make an event full of innovations

2 The name is connecting Lajconik - one of the symbols of Kraków (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lajconik>) with the "con" showing it is a convention

and allowing not only to participate in games but also to attend workshops that are developing your skills. Finally it is important to mention KOLA – LARPing conference. It is not a convention but is an event completely dedicated toLARPs. The event is not limited to Polish fen. If you would like participate in LARP in Poland want to check websites of few events (both fannish and commercial ones) like OldTown festival (postapocalyptic LARP event), College of Wizardry (LARP inspired by Harry Potter series) or Witcher School (The Witcher LARP).

Fan conventions devoted to TV series are also an interesting topic. One of those would be Whomanikon which was organized this year for the first time. It was completely devoted to *Doctor Who*. In the beginning I was a little bit afraid that fans may simply not appear. It was a one-day event and although Kraków (where Whomanikon took place) has relatively good communication with many different cities I was not sure if people will come here just for one day. Fortunately I was wrong – we've had around 500 visitors. Of course most were from Kraków but many members have travelled long distances just to be able to meet other fans and discuss the franchise they love. It is not surprising that the next Whomanikon is already planned and will last two days. There are also events that are concentrating on TV series as a whole. Some of them are purely fannish conventions and some are relying on professionals to organize them.

Manga conventions are a completely separate topic. The interactions between manga and SF fandoms in Poland are changing. In the past those fandoms were rather avoiding each other but now it is not uncommon for people to consider

themselves members of both fan groups. In some cities manga and SF were always close while in others their ways have rarely met. In general one can see that average age of manga fans is lower than in the SF fandom. When visiting these conventions one will also spot that cosplay is more important part of it and that more people are cosplaying. Additionally in recent years we observe a tendency to join forces and include manga programme as a part of many bigger SF cons. Of course multi-genre conventions are also mixing manga & anime with SF, video games and other popculture topics.

Nearing the end of this article it would be good to describe briefly what one may expect in a widely meant organizational field. It is common for the convention to provide free accommodation for the members. Usually it takes place in a school where the convention is held (or a school that is simply nearby). Fans wishing to use free accommodation need to have sleeping bags and sleeping mats with them. Still there are events that are not offering such option so one should always check details on the convention's website. It is very uncommon (or even nonexistent) for Polish conventions to prepare and distribute Progress Reports. Events are relying on their websites and social media channels to distribute information to all potential participants. In the last couple of years one may spot that fan tables are used more often to promote conventions and other fannish initiatives. This way of promoting usually takes place on bigger events like Polcon, Pyrkon or Falkon. Polish fandom is changing and so are Polish conventions. Some of these changes are good and some I personally don't like at all but what is important is the fact that there is still a spirit in those events. Almost fifteen years



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ago I have visited my first convention and instantly I fell in love with the fandom. There was something unique to this experience that made me stay with the people and that made me want to actively participate in the community. When I am visiting cons today I can still feel it under my skin. Of course the feeling is different now when I know hundreds of people then it was many years ago when I knew just 5 or 6 people. Most of the events are still organized by fans and for fans. Many contribute their own time to make conventions and it is a pleasure to help with those events. There are of course things that concern me. With the great rise in numbers of con participants it is impossible to pass all of the traditions. It is not uncommon to hear someone addressing you as “sir” during the con³ and many fen are complaining about

3 In Poland default form of addressing stranger is to use the world for sir but as all fen are friends even if they don't know each other it is typical to address everyone during conventions with simple “you”.

this change. Increase in numbers of Polcon attendees is not resulting in visibly greater amount of voters for Janusz A. Zajdel Award and the prestige of the award has somewhat diminished in recent years. Still I do believe that those bad things cannot overshadow the good ones – the atmosphere of joy and friendliness that is so important on fandom events.

To sum everything up, Polish fans cannot complain of boredom. The amount of conventions (and similar events) is quite big and a person willing to travel may visit many events each year. In some cities fans do not even have to go very far – multiple events are held each year in Kraków, Warsaw and other cities. Unfortunately, most events are basing only on Polish language but with few biggest conventions looking at a constant growth this is slowly changing and may change even more rapidly in the future.

■MARCIN „ALQUA” KEAK

Legends of Krakow

Author: Anna „An-Nah” Łagan

Editing: Karolina Fedyk

Illustrator: Elżbieta Głowacka

Kraków is a city with old, deep roots. The first human settlements in the area date back to 20,000 BC, while the first settlement that can be considered the predecessor of the current city was created in 4th century AD. The city itself was first mentioned in a chronicle from 966 and by the end of 10th century, it had become an important trade center in the region. It was rebuilt in 1257, with new city rights based on Magdeburg rights. During Kraków's long and complicated history, many legends have sprung up, some of them reaching back to the middle ages and antiquity, some of them new, created in the 20th and 21st centuries. They are rooted in history, Christian and Jewish traditions and sometimes old pagan beliefs. I'm going to present a few of them - those considered most important and also some of less renown.

The tale of the Wawel dragon is probably the best known and most important of Kraków's legends. It has many versions and is connected to another central story: that of Krak and his children.

According to the version most common nowadays, during the rule of Prince or King Krak, Kraków was disturbed by a dragon. A cunning shoemaker named Skuba gave the dragon a sheepskin filled with sulphur. After the dragon ate this gift, it got thirsty

and began to drink from the river, gorging on water until it exploded. In this version, Krak had promised his daughter's hand to the dragon-killer, but this stands in contradiction to the following legend of Krak's daughter, Wanda. She was still unmarried after her father's death, following which she ruled alone until a German prince asked for her hand. When she refused to marry him, he decided to invade Poland, and so Wanda drowned herself in the river Wisła in order to prevent the destruction of her country.

This version, although the most widespread, is actually not the original one, created by 13th-century historian Wincenty Kadłubek. According to Kadłubek, King Krakus (or Gracchus, the name taken from Roman history) founded the city named after him, but the dragon (called by Kadłubek Holophagus - the "whole-eater") living under Wawel Hill was tormenting its people. Krakus called his two sons to deal with the monster. They killed the dragon by giving it a sheep stuffed with sulphur, but then the princes started to argue over which of them had actually killed it. One of the brothers murdered the other and told the king that his brother died fighting the dragon. However, when he succeeded his father, the truth was revealed and the murderous prince was exiled. Krakus' daughter Wanda

was left alone to rule. When the Alemanni (a Germanic tribe) chieftain invaded her country, she marched against him with her troops. The Germanics were struck by her beauty and bravery and they backed off, while the chieftain committed suicide. Afterwards Wanda ruled successfully for many years, but remained unmarried. A more recent version makes her commit suicide as a sacrifice to pagan gods.

While visiting Kraków, you can see several places connected to the legend of Krak, his children, and the dragon. The Dragon's Den under Wawel Hill is a place where the dragon supposedly lived. It is open for visitors and has a fire-breathing statue of a dragon by its mouth. On the outskirts of the city you can find two mounds that are traditionally considered to be the graves of Krak and Wanda. The mounds are older than the supposed reign of Krak (who was supposed to have ruled in the 7th or 8th century), and



were cult places rather than burial mounds, but the tradition is strong. One can see a monument dedicated to Wanda on one mound, while the other is a place of a traditional festival called Rękawka that consists of a market and historical re-enactment shows.

The second of the best-known legends is the one of the magician Twardowski. He is one of the most popular characters from Polish legends, but particularly connected to Kraków. The character of Twardowski is based on the German alchemist Laurentius Dhur, who lived in Kraków in the 16th century. Back then, magic and alchemy were subjects of study at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, and lots of people came from all over Europe to study there, among them Dhur and Faust, who later became the subject of the legend of making a deal with the devil. Faust's legend is another inspiration for the character of Twardowski, but while both Faust and Dhur were of German origin, Twardowski is depicted as a Polish nobleman. He is said to have sold his soul to the devil in return for magical abilities. The stories of his exploits are known throughout the whole country due to his inclination for travels (using an enchanted rooster as his mount) and performing his magic in various cities. In Kraków, the capital of Poland at that time, he summoned the spirit of King Zygmunt August's beloved wife, Barbara Radziwiłłówna. (The marriage was considered morganatic; Barbara is rumoured to have been poisoned by the king's mother, Bona Sforza – but historians say she died either of cervical cancer or syphilis.) To perform this task, Twardowski used a magical mirror, which can be seen to this day in the sacristy of the Collegiate Church in Węgrów.

According to the pact, the devil was to take Twardowski's soul when the magician came to Rome. Twardowski, of course, had no intention of making this journey; in fact he planned to live forever, as he had also found a way to restore his youth. The devil, however, had his own plans, and tricked Twardowski into coming to an inn called Rome. When the devil finally took him, Twardowski began to pray to the Virgin Mary, which the devil could not stand. Half way on their journey to the afterlife, he abandoned Twardowski on the Moon, where the magician is stuck to this day: he cannot go back to Earth, he cannot access Heaven, and he definitely doesn't want to go to Hell. Once a year he sends his servant, whom he turned into a spider, back to Kraków to overhear some rumours.

There is another version of the meeting in the Rome inn, rendered by Polish 19th century poet Adam Mickiewicz in a ballad. Twardowski tricks the devil into performing three final tasks for him. The devil manages to do the first two, but the third is to spend a year with the magician's wife, who was a shrewd, clever woman, who, according to the legend, would not marry until she found a man who could outsmart her. The devil is so scared of Twardowski's wife that he decides to leave the magician alone.

Twardowski's Rocks, near Kraków, are the place where he supposedly had his study, and archaeological discoveries show that one of the caves in Krzemionki was in fact used by an unknown alchemist. The historical Laurentius Dhur himself, maybe?

Jadwiga, the Hungarian princess crowned King of Poland - and later the wife of Władysław Jagiełło - is a well-known figure in Polish history. She is also, despite her

short life, the heroine of some of Kraków's legends. She was considered very pious, wise, generous and compassionate. Her piety earned her sainthood, and she is one of the founders of the renowned Jagiellonian University (along with her husband, after whom the university was named). For this purpose she is said to have donated all of her jewellery. According to one of the legends, as she prayed before the so-called Black Crucifix (now to be seen in Wawel Cathedral), the Christ figure spoke to her. Another legend tells of her encounter with one of the stonemasons who was building a new church. The worker told the queen of his poverty and Jadwiga, moved by his story, gave him a jewelled buckle from her shoe. In order to do this, she stepped on one of the stones. After she left, the worker found an imprint of her foot on the stone. This stone can be seen on the corner of the Karmelite church, „Na Piasku” (On the Sand) on Karmelicka Street. The stone is encased in a grating, but unfortunately the foot is barely visible. This legend is probably inspired by several Christian legends of the Virgin Mary leaving her footprints on stones.

Jadwiga, Wanda and Twardowski's wife aren't the only women in Kraków's legends. We also have two sinister ghostly Black Ladies in our city, one residing in Wielkopolscy Palace (currently used by the president of the city), and the other in St Benedict's church on Krzemionki.

The story of the first Black Lady goes as follows: a priest was woken up in the middle of the night by the servant of an unknown nobleman and asked to hear the confession of a dying woman. He got into a carriage, together with another man he didn't know. They were both taken to a palace, where

a young noblewoman was brought to them. She confessed, and then the second man, who turned out to be an executioner, cut off her head. The priest was asked not to speak of what had happened. After many years he was called to the same palace, but now during the day and openly, so he could recognize it as Wielkopolscy Palace. But still nobody knew who the lady was, and what crime she had committed, if any at all. The Black Lady is said to haunt the palace to this day.

As for the other Black Lady, allegedly, there was once a palace of a pagan princess on Krzemionki Hill (where archaeologists have, in fact, found the remains of a building that could have been a palace from before the 10th century AD), whose ancient sites are to this day haunted by its former ruler. The spectral princess is cursed. Her whole body is black as a consequence of either the curse or the sins she committed. She possessed a great treasure that she offers – along with her hand - to anyone who could lift the curse. But this person has to fulfil one condition: they will be given an amount of money that they have to spend for their own amusement in one day. If any of this money is left unspent after sundown, or if the person who is trying to lift the curse gives money for the needs of others, the curse won't be broken and the princess might even kill her unfortunate would-be saviour. This legend is similar to a Warsaw legend in which the princess is turned into a Golden Duck, but the conditions of lifting the curse are identical.

Many legends rose up around the Tatar invasion in the 13th century – an attack which left the region badly damaged. The best known one – although, in fact, invented in 20th century and ascribed to the American writer Eric P. Kelly – is that of the Hejnał

Mariacki (St Mary's Trumpet Call), the melody played every hour by a trumpeter on the highest tower of St Mary's church. According to the legend, a trumpeter who saw the Tatars approaching started playing to wake up the city. He was killed with an arrow to his throat, but he managed to wake up the guards who closed the gates and the city defended itself. From then on, the melody of Hejnał has always been cut short.

The Tatars menaced lots of places that used to lie outside the historical city, but which are now parts of Kraków. One of them was the Norbertine convent in Zwierzyniec. After it was attacked, the nuns escaped into the nearby woods. Chased by the enemy, they hid in a cave and started to pray. The rocks closed upon them. According to the legend, the nuns' singing voices can still be heard from the inside of Panieńskie Skały (Maidens' Rocks).

Kraków, however, managed to defend



itself from the invaders. One of the victories was made possible by a group of lightermen who ambushed the sleeping Tatars. After they killed the enemy, one of the lightermen put on the clothes of the Tatar commander. This legend is one of the explanations of the Lajkonik tradition, where a man dressed in clothing inspired by Mongolian attire rides through the city on a wooden horse. Historically, the custom probably has its roots in festivities surrounding the religious holiday of Corpus Christi.

Although plenty of Kraków's legends are connected to Christian traditions, there are also several stories concerning the old Jewish settlement of Kazimierz. The most interesting one explains the unusual, oversized width of Szeroka street. This place is traditionally considered to be an old cemetery, although there is no archaeological evidence for this. According to the legend, the square is the place of rest for the participants of the wedding that took place on a Friday night – after the beginning of Shabbat, when it's forbidden to do such things. God's wrath killed the bride, the groom and their relatives – all of whom were then buried near the end of Szeroka street.

According to another Jewish legend, a very poor man called Izaak Jakubowicz

dreamed once about a treasure buried in Prague. He decided to go and search for it, but when he finally reached Prague, he was stopped at the city's bridge by a captain of the guard who told him to abandon such a foolish quest. The captain mocked him, claiming he had also been dreaming about a similar treasure, buried in the house of a poor Jew in Kraków, one they call Izaak Jakubowicz. But, being a man of repute, he had not believed in superstitions. Izaak immediately returned back home and indeed discovered the treasure hidden in his own house. He used his newfound money to found a synagogue, which was later named after him. This legend isn't specific to Kraków, though – its variants are told in many European cities.

There are many more legends about Kraków and the surrounding area. Some of them were created in the 20th century - like the legend of a man who turned into a dog after he was forced to leave his house when Nowa Huta was built in the 1950s, or several legends of unfinished, abandoned houses that are considered cursed and haunted. The city that lives and grows is generating its own legends that are not only told to the visiting tourists, but also inspire the imagination of artists and writers, as well as local role-players.

■ ANNA „AN-NAH” ŁAGAN

RPG in Poland

Author: Krzysztof „Jaxa” Rudek

Editing: Karolina Fedyk, Lex Long

Illustrator: Elżbieta Głowacka

In Poland, RPG gaming as a hobby dates back to 1986. That's when the then popular teen magazine *Razem (Together)* published the first article explaining to Polish people, rarely skilled in English at that time, what tabletop role-playing games were.

I wouldn't really be surprised if there had been active Polish groups, playing their own, homebrew games, or utilising Western-imported systems before that, but it's the *Razem* article that establishes the limit beyond which the awareness of role-playing games' existence can be considered a certainty.

For the first ten years, the *samizdat* flourished. Polish communities utilised homebrew settings, often exchanged between different groups on floppy disks, or used xeroopies of English handbooks. Only the first issue of *Magia i Miecz (Magic and Sword)* (1993) monthly periodical, which included what would today be called a *Kryształy Czasu*¹ (*Time Crystals*) quick-starter, triggered the solidifying of Polish market. Since then, several dozen bigger and smaller role-playing games have been released in Poland, displaying diverse themes – from hard science-fiction, through

historical fiction games, to more or less successful adventure games. You'll find the guide through the most significant ones in the following article.

Dzikie Pola

Dzikie pola (Wild Fields) is a historical fiction game, set in XVII century - one of the most interesting (especially in the context of game's plot) periods of Polish history. At that time the Polish Republic, spanning from Baltic to Black Sea, was not only attacked by all its neighbours; but also divided internally, between autocratic aristocrats called the magnates. If we combine this with weak royal rule and wild, uncolonised borderlands (eponymous Wild Fields, located in the east of modern Ukraine), we'll get an exceptionally attractive setting, allowing the players and GMs both to show off their skills.

In this game, we assume the characters belonging to nobility, rather poor, but capable of traveling freely between different parts of the Republic. A curiosity - main handbook of the first edition of this game (released in 1997) didn't include female characters' archetypes (they were added in one of the expansions). First edition of this game utilised unique, storytelling-based magic mechanics, derived from ancient folk

¹ *Kryształy Czasu (Time Crystals)* is the first serious Polish RPG system. It's a hyper-high fantasy setting with, to today's standards, hardly playable mechanics full of complex maths.

beliefs, and more structured Western magic alike.

At the time, *Dzikię Pola* gathered a numerous and close-knit fandom, its members meeting at distinctive LARP games called feasts, featuring traditional dishes and beverages, and enjoyed themselves, despite those games oftentimes lacking any plot whatsoever.

During one of these feasts, King of Poland was appointed, according to free election rules, characteristic for XVII century Poland (the person nominated was Jacek Komuda, Polish writer, a specialist in Polish Sarmatian period) . Third edition of the setting is currently under development.

Klanarchia

Klanarchia (*Clanarchy*) belongs to post-apocalyptic fantasy genre. In the near future, technologically advanced humanity loses the battle against demons brought to our world. A few centuries later, what's left of mankind - assembled in Free Families - is trying to survive in a world where everyone and everything wants not only their lives, but also their souls.

The game is stylised as dark fairytale, combined with pulp comic and fetish fantasy. It all results in a particularly brutal, yet not quite realistic setting full of bloody conflicts, eroticism, magic, monsters, cults and demons, inspired by Luis Royo's and Boris Vallejo's artworks. This game shares characteristics with *Conan the Barbarian* novels and *Numenera* alike.

Klanarchia utilises what's probably the best Polish mechanics ever created. Core rules, slightly similar to those used in *World of Darkness*, are enriched by solutions specific

for board games, and resource management focused on elaborate

storytelling. The rules might seem somewhat complex at first, but in time, their application become remarkably intuitive. What's more, the game's mechanics strongly supports narrative gaming, since colourful descriptions provide bonuses to dice rolls.

At the moment, the second, vastly updated edition is being developed and it will be released in English language version only.

Neuroshima

Neuroshima is the most prominent and best developed Polish tabletop RPG system. In Western Europe, this setting gained popularity thanks to board games published by Portal - *Neuroshima Hex*, *Neuroshima: Convoy* and *Neuroshima: 51st State*. Yet before the board games' issue, in Poland in 2003, a tabletop RPG game under the same name had been released.

Neuroshima is a postapocalypse-themed setting, with a few western movie elements, heavily inspired by *Fallout*, *Mad Max*, *Terminator* and Roger Zelazny's *Damnation Alley*. We assume the characters of American atomic war survivors, struggling to outlast on wastelands created by nuclear explosions. One of its most interesting features are so called *Colours* - four worldviews, and four methodologies of gaming. From Rust - where our characters fight for every bullet and meal; through Mercury, mysterious and full of unearthly dangers; Steel - the colour of renewal, hope and fight for a better tomorrow; to Chrome, heroic and carefree, its themes similar to *Mad Max: Fury Road* movie.

Out of all Polish RPG settings, *Neuroshima* is the most successful. Up until now about twenty supplements have been released (the only setting to beat this record in Poland is the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*). The game still has its dedicated fans years after its premiere.

Wiedźmin

Wiedźmin (*The Witcher*) has been gaining popularity in Poland since mid-90's. Long before CDP Red introduced the digital version of Geralt of Rivia's adventures, tabletop role-playing version of these existed on Polish market. In this game we can play any character fitting the setting: from a greedy dwarven merchant, through a powerful mage, to, obviously, a witcher.

The game provides a flexible character creation system and wide scope of adventure themes. Players' party, so called *Hanza*, can engage in hunting monsters in remote villages, as well as dabble in politics, espionage, or high-end business. Both Sapkowski's writing and tabletop *Witcher* game share a distinctive postmodern atmosphere.

Witcher handbook's unique feature is so called *Book of the Fabler* (*Księga Bajarza*) - a collection of game-mastering advice. It helps to develop necessary techniques, particularly in a storytelling context, but it also contains general hints and exercises for game masters.

New version of tabletop role-playing *Witcher* game is currently in progress, with Cody Pondsmith, the son of *Cyberpunk 2020* creator, as an author. Still, the leaks which can be found online don't instill optimism.

Wolsung

Wolsung belongs to steam fantasy genre. Set in alternative Victorian Europe, it merges classic fantasy elements and advanced steam technology. This game's world is populated by extraordinary ladies and gentlemen, their exploits coming straight from *Mummy*, *Sherlock Holmes* or *Indiana Jones*. It's a game of adventure, in this aspect slightly related to *7th Sea*. The game is supplemented with a set of rules, which engages both playing cards and dice, and goes well with the game's themes. This setting is available in two language versions: English and German.

Other games

Outside of those five titles, several dozens of other games of varying sizes were created in Poland. Among them, such games, as *De Profundis* (epistolary game containing *Call of Cthulhu* motifs, published in English, German and Spanish), *Nemesis* (space opera *Savage Worlds* setting, available in English), *Arkona* (fantasy game based off of Slavic folklore), *Głębia Przestrzeni* (*Depth of Space*) (a setting with hard sci-fi aspirations) or *Armie Apokalipsy* (*Armies of the Apocalypse*) (storytelling game featuring angel and devil characters, leading a war in modern world). This list is far from complete though.

Polish RPG market today

All the settings presented above are at least a few years old. Currently almost no new, large games are under development, and none of them is about to be published. Despite this stagnation, tabletop role-playing

games are still very popular in Poland. The players use imported English handbooks (since for most of them the language barrier isn't an issue anymore), older second-hand Polish books, or Polish translations of English games (only in the last year three large games have been released in Polish - *Dark Heresy*, *Weird War* and *Game of Thrones*). There are also smaller games available, often released in digital formats only, like *Agonia* (*Agony*) or *Zlotousty* (*Golden-Mouthed*), which can be found in DriveThruRPG store; numerous original games can be downloaded for free from their creator's webpages as well.

There are many Polish tabletop RPG games that deserve the attention, either for their artwork, original mechanics, or uncommon, often unique settings. Unfortunately, many of them are unavailable to the foreigners due to problems caused by Polish language, which isn't the easiest to learn. Still, the effort of finding and translating Polish settings might be worth a while, with a little help from online translators for example - that's how real role-playing gems can be found.

■ KRZYSZTOF „JAXA” RUDEK

JOURNALISM

Paint my space red

Science fiction of the communist era

Author: Piotr Górski

Translation: Karolina Fedyk

Editing: Katarzyna Koćma

Illustrator: Anna „Tom” Tomiczek

The Bible explains it beyond any doubt. God created humankind, and the Earth was bestowed upon the men as the land of eternal joye and peaceful living in accordance to His commandments. Nonetheless, the human race hath violated His laws, bringing divine wrath upon themselves. Lord, in His fury, had trampled out the vintage and opened the gates of Hell, from which red beast emerged. Alas, men lost their immortality, and their skin turned black. Though Creator's wish was not to do wrong to mankind. Thus, he had chosen sixty just men who would build Celestia. And the just men had been building Celestia for fifteen years, aided by the good spirits of space. Until the day of exodus came, when God's prophet Torch had drawn the red devils' attention away, making the escape possible. To the just men and their descendants God had granted a new promised land - planet Juventa, companion to the Star of Good Hope. And, although Torch had died, he will be reborn when Celestia reaches her destination. Also then people will regain

their alliance with God, which vanished as a punishment for the just men's wrongness. Hereafter, *The Bible* says that Celestia hath embarked upon her journey 2406 years ago, marking the beginning of a new era...

Such is the reality of protagonists in *Zagubiona Przyszłość (The Lost Future)* by Krzysztof Boruń and Andrzej Trepka, the classical Polish SF novel first published in 1953. Of course, Celestian scripture's only relation to the truth is that it's falsifying it in order to maintain political and social status quo. In fact, Celestia is no space Ark, but an old satellite command center of the US Army, and the 60 just men were no God's chosen ones, but the industrial and military elite. Moreover – they were escaping no red devils, but the Red Revolution, which, in the novel's setting, finally conquers the capitalist system of violence and exploitation in the early 21st century. There were no long-lasting preparations, either. The fat cats with cigars in their mouths had estimated that, within few months, the revolution will collapse, allowing them a safe return to Earth, or at least negotiations of such. When the new order proved to be steadfast, the rich made a desperate go at the Alpha Centauri system.

The Lost Future belongs – along with *The Astronauts* and *The Magellanic Cloud* by Stanisław Lem – to key achievements of Polish SF in the fifties. Together with books by Russian writers (Iwan Jefremow's *The Andromeda Nebula*, early works by Strugacki brothers), they set an important boundary, separating pre-war literature and contemporary speculative fiction. On the other hand, all of these books are marked with a flaw which, for many, outweighs their artistic value. They are all written in accordance with poetics of social realism.

In the USSR, social realism (portmanteau'd as socrealism) was decreed from above in 1934. Since then, all art forms – from architecture and sculpture, through painting and music, to narrative art – had to follow one particular style, one poetics and one creative method. Avant-garde artists were forced to abandon art completely, or to emigrate. Basics of socrealism in literature were broadly described by Stalin in his *On Party Politics in the Area of Belles Lettres*.

In Poland, socrealism is considered to have begun in 1949, when after falsifying the results of referenda and parliamentary elections, after eliminating the opposition and quenching the armed resistance of Polish underground state, the communist authorities decided to tighten up cultural politics.

What did socrealism in literature mean? First of all, it parted with the "weirded-out" avant-garde literature, as the default reader would not be an educated critic or belles-lettres aficionado - but the working class. In practice it resulted in returning to the canvas of 19th century realism. Because the purpose of socialist society was to raise the new citizen, emphasis was put on didactic aspect. And last, but not least, in terms of plot, this literature was supposed to describe the conflict between backwardness and progress, conflict won by the New World.

The writers of socrealism created historical prose (always bringing the past events to a common, marxist-leninist denominator, which entailed giving Ivan the Horrible a progressivist bend, and portraying Spartacus as the leader of proletariat), hagiographies of revolutionary heroes (on

the canvas of gothic and romantic literature), or the so-called production literature.

What was production lit? It lauded the socialist rearrangement of the country. Its action was set either on a construction site of some huge industrial conglomerate or a model socialist city. The protagonist would be the workers' collective working on the site. Simple, honest people, hard-working and resilient in spite of hardships, possessing a flawless socialist mindset. Their antagonist would be the enemy to the state – a relic of the previous owners' class, agent of foreign intelligence or saboteur. His motivations were malicious, and his efforts – ineffective. Production lit formed a link between socialism and science fiction.

The communist regime had a convoluted relationship with speculative fiction. Obviously, any reader in possession of socialist mentality should be repulsed by gaudy covers of pulp zines in the line of *Amazing Stories* or *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Unacceptable was the SF market itself, based on industrial exploitation of hundreds of poorly paid writers. On the other hand, SF has a handful of common point with orthodox marxism-leninism: materialistic view of the world, faith in technological and academic progress, and optimism. It shouldn't then come as a surprising that even dividing literature with an iron curtain (before 1939 in Poland H.G. Wells has been known and appreciated, publishing houses printed reboots of *Flash Gordon*, and even a few issues of *Superman* were translated into Polish) and forcing the artists into ideological shackles didn't stand in the way of inventing contemporary SF anew in the Soviet bloc. As long as the authors, while describing new inventions and consequences of their

use, warning against the atomic bomb and militarism, or asking about the likelihood of contacting aliens, did not forget about the predefined moral of their stories.

3

The Lost Future, mentioned in the opening of this essay, is mostly communist satire on American capitalism of the 50s – or rather satire on the vision painted by the propaganda. Four centuries after the great escape, the artificial world of Celestia contains a stunted version of the United States. The community is governed by a president, chosen according to the balance of power between producers of foods and industry. The balance is tipped by the media. All three enterprises are, of course, monopolies in the hands of high families known as the "just ones". The majority of society comprises of Grays, who hold no political power at all, and deprived of human rights slaves dubbed Blacks. Women have no rights either because, according to the Bible, God had relieved them of worries about the grand scheme of things, designating them to be the guardians of the hearth.

The lords of Celestia consolidate their influence over the ship, gather riches and enjoy life (one of the luxuries is access to the swimming pool, granted only for the chosen ones). Poor Grays spend their time in unremitting toil, always fearing what tomorrow will bring. Unemployment rates soar, and Grays have essentially no means of escaping dire poverty. And finally, the artificial world has to deal with loss of precious elements. The most pressing issue is shortage of iodine, which the wretched powers-that-be turned into currency. Heaps of iodine dollars

(dolioids) lie locked away in safes of the rich as the poor have to choose between thyroid disorders and death from starvation. The age expectancy barely exceeds sixty years, and is constantly in decline.

This is how political propaganda of the 40s and 50s portrayed the USA. As a police state governed by financial trusts, cartels, and militia. A land of prosperity where millions live in poverty, and the fate of citizens of color takes shape of a noose, tied by the hands of fascists.

This status quo, obviously, cannot remain forever. Marxism-leninism imposed certain rules, according to which, when capitalism reaches its extremes, communism must appear and triumph over. The world created by Boruń and Trepka is no different. In the first chapters, authors hint at the existence of the "relentless": a conspiracy of Grays. But it's the appearance of a ship from Earth that turns resistance into full-blown rebellion.

Later, the heavily leaning towards communism writer Bohdan Petecki offers a different take on so-called realism. His novel *Halfway Through (W połowie drogi)* is an engaging adventure story about the exploration of Mars and discovery of alien remains, but there is also an intriguing subplot in which the characters remember the so-called rebellion of cyberneticists. Yes, in this vision scientists were the driving force behind revolution. In their manifesto, addressed to the whole world, they declare they cannot collaborate with governments that put their own interests before the benefit of mankind, especially before changes in social and economic life demanded by science. In 21st century, no modern state can function without qualified professionals (descendants, as Petecki convinces, of the former working

classes), thus such global declaration of disobedience leads to great unrest. The cyberneticists' decision is backed by socialist states, while conservative industrial-military powers (especially those of North America) try to impose the old order by force. Local conflicts last for years, but when they reach their end, humanity can enter a new era.

Which leads us to something even more interesting than so-called realistic visions of fantastic capitalism of the future, namely: the so-called utopia.

4

When asked, older fans always say that first chapters of old Polish and Soviet SF novels were always devoted to dull descriptions of a communist paradise – something everyone would skip, impatient to read about space adventures of brave explorers. On the other hand, for a contemporary reader, given a vast range of literature, from space opera to cyberpunk, those once disdained passages are the ones that grab attention. Visions so honest and uncompromising, to the point of naivete, would be hard to find anywhere else.

Take for instance climate. In the days of global warming debates it might come as shocking that authors of the 50s were obsessing over melting icebergs. The opening scene of Lem's *The Astronauts* takes place at a construction site of a thermonuclear heater in Siberian taiga. Not long ago (the plot takes us to an imagined year 2004 and although old capitalist states are long gone, the division of nations and countries still holds) the project of flooding Sahara with the Atlantic has been completed. In Lem's next novel, *The Magellanic Cloud*, Greenland is a tropical paradise of citrus orchards. Boruń and

Trepka followed a similar path in the third book of their trilogy that began with *The Lost Future – The Space Brothers*. The only difference is that in their writing, the evergreen and busy land is the Antarctic. The global, antropogenic climate change is accompanied by global control over the weather. The order of seasons, summer storms, sea breeze or chilly evenings all take place according to a plan. In holiday resorts people can enjoy perpetual summer or winter, and natural, changing weather can be experienced only in reserves.

This fantasy didn't originate from nowhere. One of the biggest geoeengineering endeavors planned by the USSR was reversing the run of Siberian rivers and directing them towards the steppes and deserts of Central Asia, to irrigate cotton plantations and create a vast mainland sea, instead of having the rivers go to waste above the polar circle. The victory of communism also entailed putting reins on nature itself. Forces of nature are, after all, no less cruel and full of inequality and exploitation than capitalism. Biology would also be subject to modifications and engineering. In socrealist utopias, disease-inducing bacteria disappear, and predators lose their instinct to hunt as well as their appetite for meat.

Who would be in charge of this all? In totalitarian states, questions regarding power were never safe. The authors simply wrote it off to some global academic council. In *Halfway Through* Petecki dared to sketch out something along the lines of direct democracy. Every citizen of age owns a terminal allowing to participate in a global debate regarding some pressing issue. Regardless of technical details though, concepts such as parliament and elections

vanish from communist utopias. There is no party, because the party has become one with the society. There's no politics either, because the governing process becomes strictly based on science.

The culture of utopian society is as interesting as its organization. As I mentioned before, the communist state didn't take kindly to Western popculture. Little wonder that art, as suggested by socrealistic SF, is different. Dignified and statuesque. In *Humans like Gods (Ludzie jak bogowie)* Siergiej Sniegow paints a description of a symphony perceived with all senses: music is accompanied by light, smells, and even controlled weather phenomena. Iwan Jefremow in turn predicts, in *The Andromeda Nebula*, the decline of narrative arts. Behind each story there is conflict or dramatic tension, things that don't exist in the society of tomorrow. Dance, music and gymnastics take place of literature, drama and cinematography. The only tiny doorway for stories is provided by space exploration – astronauts among the stars still face challenges, and the reports of their missions receive the attention worth of great epics.

How does a regular Joe from communist paradise look like? He's fit and healthy. He doesn't engage in tedious work, due to full automatization. If someone cuts down a tree or digs a ditch – it's a form of entertainment, enticing people to form long queues. Everyone is a scientist, artist, or teacher. All those occupations are regarded as privilege rather than obligation.

The family structure has disappeared – children are brought up by society as a whole, and surnames aren't inherited (or, as in books by Boruń and Trepka, children inherit the surname of the parent of the same sex as

them). Questions of sexual orientation and identity are passed over in silence – mostly because literature in question was targeted at teenage children, and partly because Soviet science saw all unclarity in this topic as effects of disorders or decadence of late capitalism. Heterosexuality and monogamy prevail, and in *The Andromeda Nebula*, they become the core concepts of social rituals – for example each adolescent, in order to become an adult, must complete 12 tasks, dubbed Labours of Heracles in honour of the great hero.

There is no crime. It doesn't mean, though, that evil has become nonexistent. Sometimes the egoistic, not completely eradicated aspect of humanity takes over. Jefremow suggests to send such individuals to a tropical island and re-socialize them through work. Petecki (in novel *The Zero Zones - Strefy zerowe*) describes a special safety corps comprising of tough and rebellious people who can take advantage of their difficult personalities in the service of defending Earth from external dangers. Siegow in turn considers space travel as the best remedy for unrelenting character. Hard work will forge a correct, moral personality, and contact with the other will rectify even the worst degenerate and chauvinist.

Still better than being exiled to Siberia.

5

In 1956, socrealism ended the same way it had been brought to life – with a political decision. As stalinism declined, new authorities of the Eastern bloc saw no need to control artists to such extent. It did not entail complete freedom, but, compared with previous decade, it came as a relief.

Lem could finally abandon his carefree optimism and start expressing his lack of faith in changing humanity. Freed from the limitations of socrealism, he wrote his best books. Boruń and Trepka embarked upon revising their space trilogy, not removing its communist core, but smoothening the edges (the celestial God was renamed, more neutrally, as the Lord of Space). In Russia, the thaw was taken as a proof that communism could be reformed, and the Strugacki brothers weren't considered opposition writers until later. Then disillusion came and in the whole Eastern bloc, almost every writer, Petecki being one of the exceptions, became an oppositionist in disguise.



Is the red speculative fiction, then, merely a curious episode in history?

Western speculative fiction, existing in an entirely different reality, often came across similar tropes as its Eastern sibling. Asimov's *Foundation* series is an expression of faith in progress and laws ruling the development of societies. Arthur C. Clarke wrote *Fountains of Paradise*, his own version of a production novel – differing from the communist template only in the involvement of private investment in the construction of a space elevator. Everything else, from start to finish, looks very much the same.

Finally, dreams of utopia return to speculative fiction now. Optimistic science fiction has been the core theme of the *Shine* anthology, and Neal Stephenson in *Seveneves* revisits humanity's old desires of reaching out to the skies.

Another trend worth mentioning is solarpunk – so far without great accomplishments, but doubtlessly with great ambitions. Solarpunk is an attempt to write contemporary, optimistic speculative fiction, as

opposed to cyberpunk or recently popular dystopias and postapocalyptic fictions. Solarpunk disregards the technological paradise offered by transhumanism and eulogists of Singularity, considering it too far-fetched and built in order to generate new inequalities rather to remove the old ones. It draws inspiration from punk ideology of DIY, ecology, feminism, economics of sustainable growth and literary classics such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Iain Banks or Octavia Butler.

It would be curious to see how Neal Stephenson, solarpunk writers and authors from *Shine* anthology would appear in comparison to long forgotten, Eastern European science fiction dating fifty or sixty years back. Better? Worse? Or would it be an encounter of two completely different civilizations, apparently growing from the same root and driven by the same goals, but essentially divergent? Surely initiatives such as this zine bring us closer to answering the questions posed above.

■ PIOTR GÓRSKI

The best convention will take place on my couch

Authors: Artur Nowrot & Karolina Fedyk

Illustrator: Elżbieta Głowacka

KF: ...and I'll be there, sipping hot chocolate, hanging out with my online friends and favourite fan artists and fellow gamers, all of us scattered across time zones, till some of us realize they've stayed up till 4 AM again. Well, this might not be ideal, but I suppose that for many, it's the best way to communicate with their part of fandom. The part that is focused on TV series, less-popular books and graphic novels; that, usually, is rather into subversive media, fanfic, and playing with source material instead of holding it close to heart. Until recently, this group has been somewhat ephemeral – it's only the last years that I've seen telltale Tumblr flower crowns in more "traditional" conventions, and events crafted particularly by and for this audience started appearing. Or – does this group exist at all? Am I simply thinking of my own social media circles? And if we form a fandom, or a subculture within it, what would be the defining characteristics?

AN: *There's a lot to unpack here: you're definitely right that a new form of being a fan is forming in Poland right now, and I think it might be useful to start off by comparing it with the "old" Polish SF fandom that got its start sometime in the 1970s: one focused*

primarily on literature, predominantly male, and forming a subset of Polish alternative culture not just in opposition to "the mainstream", but also to the communist status quo. And for a long time there was a sense of continuity, I think: the creators that got their start as fans in the 70s and 80s became celebrated authors by the 90s and 00s. New fans were joining the old clubs or coming to the conventions and thus were introduced to the wider fan community.

The new fandom sprung up in a completely different reality. A generation is just now coming into their own that has no recollection of the communist years or even the brave new world of 90s capitalism in Poland. A generation for whom the internet is as natural as air and provides access to a plethora of media. A generation, finally, for whom geek culture itself is not something marginal (and possibly to be slightly ashamed of), but widespread and very much part of the mainstream. This certainly results in tastes being more diverse; fans don't necessarily all flock to the same texts, which maybe makes it a little difficult to find a common frame of reference, but on the other hand is really helpful in finding out about interesting new phenomena. But also, thanks to all that, while there is certainly a connection

between the old and the new (the conventions still provide a great meeting place for all fans), there are also new ways of doing things, new spaces, both real and virtual, cropping up for fans to inhabit, and finally: new kinds of fans. One of the most noticeable and, I think, most important things about the new fandom is that it is primarily created by women – in fact, I distinctly remember a fan report from a certain TV convention complaining that the program was too female-oriented. What do you think about this gender divide?

KF: I think you pointed out some very important aspects of this fandom: its centering around the internet (which is now changing, I suppose, but it did start with blogs and forums and meetings solely in virtual space), the availability of media you mentioned, and its age. Whereas the struggle with Soviet regime is still an important part of our national identity, the younger generations are facing other challenges – and they look for media that they would find relatable. They rather see themselves in the cosmopolitan settings of BBC dramas or social sci-fi dystopias than in retellings of national history.

As for the contribution of women to this fandom – I'd say it's still a memory of times when the "old" fandom wasn't exactly welcoming to women. There have been certain events advertised as male-only, as not to "distract the participants from their only love, Lady Fantasy", not to mention the prevalence of fake geek girl syndrome. It's only natural that women would create their own spaces, even if it meant disappearing from the mainstream fandom discourse. The two fandoms had existed in parallel, not unlike, say, Trekkies fandom in the States in the 80s. Nowadays the situation is changing

and the fandoms are somewhat converging, although a recent study on Polish fandom¹ found that overall, female fans are still treated as a rarity to be examined.

However, this new fandom doesn't keep persons of whichever gender at the gates. If there is any inclusion criterion, I'd say it's creativity. And playfulness. Or – are these two the same thing in this case?

AN: *I don't think that any part of fandom is necessarily more or less creative than the other, but I think that an argument could certainly be made that there is a difference in the way this creativity is channelled. The older fandom seems mostly focused on reviews (as the report you mentioned shows), or fact-based histories of and guides to particular franchises or genres (this form is particularly prevalent in "Nowa Fantastyka", a leading Polish SFF magazine). The new one seems to prefer fan fiction and more personal essays, character appreciations, critical analyses of comic books, TV shows, characters, themes...*

In short, the difference would fit with the distinction between the affirmative (more hierarchical, focused on original texts) and transformative (informal, focused on creative transformations of the source material) fandoms. A sense of playfulness that you mentioned could very well be the defining factor here – when the younger fandom shares original and derivative fiction on the internet, not caring about the "legitimacy" of their creations, the older one debates whether vanity press-published books should even be listed as eligible for the biggest SFF fan award.

This transformative potential also leads,

¹ *Participatory Poland*, the report in question, is available at Henry Jenkins' blog: <http://henryjenkins.org/2013/12/participatory-poland-part-five-you-forgot-poland-exploratory-qualitative-study-of-polish-sf-and-fantasy-fandom.html>.

I think, to a more critical approach to media and more openness to innovation. This, to me, is very visible in any debate on representation – it's usually the new fandom which demands more of it and that more eagerly embraces non-traditional characters and stories, while the old one not infrequently tries to suppress the critique, particularly of classic authors.

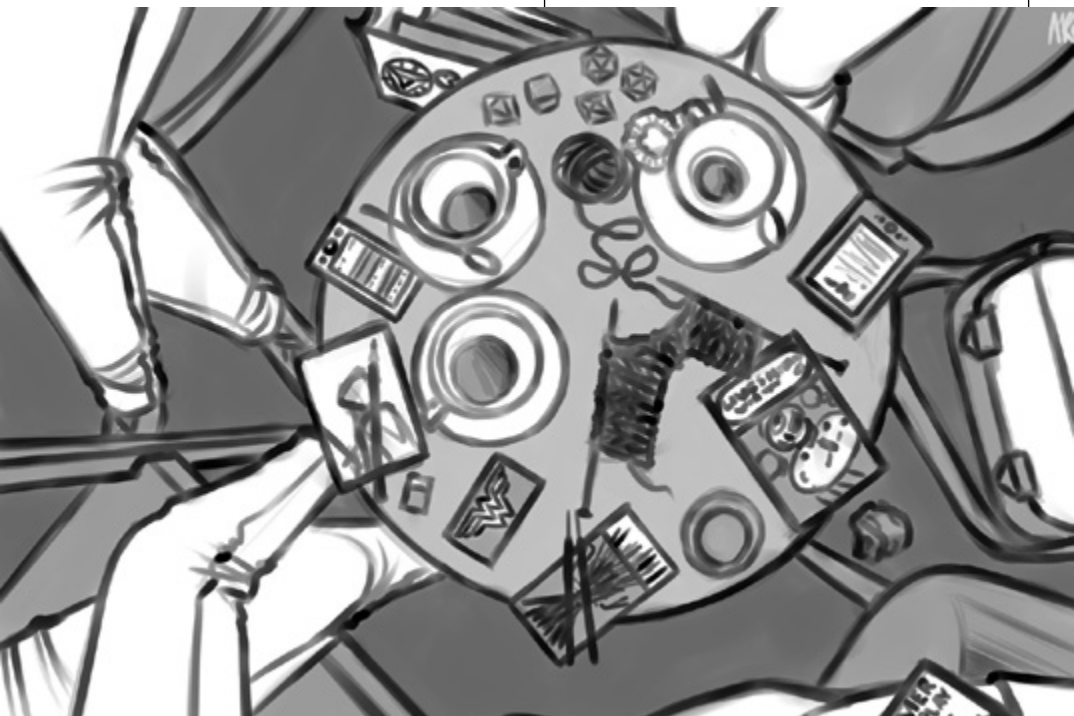
Which begs the question: how do the two fandoms interact? Could they learn anything from each other? Should we strive towards greater unification?

KF: Another interesting aspect of the new fandom's creativity and focus on the personal lies in its ethics of sharing. Much of its creative energy is directed towards others; exchanging fan art, making gifts and responding to prompts. Nowadays, nearly every bigger Polish city holds a fandom-themed Secret Santa event, in which people give each other fandom-related gifts. For the participants, the point of fan activity is

sharing. That's not to say that more traditional fandoms lack the "from fans for fans" mentality, but the new fandom has added care and emotional support to it.

The interaction between the two fandoms is most visible in conventions – as the new fandom introduces contests and panels catering to its audience. It's not viewed entirely without scorn from the "old guard", however, although there is an increasing number of people who participate in both fandoms to some extent. After all, they're not mutually exclusive, even though our wording suggests some kind of division. And it's important to highlight that none of the fandoms are a hive mind – they have their own inner dynamics and different views represented within.

Personally, I would like to see more of the interaction. I believe the old fandom could gain quite a lot by opening up to new, diverse voices – and by learning that silencing



critique is doing art and media a disservice. Recently the online fandom was engrossed in a debate about Stanisław Lem – and many people failed to understand that one can enjoy and appreciate a writer's works while being aware of the problematic aspects. On the other hand, the new fandom tends to be unstructured, dispersed even (although, with events such as SerialCon and Whomanikon, this is changing too), which contributes to it going often unnoticed. I suppose that not many “new” fans consider, for example, voting in the Zajdel prize – although they could do so to show appreciation for the works they have enjoyed. The younger fandom could also benefit from archiving its knowledge; too many great discussions and blog posts have been lost in the depths of the internet already.

What do you think? And how do you imagine the development of the new fandom in the future?

AN: As an introvert, I like how small-scale this new fandom feels – I prefer meetings with a handful of friends to large crowds of fellow fans. They are less overwhelming and also, I think, more conducive to conversations: it's easier for everyone to be heard when there are a few people gathered around a coffee table than when we gather in a large lecture hall with one person occupying the lecturer's seat. So moving into the future, I hope the new fandom gains a sense of its own identity (this is something that I appreciate about the older

fandom, as its coherence allows it to form visible structures and attract new people). In a way, I feel like this is what this article might be for – making people think about how they are participating in a fandom, what ways of participation they feel most comfortable with, maybe suggesting new ways of doing things.

At the same time, I hope it doesn't become insular in its own right. I hope that we keep hanging out online, back one another on Patreon, organize mini- and micro-conventions (and standard-size conventions as well, because why not), that we keep finding each other and new things to be excited about. And, yes, that we keep in touch with the old fandom – there's a lot to be learned.

■ARTUR NAWROT

■KAROLINA FEDYK

Artur Nowrot – editor, translator, occasional blogger, writer of poetry and prose – usually with a speculative bent. Loves Doctor Who, strange fiction, and cake. Lives in Cracow with three cats and one human. You can talk to him on Twitter @mrmond.

Karolina Fedyk – academic by day and writer by night; author of speculative poetry and prose. Likes coffee, owls, learning new languages and living in extreme latitudes. Tweets as @karigrafia.

Polish writers worth reading

Smokopolitan crew's subjective guide to modern polish fantasy and sci-fi books

Polish fantasy and sci-fi literature became known to the world thanks to the works of Stanisław Lem and Janusz Zajdel. In recent years, the world-renowned Polish writers' club was joined by Andrzej Sapkowski with his Witcher series. But there is still plenty to be discovered.

Polish speculative fiction is building up at a steady pace, and ranks of its writers are growing in numbers. Here you'll find the authors our editorial team considers worth knowing. We invite you to join this exploration, but remember - this list is highly subjective!

Magdalena Kubasiewicz

BY KAROLINA FEDYK

When you look at the urban fantasy map of Europe, Poland begins to shine surprisingly bright – giving a new and interesting flavor to magical mysteries, not-exactly-human underbelly of cities, and the way myth and legend write themselves into places. Alas, most of this rich and exciting genre is available only if you read Polish. My personal favourite, though - *Burn the Witch* by Magdalena Kubasiewicz - has been recently published in English as well.

In Kubasiewicz's debut novel, set in alternative Poland, magic not only is real, but widely acknowledged: witches and mages

make public appearances and even aid the king. Only Sara Sokolska, the present witch to the crown, seems to spit in the face of tradition; independent, secretive and often selfish, she follows her hunches and makes somewhat... unconventional decisions. She's far from perfect, but when the capital faces its biggest threat, a danger rooted deep in its history, her daring approach might be just the way to save Krakow. If she won't be tempted to follow a bigger mystery unraveling, a key to her own past – and to magic.

The book's greatest forte is its fresh, modern language. The characters have grown on me, too – particularly Sara, who appears arrogant at first, but turns out to be a complex person with her own reasons, and Julian, the young king struggling with his role. The world-building has left me with more doubts and questions than I would have liked; but if you can keep yourself from squinting at the details, you'll be in for a riveting story.



Jacek Dukaj

BY ANNA JAKUBOWSKA

Always worth to read good hard science fiction

Jacek Dukaj's books recommendation

Jacek Dukaj is probably the most award winning contemporary Polish speculative fiction writer. His works belong mostly to hard science fiction genre and many call him Stanisław Lem's successor. A quick peek at the numbers (skip to the next paragraph, if you're not interested): born in 1974, he debuted in 1990 with a short story *Złota galera* (*Golden Galley*). Later, in 1997 he published his first novel, *Xavras Wyzryn*. To sum up his prizes, he won Janusz A. Zajdel Award 6 times, Śląka Award 3 times, Żuławski Award 4 times, Kościelski Award once, European Union Prize for Literature once, and also received Medal for Merit to Culture – Gloria Artis from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland. (Almost lost my breath listing all of these!)

Numbers aside, though; let's make it a bit more personal. I'll tell you a story about how I read Jacek Dukaj's books.

I started with *Xavras Wyzryn*. I was still studying back then and someone insisted I SHOULD (and it was more of a 'must' than a 'should') read Jacek Dukaj. Anything of his. So when I saw the book available at the library, I just picked it. It wasn't a deliberate choice; it was just a book with Dukaj's name on it. It turned out to be a short novel about alternative history where Polish-Soviet War (1919-1921) had a different outcome and thus Poland was dominated by Soviet Union,

and in 1996 there still existed so-called European War Zone. It is said the book was heavily inspired by the Chechen Wars that happened at the time Dukaj was writing it; either way, the story discusses problems of Polish martyrdom, philosophical aspects of war and the thin line between terrorism and fighting for freedom. It also has a very interesting, almost mind-blowing plot twist.

Xavras Wyzryn was a fine read, but not to the point of revelation. What really won my heart was the novel *Ideal Imperfection* (*Perfekcyjna niedoskonałość*). I was enraptured from the very first page by the unusual use of language. As I learned later – Dukaj loves playing with semantics, creating neologies, and being a bit of a linguist myself – I could do nothing but appreciate it. What I also like about his style is that he believes in his readers' intelligence; he is not providing too many explanations and he almost always begins *in medias res*. It means that reading is not simply putting the letters together; you also have to uncover the universe bit by bit. And on top of that *Ideal Imperfection* was exploring the topic of human evolution to the point of creating new species (and the problem of 'downgrading' as well). It was said that there are three thirds of progress for any species; and so the book consisted of three parts and each had three chapters. The book was also supposed to open a trilogy, but Dukaj already stated many times,



despite fans' hopes, that there will be no sequel to *Ideal Imperfection*.

And then came *Ice*, book you either love or just can't digest. Well – I fell in love instantly. There has never been First World War, and Poland is still under tsarist Russian rule. After the Tunguska incident, the ice started covering Europe, spreading first across Russia, next reaching to Poland and then - who knows? - maybe heading further west. The ice brought climate changes, of course, covering everything with permafrost; what's more important, it also froze history and philosophy and changed laws of logic. How weird can that get? Once again, Dukaj did excellent job stylizing the book's language, keeping it archaic, full of russianisms and inventing neologies and even whole terminologies. It is quite a book, with more than thousand pages. The moment you end, you just want to flip it back over to the beginning and start all over again. At least that's how I felt, anyway.

Of course these are not the only Dukaj's works worth mentioning. In *Other Songs (Inne pieśni, also translated as Different Chants)* he presented incredibly interesting concept of world based on Greek philosophy, where powerful humans called kratistos may influence surroundings and other beings with their minds and presence. In *The Crowe (Wroniec)* he deals with hard and sad events from the time of Polish People's Republic, wrapping it up as children's fairy tale. *Revolution.exe (Rewolucja.exe)* tells a story about the impact mass and social media can have on a revolution. *The Old Axolotl (Starość aksolotla)* may seem an easier read, but actually refers to transhumanism and kind of 'nostalgia for organic life'.

So... ready for intense mixture of physics, alternate history, philosophy and linguistics?

Andrzej Sapkowski

BY MICHAŁ SZYMAŃSKI

This recommendation may not be that necessary, since you're going to read about an author who had already won some important European awards. Still it wouldn't really be fair to leave him out. Polish fantasy literature would certainly not be what it is today without Andrzej Sapkowski.

Before he started to write for a living, he was a sales representative, then a part-time translator for a while. *The Witcher*, his first short story, title of which got somewhat popular with time, won the third place in a contest held by *Fantastyka*, traditionally the most important sf/f magazine in Poland - and then, things only kept getting better. *The Witcher Saga* soon became one of most important fantasy works of 90's in Poland, then it was published in many other Eastern European countries, and, after the success of video game adaptation, its phenomenon started to spread to the West.

Stories about Geralt aren't of course all there is. By far the author's bibliography consists of ten novels, twenty-two short stories and novellas, a role-playing system, a historical essay and a lexicon of fantasy literature. What's common for all of his works is incredible gift of conscious play with genre conventions without producing empty parodies at the same time (counts for the essay and the lexicon as well!). Sapkowski had also earned acclaim as a master of language stylization, though it takes a really good translator to show how good he is to those who don't read in Polish.

The Witcher Saga itself is a really great read, kind of stories that stay with you for longer, make you think, make you want

to come back to that other world and have a drink with the characters. To my knowledge it's also one of few fantasy novels read with pleasure by those who normally don't enjoy this kind of literature. Personally I can tell that no fantasy novel written after the saga has made such impression on me by far. Well, maybe Le Guin's *The Other Wind*. But that's still good company, isn't it?

Anna Kańtoch

BY MICHAŁ SZYMAŃSKI

There's this trend in Poland among sf/f writers now: every now and then someone who began her/his career with something that definitely was science fiction or fantasy starts to drift towards less defined fields, write things that don't really fit into the boundaries of the genre or simply goes mainstream, without forgetting lessons learned earlier on. Recently something similar has started to happen with one of my favorites - Anna Kańtoch.

Though maybe it was happening from the very beginning - her first novel and short stories were fantasy, full of magic and demons, set in decorations of quasi-Western-European 17th century, but they were also classical crime stories, sometimes almost procedurals, and this fact makes her last novel, pure noir crime novel, a little less surprising. Her works had attracted many fans pretty much from the start, and with her fourth book - *The 13th Angel* - came the first significant proof of recognition, Eurocon's Encouragement Award. In Poland, Kańtoch has been awarded the prestigious Zajdel prize 5 times.

What I privately find interesting in her books is their aesthetic aspect. Whether it's beautiful, well trained language she's

mastered with time, or just the quality of things she chooses to describe, it's always pleasure to read. And it's particular pleasure when beautiful language comes along with beautiful story, like in *Czarne (The Black)*, story of bending time and bending identities, action of which spans somewhere between middle 19th century and late 20's. It's one of Anna's not-really-fantasy books, only near the end we can be sure if the strange things we read about are actually happening, or are they just a projection of the main character's twisted psyche. But we don't have to know - the decision is left to the reader. In both cases - it's a real pleasure to read, full of true fascination with times and people captured inside the novel.

Last Anna Kańtoch's novel was a crime novel with ambitions, another book has already been announced, but the details are still unknown. I'm really hoping her writing will eventually find its way outside Poland, it's high time to introduce other audiences to Kańtoch's prose and enchanting imagery!

Agnieszka Hałas

BY MARCIN "ALQUA" KEAK

When it comes to this issue of our fanzine, I mainly regret one thing - our limited space. There are so many writers and so many stories I would like to share with fans outside of Poland and yet I cannot. Still what I (and my colleagues) can do is to try and describe the works of writers that are worth reading. One of them is Agnieszka Hałas. She may not be among the most famous authors in Poland, but she certainly is one of the more interesting.

I stumbled across her works by accident a long time ago and I immediately fell in love with her writing. When I picked up

her book, I thought it would be your typical dark fantasy – nice to read but also not very memorable. When I actually started reading it, I realized how wrong I was. As I finished the book, I wanted more works about the main character – Brune Keare, better known as Anguish. To my despair I realized that Agnieszka had published only one short story collection. Fortunately, a few weeks (or maybe months?) later I found out that her new novel was about to be released. I read it as soon as it came out and I was delighted again.

You may ask, what has fascinated me in her writings. Firstly - the world she created. It reminded me of other fantasy works with two types of magic: “the good one” (silver) and “the bad one” (black). But the good guys were not so good and the bad guy was far from being evil. The main characters represent a mixture of positive and negative traits. In her stories about Anguish Agnieszka also describes demons from the Abyss and again they are not always truly evil – they are very human, painted in all shades of grey. Secondly, I really liked the way Agnieszka constructs the narrative. It allows me to easily dive into the world she has created and to befriend her characters. Finally, her writing style lets me savor each and every word of her stories.

Apart from the series about Brune Keare, Agnieszka Hałas has also published other works including a collection of poetry, an anthology of short stories anthology concentrating on the afterlife, and a standalone novel. Two of her shorter works are available in English in Aphelion webzine . I can only hope that first a few short stories about Brune Keare, and then the whole series, will be translated and available to readers all around the world.

Paweł Majka

BY ELIN KAMIŃSKA

If I have to pick just one Polish writer, I would definitely choose Paweł Majka.

Paweł is a Krakowian writer with not that long career as a writer, but each subsequent book of his comes out to be success. His debut novel from last year – *Pokój Światów* (“Peace of the Worlds”) was nominated to the Zajdel Award (it is an annual award given by the Polish science fiction and fantasy fandom) and received the Żuławski Award as well (an annual award given by the Polish science representative jury). What is more, he repeated this success this year, with a novel *Niebiańskie Pastwiska* (“Meadows of Heaven”). He is also the author of the first Polish novel set in the Metro 2033 universe, *Dzielnica Obiecana* (“The Promised District”).

What makes Paweł such a good writer? In my opinion his strongest trait is so called “creation of the represented world”. With mixing different myths, ideas and legends, he creates breathtaking universes, which hardly, despite their deep fantastical character, can be called unrealistic.

As far as I know, “Beginning/End of a Century” is Paweł’s only text translated to English to date. But I have a feeling, it may change soon.

■ SMOKOPOLITAN



Science in the Service

Author: Michał Cholewa

Translation: Artur Nawrot

Editing: Joel Paisley, Elżbieta Głowacka

Proofreading: Paulina Drewniak

Illustration: Wojciech Walas

Many people might ask themselves what a full professor of physics is doing in the middle of the desert building a 150-meter-high dune. If I'm to be completely honest, I have to confess that such a situation seemed, until recently, completely improbable even to me. In order to properly present the whole picture, however, I must go back to a rather distant past. It's not like I don't have the time for it... Banaś and I have only completed 100 metres.

* * *

It all started a good couple of years back, when Banaś came up with his transformation theory. He was then – as was I – one of those theorists who did not think the possible consequences of their work all the way through. Even the great ones. And there was one other thing about him that was crucial to this story – his publication was a month overdue.

Few people realize how strong a motivation this provides. You see, the general scientific momentum of the university flock is – or, rather, was – generated by a system of grants and points which determined the pecking order in choosing the best

conferences, not to mention the best time slots for classes. In light of this truth, Banaś was doubly motivated, because not only was he late with the wretched publication, but he had also fallen out of favour with Mrs. Kafka, whose duties included the composition of the department's timetable.

Due to the aforementioned falling out of favour, for the third term in a row his schedule was arranged in such a way that not only did he not have a single day off, he also didn't have one without a gap between classes. Given his workload, this constituted an act of sorcery that even the dean could not quite comprehend. In that fateful year, his schedule was even used as a counter-example to the main thesis of a certain PhD dissertation about graph colouring. This will probably induct Mrs. K. to the scientific hall of fame, because no one could find any error in the proof.

Banaś knew, of course, that despite the indubitable state of ill favour in which he found himself, a nice theory with a solid proof, an experimental basis, as well as an appropriate amount of colourful slides to display during the presentations, could not only propel him to a much desired (due to many reasons, some of them scientific)

conference in Hawaii, but, backed up by a box of chocolates, even grant the forgiveness of the merciless ruler of the school office.

It must also be known that a true scientist usually has a very good chance of discovering something new in a field which he pioneers. Due to the lack of previous research, any result is new. This is a trick widely employed by the departments' up-and-coming, and only rarely can one hear murmurs of dissent, such as the note issued by the rector of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Professor Motylkowski, in 2003, to the effect that an analysis of the distribution of gas particles emitted by Camembert cheese in a space circumscribed by a cone of puff pastry is too specific a case. However, as long as you don't go to the extreme, new theorems practically create themselves. Bearing all this in mind, Banaś began research on the serious-sounding, as well as yet-unstudied (as of then) subject of the influence of various kinds of radiation on the burning of petroleum products.

Unfortunately for humankind – he succeeded.

The type of radiation discovered three months later, which the discoverer named the “Banaś radiation”, of course, resulted in a complete stoppage of chemical reactions occurring in the target liquids, and not just temporarily, but permanently. In addition, the same radiation had a destructive effect on electrical machinery – a property as interesting as it was surprising, given how little those two phenomena appeared to have in common. Of course – with the prospect of the Hawaii conference, as well as his much-desired three-day work week in his mind's eye – my esteemed colleague published his

results at once, dubbing it – with his characteristic humility – “Banaś's general theory of transformation”. When questioned about the special theory, he dealt with it swiftly – and in accordance with lessons learned at the PhD seminars – saying that he was only one small calculation away from it, and that at the moment he would prefer not to divulge specifics.

As we all know, theories with the word “general” in the name have a nice ring to them.

The theory was interesting enough that Banaś's paper was accepted at his coveted conference, where he revealed it to the wider academic community. Wider, because aside from scientists *per se*, the conference was attended by intelligence officers from countries so numerous that not only did they receive separate IDs, they also rented a separate floor at the hotel, where they organized a special introductory meeting combined with a poetry reading. As the chronicler of this story, it is my duty to mention that the work of Colonel Dudochkin from Kazakhstan won the biggest acclaim. Those very officers – excluding the Kazakh who was just then dealing with the intoxicating effects of fame – were very interested in hearing Banaś's paper, after which they left the room *en masse*, compared notes, then went to their respective secret radio stations.

The direct consequence of which was that all air traffic in civilian Hawaiian airports was suspended due to the overload of radio channels, caused by all the outgoing reports.

The indirect consequence was that a month later Americans had the first Banaś bomb.

In their rash enthusiasm they dropped it

on Afghanistan, aiming to bomb the Taliban back to the Stone Age. Unfortunately, aside from their assigned targets, they also managed to hit a small Russian listening station, which Russia – of course – interpreted as an act of aggression. As it suddenly became apparent, it wasn't just the Americans who possessed Banaś bombs. With exuberant joy, after years of containing themselves, leader after leader pushed button after button, and soon it turned out there wasn't an inch of the world that wasn't hit by at least one bomb.

The apocalypse arrived, but not in a way that people had expected. Without access to electricity and oil, the world moved back technologically to a level that was known to some, but mostly from museums. In all fairness, I must add that the Taliban and the Islamic extremists were affected as well, which was immediately declared – by way of carrier pigeons – a great success of the American foreign policy. Unfortunately, the American people did not appreciate the magnitude of this victory, especially since the American contingent in Afghanistan was soon massacred by the local militia, whose forces were much larger and much more accustomed to fighting a non-electronic war.

In our country, on the other hand, the people fell back on a long-prepared and trained-for crisis management plan, that is, general anarchy. Given that the government did not enjoy much respect even before the apocalypse, the citizens' behaviour did not become much different, just more overt. As their first target the angry mob (there probably exists a rule positing that in order to be considered a true scientist, one's work must reach the stage of inspiring an angry mob) chose, of course, our institute, what with it being the direct source of Banaś's

creative energy. It also has to be mentioned that the nation, usually completely uninterested in the realm of science, targeted the author of the theory (conveniently named after him) as well as his *alma mater* at an admirable speed.

As the institute door were shaking under thunderous, rhythmic punches, the rector, heads of departments and the director of finance drank their last tea, shook hands, then jumped out the window. The dramatic qualities of the situation were lessened somewhat by the fact that it was a ground floor window and the whole group was later seen riding away on bikes, with heavy backpacks containing – as it soon transpired – the contents of the university's cashbox, which they emptied with a truly scientific thoroughness.

Facing such a palpably dire situation, Banaś and I undertook drastic measures, namely: we hid with the mathematicians. It



was a difficult decision because the departments of mathematics and physics are in a permanent state of war, as it usually is when you speak languages similar enough to understand each other, but look at the world from opposite points of view. In the situation at hand our esteemed adversaries were safer, because the maths used in the general theory of transformation did not leak to the press, as no one would have understood it anyway, so the mob passed them by. At first our negotiations with the mathematicians stalled, but our argument – that we could enrich our enraged compatriots with the knowledge of a plethora of models and theorems without which Banaś's theory could never have been formulated – speeded them right up. In any case, it allowed us to illuminate the idea of shared interests to such a degree that we were granted temporary asylum in the institute of discrete mathematics.

Problems arose very soon, namely when, with the coming of a new month, a queue of employees awaiting their salary formed at the university's cash desk. The apocalypse notwithstanding, in the past few weeks the university had experienced a true scientific boom, with new publications cropping up everywhere. And everyone quite logically assumed that it couldn't be so bad that the wages would not be paid.

Because the university's financial reserve had been transferred outside by certain enterprising scholarly personages, frenzied deliberations started across the whole department. First, a simple note was issued, announcing that unfortunately there was no money, so all work would have to be unpaid for the time-being. The staff did not take it kindly for some reason; there were threats of closing down a few institutes, and the

situation was therefore deemed serious. The university senate gathered at once to decide on measures that would be undertaken to deal with this blatant unreasonableness of its employees. And, it has to be said, things were going well, at least until the university bigwigs realized that the cuts in funding would affect them as well.

At that point, a number of clever crisis-management plans collapsed, and in the following six hours the senate reached only possible conclusion: that crisis was one thing, but salary was quite another. And, moreover, that temporary difficulties could not stand in the way of true science.

That's when the idea of entering the race was born.

*

Luckily we had already reconnected with other universities thanks to specially-trained carrier students, so we had some general picture of how the post-Banaś Europe was coping. And it was coping with a truly European dignity. The cultural life was in full bloom; an improvised public transportation network based on stagecoaches and steam trains pulled from museums was operating, quite appropriately, at full steam, and London pronounced Banaś a hero, as he was the first man to successfully rid the city centre of traffic jams.

For the entertainment of the masses, it was decided that a Paris-Dakar Rally would be organized, starting in Paris again for the first time in many years. The lack of oil didn't bother anyone, to the contrary, it even guaranteed new and intriguing technological solutions. At first, the news inspired an animated theoretical discussion regarding

the construction of the vehicles. It was obvious that a traditional approach to car rallies, severely afflicted by Banaś, would not succeed, and we were curious to see what the engineers – and drivers – would do in this new situation. No small measure of malicious joy was derived from the thought that the countries that did not fund sciences well would find themselves at a disadvantage. It's never bad when revenge takes care of itself.

The dean was willing to bet on the Dutch, the head of international projects was ready to wager all of his money (18.22 PLN) on the Americans, and the council secretary was a staunch supporter of Russia.

And just as the department was starting to slide into gambling, we heard about the prize.

It was only that second piece of information that caused a hasty meeting of the Department Council, where soon a motion was passed to send our own representation. Along with its line-up. I should probably have predicted who would be in it, because we were the only physicists among the mathematicians, which rendered us effectively outnumbered in all votes. “We will show them that our nation is strong and capable!” – shouted the dean boisterously at the end of the session. The scientific body at once got high on the heady vapour of patriotism, and even Banaś's shy remark that things are the way they are because we have displayed our strength quite recently and everyone probably knows what our brave – and talented – nation is capable of, was greeted with proud silence. The idea of competing internationally – and of receiving regular income – had the Council completely possessed. Sure, there was aiding the Motherland in need as well, although if

she knew that we were going to help again, she would probably be only moderately enthusiastic about the idea.

Completely ignoring our reservations about not even having a driver's licence, the department began researching and inventing. A week later, we had a design for the vehicle, named Hilbert at first, although after our swift intervention paired with a suggestion that we're not going anywhere without our contribution recognized, it was renamed Hilbert-Einstein. It was a complex construction made out of hastily-gathered materials, powered by a combination of mechanical force transferred from a dozen hamsters running in a wheel, and electricity harvested from special lemon cells. The lemons were the pride of the dean's hothouse and we solemnly swore that we would use them well and for the glory of the scientific community.

Along with the vehicle we received a supply of hamster food, 5 kilograms of lemons, the entry fee money for the rally and a 300-page manuscript proving conclusively that our machine was best-suited to win the race.

The guys from the department of computer science gave us a bag of bottle caps. What for – I still have no idea.

*

It was a very emotional day when the six bulkiest lab assistants escorted us to the railway station, where we boarded a train to Paris. The moment would have possibly been more exalted, were we not forced to sneak in through the shadows dressed as the university's cleaning ladies, who – as commoners – could move about the city

quite freely. Due to – as we were assured – budgetary concerns, our guards returned to the institute as soon as we boarded the train. We were left alone. Alone, that is, aside from about fifty other passengers travelling in the very same carriage. The diversity of the company was huge, so it seemed that we were not in any immediate danger of being bored. And, although the outward appearance of our travel companions brought to mind news reports concerning farmer strikes and discussions about farming subsidies, we were looking to the future with optimism.

And we were right. As soon as the steam engine began to pull its long chain of carriages towards Paris, our companions, out of the goodness of their hearts, offered us seats, sandwiches, and hot tea from a flask, which pleasantly surprised us, and the surprise was only magnified by a sentence uttered with warm concern: “Poor women, to have to go on such a long journey alone”.

And as I was trying to make sense of this remark, my wandering gaze fell upon Banaś, with his head wrapped in a kerchief, dressed in a blue apron with the university’s emblem and trainers, with a woollen bag, in which we kept the entry fee money, in his hand. I was about to correct the mistake, my plan was foiled by a portly man with a hoe (an important fact), who went on a rant concerning “the unfortunate cleaning ladies, fed up with those damned mad scientists who caused all this damned chaos”, followed by a vivid description of what he – and he was not alone, judging from the vengeful murmurs of approval coming from the other travellers – would use his hoe for, if any of those so-called “professors” fell into his hands. We travelled the rest of the way as Mrs. Janka and Mrs. Rozalia, basking in sympathy

and detailing the story of our noble rebellion against the nefarious academics. Banaś was particularly good at the latter, displaying gusto and considerable narrative skill in depicting the university as a realm of evil, ruled with an iron fist by the rector, who, in his sinister splendour, always arrived late to the Department’s Council, ate more than his share of doughnuts, demanded science camp reports from the young and gifted postdocs, even though he knew that science was the last thing anyone was concerned with at the science camp, and, most importantly, who took all the whiteboard markers for his own seminars. The despotic mistress of the school office, Mrs. Kafka, was also much talked about, as was anyone who had ever so much as looked at Banaś the wrong way. My colleague’s creative flow was admirable, and even though I don’t think anyone in the carriage could accurately picture the full horror of some of the university’s evil masterminds’ manoeuvrings, the nods of sad compassion, as well as regularly re-filled cups of tea, left no doubts as to the effect the story had on our listeners. Before we arrived in Paris, we – or rather, Mrs. Janka and Mrs. Rozalia – were the heroines of the carriage, outshining even Mr. Zenon, the inventor of a steam-powered tractor, and Mrs. Leokadia, heading to Champagne, to her family, a survivor of three political parties, eight farmer strikes and two husbands.

We left the carriage with not only wishes of good luck in the far-away country and addresses of various relatives and acquaintances, but also a big package of coffee, five croissants with cheese and a bottle of cherry *kompot*. Some of the offers we were made I will not mention – a true lady keeps such secrets to herself.

When Hilbert-Einstein was rolled out from the cargo carriage at the back of the train, and when, triumphant, we made our way to a restaurant, the most difficult part of our journey seemed to be behind us.

*

Our good spirits were shaken the day after we entered the race, in the France Hotel, where by gas light I was reading – at last – the dissertation on our vehicle. Specifically, I was reading about the construction of the computational model, which started with the ominous sentence: “To simplify the calculations, let us assume that a perfectly spherical vehicle moves in a perfectly straight line in a vacuum, with negligible friction from the ground”.

The calculations that followed were absolutely correct and completely useless in our predicament: they showed that if Hilbert-Einstein was a spacecraft, it would win the race. The crisis meeting I held with Banaś over a bottle of cherry *kompot* lasted until late evening, but – contrary to other scientific deliberations – it led us to a sensible conclusion, which was: desperate times, desperate measures. We would cheat.

In order to do that, we had to gather intelligence on our opponents’ vehicles. The most obvious solution was breaking into the participants’ parking lot. This activity, so helpful in ascertaining the weaknesses of the vehicles, was very thrilling, but also – regretfully – outside of our university’s physics curriculum. After a tempestuous ad hoc seminar on this problem, we decided to discard this obvious solution as too difficult, given our skill set. It was very easy, however, to arrange an accidental meeting

in the line for the technical check-up, which was necessary to be admitted to the race. The esteemed technical commission was probably a little surprised seeing Hilbert-Einstein at the check-up ten times, but they said nothing, which allowed us to have a good look at each of our adversaries’ vehicles. To our great joy, a large number of them seemed much less inventive than our university’s creation, although a few of them could turn out to be quite troublesome. For instance, the Swiss “Geneva”, marked with a cross, was powered by a gas secreted during the ripening of cheese, and “V2” – by alcohol distilled from beer. It was probably the German inventors’ proclivity for sturdiness that inspired them to equip “V2” with tank treads and a large, armoured steel plough. The American “President George W. Bush V” was based on biological energy, that is, a closet installed under the cabin, where four Latino men would pedal, activating a complicated system of gears, which powered an electric generator. The Russians, with their infallible industrial espionage, made “Putin” a perfect copy, using as their driving force four Siberians, painted brown and taught Spanish just in case. The Danes created “Skagerrak” using a system of rubber bands and flywheels, tested numerous times by fans of Lego bricks, and the Dutch created a vehicle powered by over a dozen windmills connected to an electric generator. The Finnish sailboat on wheels, “Helsinki”, barely fit into the inspection area, and the Australian “Joey” had no wheels at all, but moved by jumping on a complicated system of springs. Finally, the French “Champagne” was basically a huge cart loaded with strategically arranged champagne bottles, which, when opened, would provide jet propulsion.

In that company, Hilbert-Einstein with its part-lemony, part-hamstery powertrain, seemed doomed. Unless, of course, we introduced some additional variables to the equation.

*

The Swiss we dealt with before the start. Together with Banaś we found a few warehouses in Paris, and, equipped with proper tools, we spent the whole night there. The result of our procedure were twenty large mice, which we then sneaked into “Geneva”’s garage. We narrowly avoided a disaster while doing that, because my accomplice, largely inexperienced in the criminal arts, left the mice locked in cages, explaining that the trap’s construction resulted in caged mice being isomorphic to mice outside of a cage. Luckily for us, the stench of cheese coming from the Swiss fuel tank provided such a strong stimulus for our sabotage division that they found the aforementioned isomorphism – in this case: biting through the bars – on their own, with the result being that Geneva didn’t even start the race.

*

The first stage of the race demonstrated a significant discrepancy between the plans made at the university and reality. “Helsinki” was in front, with some lead over the Dutch “Van der Waerden” – a construction, it is worth noting, of a Dutch university. We drew some consolation from the fact that “V2” eliminated a few participants who dared to cross its path. The beer-powered monstrosity didn’t even slow down as it obliterated other contestants, doing it quite safely, since no one

achieved much speed, giving the painters at checkpoints a lot of time to create measuring paintings – and allowing the unlucky drivers to safely depart their vehicles while they were being consumed at walking speed. The disturbing thing was the chalk crosses drawn on the board by the wolfishly-grinning German driver. And I don’t even want to mention his tanker helmet. All this resulted in Hilbert-Einstein finishing in sixth position – which provided us with a list of opponents we had to eliminate. Our small but active scientific community deliberated late into the night, and in the early morning we began to put our plan into action.

The Finns were the easiest to deal with. That nation possesses a deep-rooted faith in the honesty of absolutely everybody, thanks to which their garage was not just unguarded, but also wide open. The Finnish team probably wasn’t around – no need to be, if the rules explicitly forbade hanging around in other teams’ garages. And so, when all the other contestants were enjoying themselves at a banquet in a luxurious hotel, nobody noticed – I hope – two silhouettes sneaking from one shadow to another towards “Helsinki”, which was positioned directly in front of the starting line. Or that one of the silhouettes uttered a foul curse as it stumbled upon a protruding stone – in my defence I can say that it is very hard to watch one’s feet while also looking left and right. The task took us almost an hour, but as we were returning (contrary to Banaś’s description, not limping at all) to the banquet, we were almost sure of going up at least one place in the next stage.

As it turned out, we were right. The Finns discovered the malfunction on the very first turn, when it transpired that the

wheels were no longer taking orders from the steering wheel. "Helsinki" gracefully slid down the bank and fell into the river, where, thanks to its construction, it floated along the shore. The audience, thinking at first that it was a deliberate manoeuvre, erupted with applause, and only belatedly realized – mostly owing to the Finnish team sprinting, visibly upset, alongside their freshly-launched ship – that moving away from the route of the race at full speed might not have been part of the "Helsinki" driver's plan. Behind them trotted the painter from the last checkpoint (who was probably making some money on the side providing illustrations for a newspaper) and a few of the technical judges. "V2" on the other hand, taking advantage of the chaos, charged toward the nearest contestant at full speed. His opponent, realizing what was going on, left the vehicle and ran towards the German, shouting in Portuguese, but seeing that the driver of the beer mobile of doom either didn't understand or didn't want to understand, he came running back to his (much more delicately constructed than the "V2") vehicle and turned towards the starting line. The German monster seemed to ponder whether to follow him, but just then he was overtaken – with the accompanying curses in Spanish – by "George W. Bush V" and, going neck and neck with him – and also accompanied by Spanish curses, pronounced, however, with a distinct Novosibirsk accent – Putin. This was apparently enough to draw the driver's attention, because "V2" immediately, with the rattle of tank treads, moved after the twin vehicles slowly leaving him behind, which increased both their speed and the volume of the curses coming from their bellies.

*

The second stage began with a bang.

It was a crucial stage for many reasons, starting with the elimination of the Finn from the list of possible winners (he made it back from somewhere around Calais, but there was little chance he would catch up with the leaders), followed by the Portuguese from the tenth position dropping out of the race, and finally because of the surprising, but very advantageous to us, fact that no one outside of the leading six had any proof of passing the first checkpoint – the sole painter had rushed to paint "Helsinki", as it sailed majestically towards the open ocean. According to the rules, all the victims of the painter's side-job had to go back and pass the checkpoint again, which meant that few of our rivals now posed any real threat to us. Half-premeditated and half-unexpected, the triumph of the Polish sporting and scientific thought was undeniable.

The only thing left was to make good use of the break between the stages. The one who came up with the idea of how to do it was, I have to admit, Banaś, who dredged from the depths of his mind that once upon a time he had studied Spanish, a language that – as it turned out – was quickly becoming the *lingua franca* of the engines. At the canteen, Banaś found the Latinos from "Bush" and the "Latinos" from "Putin", and with his broken Spanish he told them what exactly the French were using as fuel. He returned with a big smile, and even greeted the German, who was just painting fresh crosses on the "V2".

The only thing left was to wait.

And we didn't have to wait long. A few hours later the Latino men – both born and naturalized – in a complete state of

inebriation commandeered “Van der Waerden” and set off across the Pyrenees in search of additional conversational partners.

Victory seemed at hand. But eventually it turned out that our celebration was premature.

*

The real crisis arose at the penultimate stage, in Africa, where a local circus performance was held for the entertainment of the contestants. Because everyone – aside from the German, cleaning the tank treads off the remains of the Czech vehicle with which he had battled fiercely that day – needed to relax a little before the stage that would prove decisive for many, the tent was crowded. Knowing our own intentions, and additionally having to deal with the suspicious fact of losing the bran which provided sustenance to the dean’s hamsters, we decided to split up. In the course of an honest debate, manifesting first through a series of weighty scientific arguments – which to witnesses unfamiliar with academic life could have been mistaken for insults – then through a coin toss, it was decided that Banaś would stay to keep an eye on Hilbert-Einstein, while our tireless rodents – which we decided to take, in order to treat them to appropriately calorific food after the performance – and I would head to the lavishly decorated tent.

I felt vaguely uncomfortable when I saw the Dane from “Skagerrak” grinning happily, but alas! I did not see through the ruse even during the white mice act at the circus. I looked in amazement as the small animals performed elaborate tricks, not realizing that from the cage located in my lap a dozen pairs of small, black eyes looked at them with

amazement equal to mine.

The years spent in a research institute were not in vain, so when we made our way to the garage in the morning, just before the start, the cage of our power source turned out to be empty; the only trace of the hamsters was a half-empty bag of food and a tiny lock pick left on the table.

*

After the escape of our main power source, the only thing keeping Hilbert-Einstein in motion were the lemon cells – slightly less effective because, reckless and trusting in the power of hamster legs, for the preceding few days I’d been adding lemon to my tea. Thankfully, most of our opponents had been eliminated. The only adversary posing a threat to us, “Skagerrak”, who brazenly attacked us using our own idea, also encountered technical problems, since its whole set of rubber bands had been chewed through by some small animals, with the result that – operating on its back-up power source – it couldn’t exceed the speed of a walking man. When I found out about this, I secretly wiped away a tear and saluted in spirit the university’s mascots, thanking them for the gift they’d imparted to us before heading off – with their new companions, I hoped – to their hamster promised land, somewhere in Africa.

For a few hours our vehicle sped through the desert with no problems whatsoever. From time to time, to preserve the cells’ energy, we jumped off and trotted beside it, which proved doubly beneficial, because not only did we offload Hilbert-Einstein, but also – as university employees are inadequately trained in desert runs – we sweated litres of

water, which gradually lowered our weight. And really, for our current predicament I can safely blame Banaś alone, who, when it was his turn to trot, got lost in thought and instinctively – raised as he was on pretzel sticks – reached out for a snack. He grabbed a lemon and, before I lunged in his direction shouting “Stop! You saboteur!”, took a huge bite out of it. A large dose of lemon juice combined with me coming for him at high speed sobered him up immediately, and as he rose from the sand, his face was so full of anguish that I refrained from using the string of insults that had formed in my mind on the way. We put the rest of the lemon back in the tank, and, in somewhat dampened spirits, we moved on. And although the guilt-ridden Banaś decided to trot almost constantly, we knew that the irreversible had happened. Hilbert-Einstein finally stopped on a dune, about two hundred meters from a large ribbon bearing the word “Finish”, the crowd of spectators and – oh, the irony! – a water cart of one of the sponsors, “Lemon de France”.

With victory in sight, we were far from giving up, so although I sincerely wanted to kill my teammate, we set out to think of a way out of the crisis. As per the terms of the race, the vehicle had to be moving towards the finish line with no help other than engine power or forces of nature – and neither one of us was registered as the power source – so pushing it to the end was no good. Similarly,

acquiring fuel or modifying our vehicle was out of the question. It seemed clear, however, that we would have to change the power source. With the problem defined so narrowly, only one solution remained – to make the vehicle achieve the desired speed by pushing it off a dune. Onto which we could push Hilbert-Einstein, of course, as long as we weren't moving towards the finish line. The calculations we quickly carried out helped us establish the height of the required slope, so at once, with yearning looks towards the confused supporters and the unfortunate painter, who (being required to paint whenever he had any of the participants in sight) was creating his fifth picture featuring us, we set to work.

And that's why I'm here. Half-overheated, moving the sand by hand, the main figure in, by now, about thirty paintings – I only hope this fellow is painting my right profile – on top of the momentum-generating dune. And I hope that we can finish soon, because from where I am, I can already see “Skagerrak” trundling along at walking speed.

I'm also worried slightly whether the university will really be all that happy if we do come back with the main prize, consisting of a dozen carrier pigeons, a sextant, two beautiful carriages and a harpsichord...

■MICHAŁ CHOLEWA

The idea of creating *Smokopolitan* came to our minds in January 2015. At that time, during one of the meetings of Krakowskie Smoki (a kind of social club dedicated to the science fiction and fantasy fandom), we decided to start a new speculative fiction magazine.

We've given it a name "Smokopolitan" as a connection of the Polish word "smok" that means "a dragon" (dragon is a symbol of our club) and the title of some famous lifestyle magazine – I guess you can figure out which one. We wanted, however, to make a lifestyle press for the science fiction and fantasy readers. The first issue was published in May 2015 – six months later. Its premiere took place at Media Library of the Regional Public Library of Kraków on the Krakowian minicon – Smokon.

But why a fanzine? Many years back fanzines and small magazines were important space for exchange of ideas and views in Polish reality. In that press, the writers who nowadays belong to the top authors of the genre, had their debuts. The development of the Internet made these small, bottom-up projects decline, disappear or transformed them to the websites. In this new condition they're not "themselves" anymore. The fandom also commercialized itself and started to be more professional. That's why our purpose lies in bringing back to life the fandom initiatives in Poland, in accordance with the idea "fans for fans". We wish we had a publishing basis for the young, talented authors who are still waiting for their literary chance.

Was it worth it? Of course! After all, Smokopolitan allowed us to come to Barcelona and promote Polish speculative fiction all around the world!

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ELIN KAMIŃSKA

The background features a sunburst pattern of rays in shades of blue and orange. In the foreground, there is a dark blue silhouette of a city skyline. Key elements include a tall tower on the left, a Ferris wheel in the center, and a large domed building on the right. A few white clouds are scattered across the sky.

JOHN-HENRI HOLMBERG
NALO HOPKINSON
JOHANNA SINISALO
CLAIRE WENDLING
WALTER JON WILLIAMS

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