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EDITORIAL

Dear reader,

"Parsek" is the oldest Croatian fanzine, first published in 1977 and still running. It is also the bulletin of Science Fiction Club SFera from Zagreb. Today, SFera consists of some two hundred members and is a literary society, as well as a fan club. The annual SFeraKon convention, organized by SFera, attracts nearly a thousand fans each year, and the SFERA Award (I know, the spelling bothers me, too) is awarded in several categories. Now, let me introduce you to the Croatian SF, with the little help of SFera's cute (oh, well) official mascot, Bemmet.

Enjoy!

Boris Švel

In Zagreb, 26th April 2012

"Parsek" on the internet:

<http://parsek.sfera.hr/>



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NOTE: all materials are translated by the authors themselves, unless stated otherwise.

PARSEK is bulletin of SFera, Društvo za znanstvenu fantastiku, IV. Podbrežje 5, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia. Editor and designer: Boris Švel. Cover: Kontakt logo. All rights reserved. PARSEK has been awarded as the best European SF fanzine on the Eurocon 201 in Stockholm.

One of the foremost Croatian SF authors, Aleksandar Žiljak was born in 1963 and resides in Zagreb. He won SFERA Award six times, equally excelling in illustration and prose, as well as the editorial work, being the co-editor of the new Croatian SF literary magazine UBIQ.

Aleksandar Žiljak

LONG MARCH FOR PANDA

An old tale says that once upon a time - a long, long time ago - all the giant pandas were white. And then, one day, a little shepherd girl - Losang was her name - died defending a panda cub from a leopard. All the pandas gathered at her funeral. They dug her grave in soft black earth with their paws. And when they laid Losang down into her grave, they cried, wiping their tears with their clumsy paws, black from the black soil. From that day on, all the giant pandas have black legs, black ears and black circles around their eyes. And Losang and her three sisters were turned into mountains.

I pause on the steep road. I watch the Four girls, snow-covered peaks rising above the clouds, and the forests on the lower slopes of the mountains. Once, a long, long time ago, pandas mourned a girl. I wonder if a single human being cried a tear when the last panda died.

* * *

Japanese crested ibis, cranes, snow leopard, wild asses, yak, Yangtze dolphin, pheasants, Asiatic lion, gibbons, tiger, orangutan, Philippine eagle, Javan and Sumatran and Indian rhinoceros...

We sit before a screen, three hundred of us, in a large hall brightened by the morning sun. It is informing time. On the screen, smiling announcers greet us, tablets in their hands. The news are good. The solar panel production is up seven percent compared to the last year. Preparations for the Party Congress are proceeding as planned. All the stares in the hall turn to Deying, he's the deputy from our labor unit. The reclamation of Shanghai is continued with removal of four more skyscrapers. On the screen, controlled blasts demolish consoles and they collapse in the clouds of dust. New forest will sprout in their place.

News from the world are next. Japan reports of the first whelped Japanese wolves. Our hearts beat faster at tiny, still blind pups licked by their alpha. Behind the announcer,

the image changes: we watch a black rhinoceros, his front horn three feet long, as he threads savanna in the Ngorongoro crater. With joy in her voice, the announcer reads that the number of the black rhinoceroses finally rose to 10 000 and that the species can be considered safe. The exaltation in the hall is almost tangible. And then, Deying leaps from his chair, raises his clenched fist and shouts: “Long live! Long live! Long live!”

Three hundred voices join him as one, three hundred fists reaching up. “Long live! Long live! Long live!” breaks through the hall, thundering across the valley, echoing between the mountains of Wolong, over the entire country once called China, throughout the entire world. Another species is returned.

* * *

Great auk, Pyrenean ibex, beaver, imperial eagle, wolf, lynx, wolverine, otter, trouts, sturgeons, Eleonora’s falcon, Mediterranean monk seal, wisent, brown bear, spoonbill, stork, honeybees...

The Center is three hour’s walk behind me. I thread the road worn out with ravines. It takes me to a mountain village. Actually, it’s not there anymore. We know it was there, we even know what it looked like: several old photographs are exhibited in the Center. Peasants gathered before their houses, their board roofs pressed by stones.

Men wrapped into their garments, under furry caps. Women with shallow hats adorned with white feathers. Curious children staring into camera. There’s nobody left of them, neither peasants, nor the photographer, nor his guide. The modest houses crumbled a long time ago, the forest conquered the village, only a beam or pillar can be found here and there. And that only if one looks carefully. The road would be covered by forest, too, if we didn’t maintain it.

* * *

Blaubok, quagga, black rhinoceros, gorilla, bonobo, African wild dog, giraffe, cheetah, pigmy hippopotamus, lemurs from Madagascar, gazelles and bontebok and oryxes, zebras, okapi, crocodile...

White water roars through the valley. I read the signal from an ultra light unmanned solar-powered airplane: my target should be here somewhere, in the thicket growing around the small waterfall. But the forest is dense, and black-and-white fur is excellent camouflage. Allegedly, one could pass a still panda merely few steps away without seeing it. The signal guides me precisely, but the beast is well-hidden.

And then I spot her. Alpha-7 emerges from beneath the bamboo and follows the rock. She stops, turns around, sniffs the soil, swaying slowly uphill. Pandas love water, sometimes they drink so much they cannot

move. From here, she resembles a plush toy, but I'm well-aware pandas are not to be taken lightly. In the Center, they showed us an old television clip: a panda grabbing a ZOO visitor's jacket with his teeth. He wouldn't let go until the tourist took the jacket off. It's a bear, after all.

It's early afternoon. I follow Alpha-7 for the whole day, visually, as well as following the signal emitted by an implanted transmitter and relayed via the plane. Finally, she settles down in a bamboo grove. I find her laying on her back. I stalk her without a sound as she eats bamboo peacefully, holding the stem with her forepaws like hands.

* * *

Passenger pigeon, ivory-billed Woodpecker, grizzly, black-footed ferret, red wolf, jaguar, monkeys, condor, giant armadillo, tapirs, macaws, frogs, vicuña, caymans, jungle butterflies of glittering blue wings...

An embryo was implanted into Alpha-7 twenty days ago, and then she was released to the mountain. Alpha-7 is one of a series of fifty. Alpha-7 is not a true panda. True pandas are extinct. Despite all the efforts, protection, death penalties for poachers, artificial insemination, attempted captive breeding. They went extinct, their habitats destroyed, forests felled, bamboo groves cut down. Split into ever smaller

groups, squeezed between clearings and roads and fields, and finally separated: one by one they died out without offspring. Only pictures, films, photos remained after them. Brief news of another species gone, seemingly forever.

But their genes were preserved. And cloning technologies made leaps since that sheep of feeble health. We reached new knowledge, mapped genomes, understood what does every particular part of DNA do and how. The procedures of direct DNA manipulation were developed. Thus we created the first embryos. And then the problems started.

Because, it wasn't enough to clone a panda. It was necessary to teach a little panda how to be a panda, how to become an animal capable of living on its own and feeding and reproducing in its habitat - once it is restored, reforested, naturally or by effort of tens of thousands of us. I myself was in a labor brigade afforesting the Sichuan mountains, planting seedlings of maple and birch and camphor and fir and spruce and larch by our own hands, stopping the erosion, washing down of soil, denuding. Without rest, without a pause, until the mountains were again covered by forest, and the forests ready to receive the first pandas anew.

* * *

Moa, kakapo, takahe, Tasmanian tiger, koala, numbat, Tasmanian devil, duckbill, bandicoots, echidna, birds-of-paradise, tree kangaroos, glider possums, wombats, kagu...

Greed. Profit. Luxury. Squandering. Furs and quack medicines and trophies and fine wood.

Greenhouse gases. Poisons. Radiation. Spilled oil. Released chemicals. Dead rivers flowing through dead valleys into dead seas. Cleared forests. Droughts. Fires. Landslides. Wars. Death. Refugees. Terror. New wars. Anger. Sorrow. Misery. Death. And more death, it seemed only death was real. And next to millions of dead people, who cared for countless plants and animals, for all that beauty and diversity created through millions of years and wiped out in less than two centuries? Next to hollow faces of starved children, their lifeless eyes staring out of sockets, who felt pity after striped and spotted cats, antelopes and deer, giraffes and zebras? Birds and fishes and reptiles and frogs? Butterflies? They went extinct one by one, with every new day: nobody counted them anymore.

And then, when there was nothing left to count, one day there was *no-one* left to count. The last human being was extinct. Did he close his eyes in peace or did he slip and fall or drown or step on a land-mine, or did the next-to-last man wound him lethally before the last man killed him? We don't

know. Frankly, barely anybody cares any more.

* * *

Steller's sea cow, dodo, tuna, blue whale, polar bear, seals, leatherback turtle, giant squid, great white shark, marlins, countless coral sea fishes, giant turtles, penguins...

But we were left behind, the unrecognized children of man. And gene bases were preserved. And what was not in them, we learned to reconstruct from external appearance, from books and movies somehow surviving, remains of a civilization committing suicide.

For some animals it was easy. A snail doesn't teach snail offspring how to be snails. But a giant panda is a different matter altogether. Or an elephant, or a rhinoceros, or a tiger.

Therefore, alphas. All females. All cyborgs, part animals, part machines, controlled by computers inside their skulls, programmed to follow the behavioral patterns of a species, the way old records carried them to us. As much as we know them.

We make errors in our ignorance. We learn on our mistakes. We progress. The rhinoceroses are back. Tigers, too. And gorilla and jaguar and African wild dog and cheetah and snow leopard. And Indian vultures and Philippine eagle and Spix's

macaw and Caribbean amazons. We recreate what was destroyed, exterminated, hunted out, poisoned. We are all devoted to that goal, without exception, every moment of our lives. There's only one guiding thought before us, shining like a star in the night, showing us the way: to rebuild the Eden the way it once was, to erase all the traces of wars and death and poisons, and to return this planet its beauty. This is the path we proudly walk, under wise leadership of the Party, the path we do not deviate from.

* * *

Alpha-7 chews bamboo peacefully, devouring it with relish. In less than four and a half months, she'll make a den in a cave or beneath a tree and give birth to a cub. A cloned cub, that is no cyborg, but a real living baby panda: tiny, blind, covered in soft white down. Alpha-7 will suckle it tenderly, hold it in her paws, watch over it. And when the cub grows up, she will lead it into the forest to teach it how to be a panda. Alpha-7 and 49 more alphas will be the mothers to the first generation of returned pandas. And if everything goes according to the plan, in as soon as several decades, the announcers will report to the world that another species is stable.

Red signal flashes before my eyes. Damn, I'd like to watch her a little bit more: Alpha's peace crossed on me, erasing from my head the images of horrors we've been through. But, the red warns me and I retreat, softly, softly, so as not to disturb the mother in her meal. The four girls are covered by snow, but it is warm here. Somewhere in the ticket, a pheasant calls. Higher up, there are takins, another returned species, and golden monkeys and leopards in the forest.

The future is the world that's green and blue again; wind whispering in treetops, bending grasses and carrying seed through buzzing of bees; birds singing at dawn, hooves echoing, paws threading softly, softly. Rains falling, while waterfalls thundering down the cliffs, all the way to the blue lakes and further on, to the vast oceans in which dark tuna schools circle again, while sad whale moans echo in the deep.

This is the world we create, I muse as I open the covers on my back. I turn my back to the sun and open the solar panels. I feel joy as my batteries charge under the pleasant caress of the sun. This is the world whose ruined beauty we restore.

We, the heirs to humans that are no more.

We, the robots.

Mirko Karas is a science fiction fan from the times immemorial, and is basically a good spirit of SFera, the SF club from Zagreb. I don't know exactly how he began to write, but it must have been something that occurs after long reading of science fiction. I mean, he must have thought: "I can do this, too..." And then the usual: "I can do it better!"

Mirko Karas

LIVE STREAM

The damn bills were spawning in my Inbox.

Well, OK; paying bills was not such a big deal, but sometimes you just want to treat yourself to something a little bit extra. Like antique editions of *Alan Ford* comics I just scored on this auction. I shut down the link to eBay and opened my homepage to check the statistics of my channel on the *Stream*. Numbers and graphs raced over my wall screen, but there was just one thing I was looking for.

“Ranking below thousand?” grinned Ivana peeking over my shoulder. “Looks like you're not really interesting.”

“Hey, I was in the first five hundred last year! I just have to find the right scenario and I'm back in the game!”

“Good luck with that. Once, at college, we did this sociological analysis of the various scenarios popularity. We tried to predict the trends. Our accuracy was just a little bit better than a random guess. I

thought I'd never say that, but even sex doesn't sell as well as you'd expect.”

“No way, just look at the top streams!” I clicked on the “Cool” list and opened a few channels. “Superhero costume gang bang. The Naked Chef... I wonder how he fries zucchini without scalding his...” The next few channels I flipped had nothing going on.

“Hey, that's my neighbour.” Ivana stopped me. “She told me she was high on the list but I didn't think she'd get that far!”

The girl on the screen was reading a book and eating grapes. She was kind of cute but did not strike me as someone who would get such attention.

“What's her game?”

“Yoga. Every night.”

“What, naked? Or smeared with oil? Something like that?”

“Nope. Just yoga. She doesn't even wear leotards.”

“And people get off on THAT?”

“Her roommate is a painter. She has some really bizarre paintings, but I find them amusing. That possibly affects her ratings as well.”

I threw the remote onto the couch, cursing the unpredictable taste of people. I just could not think of a way to get their attention. Porn was a sort of a safe bet but I had neither guts, nor interest in such things. Besides, after the hanky panky with that little Goth babe, half of the office was mocking me with tips and pointers on what I should have done. And she nearly bit my head off, too. Apparently, she did not have a clue I was on the *Stream*. Well, who wasn't? The *Stream* was a standard part of every ISP package.

The screen flipped to my channel. I was looking at myself, loitering around the room. Behind me, Ivana was putting on her coat and waving goodbye.

“See ya. And don't fret. Only a few people make real money from the *Stream*. The yield is usually peanuts, only the first hundred or two net some serious cash.”

As if it was about the money... It came in handy, but honor and glory mattered. Popularity. The fact that the world wanted to know something about you. It was easy for her to play indifferent when all the Wiccans in town followed her stream. At least since she had started with the rituals...

I checked my comic book shelf. Thanks to them, I made it into the “Almost Cool” list last year but at the moment

nobody cared about stuff like that. You had to find something new, the right thing, and do it regularly so people would notice you. That meant ratings, and with proper ratings came money and all... The ratings mattered. I started flipping channels. Nothing from the neighbours. Saša from the upper floor was watching me. Optimist. We both grinned and nodded. Alexandra had a dinner guest. Candles, soft music... She had a new hairdo, too. I thought to get back to her channel after dinner, there might be some action.

Nothing from the guys from work. Except Rudjer. The kid played online chess, so I watched a bit. Not a bad player. I could ask him for a game or two after work.

I flipped to boss's channel. It was encrypted. Since the Domestic Security Legislature abolished free encrypted channels, password protection was an expensive affair, but with his salary he could certainly afford it.

I flipped the channel of Ivana's friend. Bingo! She was sitting in a lotus position, wearing comfy baggy pants. Watching her go through asanas was kind of meditative. And she was a cutie. I might ask Ivana about her, she could introduce me.

There was a poster of Corto Maltese on the wall that drew my attention. I made a mental note of it; I might use it as an icebreaker later.

* * *

I twitched and woke up. Blinking in the dark, I smacked my tongue a few times. The bedside clock showed it was almost two in the morning. I hugged the pillow... and heard noises from the living room.

There was someone else in my pad. I heard drawers open and someone rummage through them. Who would break in without checking the place on the *Stream*? Who the hell breaks in on the *Stream* at all, where everyone could see him?

Shit.

The real question was did anybody watch me at all. If I had better ratings, I would be safer than a museum! But, as it happened... Also, broadcasts from the *Stream* were not automatically recorded unless the subscriber paid for such an option. And it made no sense if the ratings were low.

Ain't it just great?

I reached for the phone. It was not there. I left it in the kitchen. How was I supposed to call the police? I might as well stay in bed until the burglar leaves but I disliked the idea of parting with my stuff.

I sneaked up to the door and pushed it just a little bit, as quietly as I could. Nobody in sight. I grabbed the metal rod from the weight lifting set in the cupboard. It would finally be of some use, since I was not doing any workout, anyway. I sat down on the bed and rolled around it, loudly. I coughed and stood up, stomping my feet. If he was smart, he would hear me and get the hell out of

there. I went for the light switch. Let him think this was a late night whiz.

Slowly, I opened the door. There was not a sound. The bastard was hiding somewhere.

Or maybe, he had already gone.

I took a step into the darkness of the living room, clutching the rod with my sweaty palm. It seemed I was alone. I went to the kitchen to get the phone.

Something shifted in the corner of my eye. A shadow beside me sighed and tore off the wall. Shrieking in horror, I swung the rod. I felt it through my arm, the flesh crushing and bones crunching.

I cudgelled the pulpy mass on the floor two more times and only then did I stop screaming.

* * *

The police arrived a few minutes after I had made the call. In the burglar's bag they found the collection of comics I got from eBay last week. What a stupid reason to die! The detective who took my statement lowered the sheet covering the corpse and shook his head.

“It was a bit of overkill. Those last few blows were not necessary for self - defence.”

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat.

“But, we also consider mitigating circumstances. Witnesses confirmed you were attacked.” he opened his PDA.

“Witnesses?” I raised my eyebrows. Seemed some night owl stumbled upon my stream and had a live broadcast of the burglary.

“Yes. A lady called just after you did. She recorded everything from your stream and sent us the recording. It made things easier, really. Keeping other factors in mind, it looks like the issue of excessive self-defence won’t be raised. There won’t be any charges against you after all.”, the detective closed his PDA. “I can send you a copy of that recording if you'd like. Remind me tomorrow when you come to the precinct to sign your statement.”

“I'd appreciate it.”, I nodded while we said our goodbyes.

At that moment a thought struck me.

“Excuse me!” I stopped him at the door. “You mentioned other factors. What was that?”

The detective gave my wall screen a glance and got out without a word, shaking his head.

Dawn was near and I was too shaken, too edgy or just too tired to go back to sleep. I plopped into the armchair and turned on the screen.

The ratings graph was through the roof.

* * *

Carefully, I placed the crystal skull I bought on eBay on the table and stepped back to have a better view. It looked magnificent, especially now when its pedestal was covered with a black velvet cloth.

“I wonder if anybody dares to steal THIS beauty.” I said in a sinister provocative voice with an icy stare I practiced in front the mirror.

The ratings graphs showed that I was slowly, but steadily, pushing me into the top 50 streams.



Tatjana - or more commonly (and simply) Tanja - is a sine qua non of Croatian SF, being a multiple SFERA award winner, for prose and poetry, as well as for her visual works.. She is an accomplished visual artist, editor of many SF books, also always helpful to her colleagues. Her stories have a distinct touch, and this one is fairly representative for Tanja's writing.

Tatjana Jambrišak

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although we offer a wide range of professional careers for telepaths as well, for instance, in the field of entertainment, education, offspring care and cross-species geriatrics.

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In addition to the lavish regular meals and comfortable cabin accommodation for the crew provided free of charge by the star

cruise company of your choice, you should also count on various commission fees and generous tips from satisfied customers awarding your efforts and enthusiasm.

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Choose one out of numerous attractive positions on special offer this decade: hostesses to all known sentient species, entertainers (stand-ups, cabaret artistes, jugglers, magicians, puppeteers and live-meals-on-stage culinary experts), fitness instructors and zero-gravity sport coaches, land excursions managers, on-board spa and swamp therapists, youth psi-counsellors, professional casino escorts and holophotographers. Presently, there are also numerous openings for highly paid jobs of maintenance staff and managers (inner space sweeps and outer shell vacuum cleaning, ecosystem assistants), medics, galactobiologists, all species female escort personnel (essential skills required), accountants and gentlemen hosts on board.

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Do not miss this phenomenal opportunity! Call us now!

A MILLION CREDITS FOR ALL!

Ed Barol, twice the SFERA award winner, is often regarded as the tough guy of the Croatian science fiction, but he is in fact a very gentle person. That means that you shouldn't judge him by his looks. Or by his bloodthirsty stories...

Ed Barol

60 DAYS TO GO

Whilst looking at two young men who were strolling around the shop nudging each other and laughing, Linda was turning the pages of a magazine with one hand and with the other she was massaging her right leg that stiffened up from her standing above the switch that was activating a silent alarm. Her eyes were hurting from following the two in the convex mirrors placed around the shop. She was cursing the night shift and the uncomfortable chair which hardly fitted her backside.

On the other side of the shop a middle-aged man took a beer from the fridge and started walking through the aisle

towards the cashier. Linda recognized him as a regular. Almost every night he would go home with a pack of beer, which manifested itself in his rather large belly. Two young men in baggy clothes and woolly hats finally stuffed a pack of chips each under their wide jackets and started moving towards the exit laughing. Linda was relieved, the hell with them and the two-dollar goods. She charged for the beer and looked at the door through which a slim elegant woman in her thirties entered. The woman looked expensive and well kept; she was the type that Linda didn't see often in the shop, nor in this part of Baltimore.

The woman was digging through her purse, as she came up to the counter. The man with the beer was walking out of the shop and while looking back at the woman he almost walked into a broad tall man, dressed in a long black leather jacket, who approached the counter and smiled to Linda.

- Hey girl, grab me a bottle of Jim Beam, will you?

He had messy black hair with few gray hairs and a three-day beard, but Linda liked him so she gave him a smile a lot more beaming than her job description demanded. Linda took the bottle from the shelf behind her while the elegant woman kept on digging through her purse without paying attention to them.

Linda put the bottle on the counter, made of artificial gray granite, and the man, still smiling at her, pulled a semiautomatic gun out of his jacket. Linda stood there, stiff with her mouth open, while the woman looked up, screamed meekly and dropped her purse on the floor.

The man took a step toward her, reached out his hand, grabbed the woman's hair and pushed her on the counter. Linda opened the cash desk and started taking out the money, putting it in front of the man, while pushing the silent alarm with her right leg.

- Take it, not much there, take it, take it and go!

Still smiling, the man was holding the gun pointed at Linda.

- This is not what I came for. In some other occasion I wouldn't have said no but I can't take it with me where I am going tonight.

- Wh ... what?

- Bye, bye!

The bullet hit Linda in the middle of the forehead throwing her on the shelf with drinks behind her. The woman's scream got lost in the crash of the broken glass. Linda slipped down on the floor with her hands spread out while the bottles kept falling down around her. The woman tried to turn around and run but the man grabbed her again by her long, dark blond hair pulled back, pulled her and hit her head over the counter causing one more scream.

- Shut up! You will have the opportunity to shout. You and I will have fun in the next couple of hours.

- Please don't! I have money! - the woman whined in tears.

- I'm not interested in money, I don't need it, I want something else from you - the dark hair man whispered in her ear.

He was pushing her from above with his left hand holding her head, leaned against the counter and with his right hand, the one he held his gun in, he was going over her thigh, pulling up her skirt.

- You will come with me now and you will be obedient or otherwise I will release a bullet to your head immediately! - he said with a rough voice and bit her ear.

A melodic sound preceded the opening of a double door that slid to the side. Two police officers in dark blue uniforms and with guns already pulled out jumped in and immediately spread apart. The dark haired man turned around and pulled up the screaming woman in front of him raising his gun.

Gunshots deafeningly echoed in the closed space, the glass was sprayed around and the food from shelves flew up in the air. Two bullets fired by the man, have hit the policeman on the right in his chest pushing him back against the wall and two bullets fired by the policemen have hit the woman, silencing her scream and rotating her in a way that another three bullets have shot the man in his chest, knocking him down on the shelf among boxes and food cans.

* * *

Rotating lights of a white police car with the blue horizontal strips were reflecting on the shop's windows. A black Lincoln Navigator pulled over next to a surrounded perimeter and two men in dark coats got out. They crawled under the tape and looked at the shop whose windows were dominated by yellow placards with noticeable red letters that were advertising the sale and as such fit the local colors.

The two passed by the curious crowd that stood on the crime scene and they approached a group of five officials that

surrounded the body on a stretcher. Most of the journalists and TV crews have gone by now.

- Paul Keating, special agent FBI?, the older man jerked his wrist showing his ID ? - And this is my partner, Fred Garson. A blond balding detective in a worn out corduroy suit worn over a sweater pulled out his hand.

- Nice to meet you, Phil Ruskin, I called you.

- That's him? - The younger agent asked.

- Yes, I would say so. The description matches and the gun, nine-millimeter SIG Sauer, is probably the same one that was used two days ago in the triple homicide up in Allentown. The bets are three to one that the ballistics will confirm it.

The older agent with thick gray hair and a military haircut kneaded down next to the dead man whipping the oily asphalt with his coat tails. His forehead on the narrow face with long nose wrinkled, while he was staring at the dark hair man in a leather jacket lying dead on the stretcher.

- Son of a bitch, were been chasing him over two months now in three federal states. He is one of the worst serial killers that showed up lately. What do you have on his identity?

The detective took out of the bag that was near his feet a see-through plastic sack with a brown leather wallet and raised it up.

- We found in it a drivers license issued in Reading by the name Jared Holt. We checked and the name and the face matched. He was reported missing last year. He was married, father of two and a car mechanic in Ford's service. He had no record and he hasn't been persecuted.

Paul Keating stood up slowly shaking of the dust from his coat tails.

- In that case, check all the cases within the last year that might match his working method. I don't care why he freaked out and started to kill, you got the bastard and that's all that matters.

The detective waved to the two mechanics that were waiting with a black rubber sack and put the see-through sack for evidence in the bag.

- Three people died tonight. Our man, the saleswoman and a woman that happened to be in the shop.

- I'm sorry about your man - said Keating - but at least it's all over now.

Behind them the technicians have already put the stretcher with the black sack into the coroner's van and slammed the door.

* * *

Jared woke up with a feeling of suffocation and pressure. It was dark and smelly and he couldn't move his limbs. He forced himself to breath slowly and he saw a small point of light above his head. He slowly moved his right arm upward, pushed

his fingers into a small gap and expanded it. He pulled the zip of the black sack toward his legs and straightened himself up into a sitting position. A strong smell of morgue replaced the smell of black rubber in his nostrils. Weak fluorescent light from two square lamps at the ceiling threw some light on the room. Black sacks occupied three out of five ironed chrome tables behind which there was a wall with fridges for the deceased. The idea that he could end up in one of them made his skin crawl. He looked at his chest and touched the holes surrounded by the crusted blood on his flannel shirt and then he scrubbed his face.

Shit, he thought, this is the last thing I need. Waking up at the last station. He got of the cold table and opened the three remaining sacks. Inside there was a young fat girl with a shocked expression on her face and a bullet hole in her forehead, a beautiful, long blond woman and a policeman in dark blue uniform. He looked at the yellow letters on the emblem. Baltimore.

There's only one solution left, he thought. I am a victim or a murderer. Given my luck I'm probably the latter. In any case, the next sixty days will be pretty nasty. He checked his pockets. Empty. Then he started to search the clothes of the deceased. Two credit cards and 75 dollars in cash. At least something. The smell of the room was getting into his nostrils more and more, which made him feel sick, together with

robbing of the deceased. He went to a shining metal lavatory on the wall, bent above it and threw up all of his dinner in one quick convulsion.

After he had regained the control over his stomach Jared went to the double metal doors and slowly opened them a bit. He peered into the poorly illuminated empty corridor and stepped out. It took ten minutes for him to find the backdoor exit. Near the front entrance a big old black guy was sleeping. He was a night guard with a CD player on a small table next to him, from which Elmore James' music was quietly spilling over the walls. Above the table there was a Red Cross poster hanging whose upper left angle came off and folded over so it looked like a puffed up canvas. He got back and moved slowly towards the other side of the building. The backdoor could have been opened from the inside without the key. Once outside, he took a deep breath sucking into his lungs the pricking air and smell of the night, pollution and the street.

Baltimore has a harbor, oil loading terminals, tankers and ships that stay there for a short period of time. To embark on one of those like a stow-away passenger and go few thousand of miles away from this place seemed to him like a good idea He wrapped his leather jacket around him and started to walk towards the traffic noise.

* * *

The phone's vibration and its jumps on a tray table woke Paul Keating up. He tried to reach the phone and he crashed the photo of a young black haired girl from the table.

- Garson, what, what's your... ?

- Boss, the murderer's body has disappeared.

- What are you saying? - Keating asked blinking his eyes and trying to shake away the sleepiness.

- The night guard noticed it disappeared when he went to make his rounds, then he called the police and Ruskin called me now. He's on his way to the mortuary - Garson answered agitated.

- I'm ready in two minutes; let's go there! - Keating put the phone down, putting his feet straight into the shoes next to the bed.

* * *

A group of men with stiff faces were looking at a black and white picture on one of the small screens that showed a black haired man in a long black leather jacket walking down the corridor and carefully peering behind every corner.

- He had a bullet proof vest on him, he must have had it!

- Garson! He was covered in blood and he didn't breathe. I checked him thoroughly.

Ruskin pulled out his hands from his jacket pockets and checked them palely. He bended over the screen so the badge he was carrying around his neck, as a necklace, covered a half of it.

- Agent Garson was surely right. Maybe the bullets pierced the vest but they didn't hurt him. Maybe he just lost his consciousness.

Keating straightened himself up and his hand went over his face - Yeah, right. Forget about it now. Start up the search and declare him wanted. Watch all the traffic, airports, buses and cab services, although, as much as I know him, he has probably already hijacked a car and disappeared.

Ruskin turned around and waved to a couple of his colleagues.

- Detective? - Keating called him.

- Yes?

- Tell your men to shoot in the head, and when he falls, feel free to drive a hawthorn picket through his chest and spray him with holly water too. Do everything to make sure he stays dead this time.

Ruskin grinned and walked towards the exit. A gray morning light pushed through the door he opened.

* * *

Half an hour later Keating and Garson had their hands around some smoky Styrofoam cups of coffee, standing near the vehicle that was parked by the road.

Garson, usually impeccably tidy and well groomed in his expensive suits, looked equally wrinkled and messy like his superiors. They were slowly sipping their hot coffees and watching the morning traffic that just started to warm up when Ruskin announced.

- We're got him! - Ruskin said happily.

- Where? - Keating asked

- He took a cab a block away from the mortuary. Idiot, it was easy. He took off at Locust Point, the harbor area that we are surrounding right now. We called all the available units and we also have his personal belongings for our K-9 unit.

- We're on our way! - Keating put his phone away and waved to Garson walking towards the car.

* * *

Jared was walking down the dock watching how distant terminals and ships being splashed by the gray waves. The idea to come here seemed to him less and less attractive. He couldn't think of a way to embark on some ship unnoticed under the upcoming daylight. Few workers were already looking at him suspiciously while he was mingling around the docks and most of the ships were unapproachable. He was walking cautiously step by step, concerned that someone may notice the holes on his jacket and hardly visible dark blood around

them. He kept walking southward, hoping that some solution would pop up and that no one would make a fuss about one less dead man.

The buzzing of a helicopter had dispersed the seagulls from the nearby coast. It was a dark blue Bell, with visible police signs. Jared shuddered. There was another one coming. Down the coast a blue light flashed on a car's rooftop that blocked the road a hundred yards away.

I should leave the soon as possible, Jared thought. The subway. If he could only find the nearest station and get lost in the crowd. He turned into the first alley away from the coast and sped up his walk. When he turned around and saw another police car passing by the alley he ran toward the next alley on the right. There were not many people on the street and those few just glanced at him. He ran a couple of hundred of yards till he lost his breath and reached the end of the street. He leaned on the corner of a building and looked at the right side where the police car was just passing slowly. The helicopter's buzz was getting louder in the air. He turned around and started to run under the sirens that were cutting the air. He turned left into a small narrow alley, still running with his heart in the throat. At the end of the alley there were two policemen holding their weapon. After he quickly looked around in all directions and decided to do the only reasonable thing, he threw himself on the ground and raised

the hands with open palms. He was soon covered by the noise of sirens, engines, shouts and policemen's bodies.

* * *

The interrogation room in a big square building at Arlington Rd, which was the FBI headquarter and where Jared was sitting across four men on the other side of the table, looked different than he expected. Instead of stonewalls, bars, prison like smell of sweat and fear, the room was bright, the walls colored in light pastel and it had no mirror behind which observers would stand as it's usually the case in crime movies. There were art paintings hanging on the walls and even the chairs were comfortable. The only thing missing was a window with some daylight. However, Jared had no doubt that the whole interrogation was somehow being recorded. The purpose of the interior was to relax him and make him talk. Psychologist and the agent in charge put their hands together and started to whisper while the cold eyed agent introduced as Keating was taking some files out of his bag and folding them at the edge of the table.

He took an envelope from one of the files and he spilled its content on the table. There were all photographs. Keating pushed them towards Jared. The photos showed various dead bodies soaked in blood, pictured from various angles.

- Do you recognize them? - Keating leaned over the table looking straight into Jared's eyes.

- No - Jared managed to keep the eyes still but his right leg started to shake randomly under the table. His fear became palpable and it filled the room taking away all the calm released previously by the environment in which he was sitting.

- You are Jared Holt, 32 years old car mechanic from Reading and a married father of two? - Keating still stared at him while interrogating.

- No.

- No? - the agent repeated.

- I am Jared Holt, but not the one you have in mind.

- And which Jared Holt are you? - a young agent in a smart suit asked him.

Jared took a small plastic cup of water from the table and sipped a bit trying to prevent his hands from shaking too much. He put down the cup wiping the cold sweat from his forehead. Is there any point in telling these people my story? After what he heard from the policemen when they were taking him in, he was cooked and fried. He turned down his right to call a lawyer. After all, whom can he call? Still, he decided to try if not for himself but rather for the next guy.

- I am Jared Holt, physicist, I work at Brookhaven National Laboratory in Long Island, New York.

Will they confirm your identity if we call them? - the young agent asked smilingly.

- I doubt it. If the Laboratory exists then it probably produces super bulbs, what the hell I know. I haven't been there for I while.

- Listen, if you think that I will sit here and listen to your bullshit - Keating got out of the chair and leaned towards him but the small chubby psychologist with round smooth face and a smile that made him look like Buddha's incarnation put his palm on the agent's forearm. - Let the man tell his story. A lot can be heard from a good story - he smiled to Jared and placed the palms on his stomach - tell us the unpleasant events from your life that brought you to this room.

Jared put his hands on the table breathing deeply, calming his trembling and trying not to look at Keating.

* * *

She entered a restaurant shaking off her umbrella before she put it in a jar near the door, looking around and searching for Jared. She spotted him sitting at a table on the right leaning over a plate chewing a steak. She took off her raincoat and gave it to a waiter who started to walk towards her smiling. Then, she slipped on to the bench across from Jared.

- Brother I see that you started without me. Did you forget again to eat for couple of days?

Jared looked at her smiling with his mouth full of food.

- Don't worry; this is only the first meal. I intend to eat at least two more and splash them all with some good wine.

- What? Did you get promoted or someone tricked you by saying that girls like man with round bellies? - She looked around the restaurant which she visited for the first time. Cute, decorated in Art Deco style, too much illuminated for her taste but the food seemed very appetizing.

- What happened, why did you insist on meeting me tonight? I spent two hours in a cab - she thanked the waiter who offered her a menu and she poured herself some wine. She raised the glass studying the wine, inhaled the aroma and sipped the first sip, which she kept in her mouth for a while, and then swallowed it.

- Listen Jenn, I called you because - he swallowed a bite taking a glass from the table - I have been chosen for the experiment that I have told you about. I'm leaving tomorrow.

- Shit, I was hoping that such an honor would not be granted to my little brother.

- Hey, that's an unique opportunity! - he replied

- Why you? Why do you send a human being at all? You could send a robot, monkey or a letter.

- Listen, I have already explained all this - he grabbed her hand and squeezed it tenderly - out of all the educated, young and healthy volunteers for this project, I slightly won over Lankenau, but only because he had a wife and a child. We are sending a man because this is the only chance we have. The project is eating enormous amount of money that we have to justify soon and the amount of energy that we need for one shot is simply incredible.

She was looking at him with her big eyes and sad lips - When are you coming back?

- The effect lasts two months - Jared sighed leaning - after that there will be a returning impulse. We were not able to calculate better to get a big enough passage.

- Are you afraid? - She asked him in a low voice.

- No - Jared replied and sipped a lot of wine - actually, what I'm afraid of the most is that nothing will happen, that we will start the process, the devices would flash, I would turn around and still be in the same room. My colleagues would say that we didn't make it but I'll never be sure. I would walk around the world looking for differences, for things that should be here but are not and for those that shouldn't be here but are. Maybe I would look for little things that I wouldn't have noticed

otherwise constantly asking myself and never be sure if we actually succeeded or not. That's my worst nightmare.

* * *

Jared entered the room with a knot in his stomach and shaky hands. Escorted by shouts of his colleagues he was shaking hands with everyone. Even Lankenau smiled at him sourly and wished him luck although Jared could have seen in his eyes that he wanted him to fail, he wanted Jared to evaporate so he could get his chance to enter the history. The room was dominated by boiling commotion, palpable enthusiasm, anxiety and tension. Mark Bellows, the project manager shook Jared's hand with his strong hand, although covered by age spots and he repeated smiling what Jared has already heard thousands of times - I wish I was a bit younger, dam' it, just a bit younger.

Peter Orsan, the biggest blabbermouth among physicists, shook Jared's hand too slapping his shoulders - Good luck Jar-Jar and may the force be with you. - And take me to a place where I won't have to listen to your stupid jokes, Jared thought.

He passed through the steel door that was fixed to a meter wide wall and entered a big oval room in which ultra fast rotating mirrors were already in motion, buzzing quietly and expecting the impact of many high power lasers. Such a knitted net of

energy would be shortly compressed allowing a precise clutch into space-time foam, acting as a blower inside a tiny bubble of quark-gluon plasma, on a virtual worm-hole stabilizing it in this space-time and spreading it beyond. This will give him an opportunity to slide through the created worm-hole into one of Everett's dimensions creating a loop that will kick him out at its other end to this same place in sixty days.

That's it, he thought, standing still on a precisely marked spot within the secured field, no step for man and as for the mankind we'll see.

* * *

- And? What happened? - The psychologist with Buddha face asked him.

- We messed up the whole thing - Jared said - instead of a loop we created a chain reaction. Not only that I jumped in one of the multiuniverse's reality, but I also kicked out of that reality my second self, who did the same in another reality and so on and so on. This repeats every sixty days. I have no idea how long this will last and how to stop it and revert it.

- Nice - the psychologist smiled to him while the agents were watching him gloomily - but how can it be that we caught you in the same clothes? Where are the clothes that you came with and where's the rest of your belongings?

- I don't know - Jared replied looking at the table - after the first break through I found myself in bed of my double wearing his pyjama. I don't know why the clothes remain. Perhaps it's because the clothes are not as unique as human beings or they don't have the will or awareness. I don't know. I don't know a lot of things.

- In any case Mr. Holt, if you want to try your luck with this story, I would advise you to take a lawyer - the psychologist stood up asking the agents to leave the room - the two of us will have a word alone.

Outside in the hall Keating punched the wall furiously - The stinky bastard will go for the unaccountability. With the stupid enough jury it could work out!

- I doubt you can sell such a thing even to the stupidest jury - the psychologist replied calmly - the evidence against him is stacking up. Still, Paul, soon they'll bring his wife. Face him with her and then question him. I want to know what motivated him and how the story begun.

* * *

A woman in her mid thirties was sitting on the sofa looking lost when Keating entered the room. The traces of a onetime beauty were still visible on her. She looked drained and tired resembling a dripping wet puddle with her bad haircut. She met him cracking the joints in her fingers.

- Ms. Holt - he settled on a sofa across her and crossed his legs - Have you talked to your husband?

- Husband? - She looked at him with tearful eyes and a trembling lower lip - that is not my husband!

- Madam, the identification was beyond doubt.

- Identification? The last time I saw my husband was a year ago when he went to a bar with his friends. I heard him when he came back home some time before midnight. He was making noise downstairs getting ready to go to bed. You know, I don't like him sleeping in my bed when he gets drunk because he smells on beer, snores, pukes and sometimes even wakes up the children. I don't mind him going out but, you know, these things I can't stand. I think he felt asleep on the couch but a heavy noise woke me up. I found the table upside down, the vase broken and the door opened, but I haven't seen Jared since.

Keating was looking at and sympathized with the sad bleary-eyed woman who kept on crossing her fingers in despair. He knew that look. It was a look typical of people whose lives have taken them to the road of no return and where the dark clouds were their only companions. He used to see that look on himself when he would look in the mirror. Long time ago he sacrificed his family for the career that hasn't brought him anything he hoped for. His ex wife hasn't spoken to him for a long

while and his rare encounters with his grown up daughter were full of tense silence. The arrest of some criminal, or even his dead body under his feet, would be the only thing that could disperse the dark clouds above him for a moment and bring some light.

- Madam, does your husband have a sister? - He asked her.

- A sister? - She looked at him surprised - no, he doesn't have a sister. You know, his sister and mother have died in car accident when he was still a child.

* * *

While climbing the stairs towards the office, Keating found an appropriate moment and spoke quietly to Garson

- Fred, I want you to take Holt to medical examinations, magnetic resonance, CT, fluoroscope, let him be scanned by x rays from all sides, even if it'll make him shine in the dark afterwards. I want all the possible examinations to be done and then take all the results and bring them to me only. Get all of his existing medical records from Reading. Come up with something to drag him out. I will hit him in the head if needed.

- Come on, boss - the young agent who was standing a stair lower opened his hands and started to laugh - should I take him for a mammogram as well? Do you really believe in what that animal told you?

- I don't know what to believe - Keating relied - but in two months from now I will personally take him to the examinations and compare the results.

- Boss - Garson addressed him quietly - forget about it, you'll just get into more troubles.

- Just do what I told you - Keating looked at him furiously from above, strongly squeezing the handhold and lowering his voice for an octave - the responsibility is mine. Make sure to get his dental record too.

* * *

Three months, later Keating was sitting in a semi-dark hotel room looking at the picture of a young girl on the table in front of him. He lit a lighter and approached it to an angle of a pile of paper that he held in his hand.

The flame touched the paper and the moment the flame changed the color from blue to yellow and the paper started to bend, he threw it to a metal can in front of his feet and continued to look at the random swirl of smoke and sparks that mixed with rays of light coming from a neon commercial on a nearby building and entering the room through the blinds.

The flame and the light were still creating mutual shiny and complex shapes when Paul Keating put the barrel of his official gun into his mouth choosing the policeman's solution to escape from chaos

and a reality for which he believed that was not worthy of existence.

* * *

With pain in his legs Jared was walking for hours on the rough terrain over Narragansett. He got down to the ocean's coast at Pawcatuck Point near the cape where he once came with his ex girlfriend. He remembered the old lighthouse there, although he forgot the name of this part of the coast. That sunny day was made for relaxation near the waves and for search for the long lost moment of happy love and carelessness.

He was sitting and praising the blooming spring season that enabled him to survive the last two months although he didn't know a thing about survival in the nature. There was plenty of food, mostly wild fruit and berries. Once he read that anything that tastes good was probably eatable, so he held to that. The theory proved to be relatively correct with occasional stomach ache and diarrhoea. He gave up on the idea of trying to catch some rabbit or turkey. In a movie it would be so simple but it's always easier said than done in reality. He didn't even know how to set up a fire and even if he knew he would be afraid of becoming the meal himself since the very smell of food would surely attract a bear or a pack of wolves.

He didn't come across some friendly oriented locals that he expected in this area when he realized that there were no cities, nor he saw any cultivated agricultural land or populated areas with long houses. The tribes of Nipmuc or Pequot did not live here nor did any other tribe from Algonquian speaking group that he remembered from the school's material. The immense thick centuries old forests were spread out all over and the only people he saw once in the forest were a bunch of naked savages armed with knotty sticks who howled after him louder than their dogs. He saved himself by running crazily through the bushes. Covered with scratches and rags he himself looked like a forest monster. After that episode he decided to remain alone and alert.

For the last half a year he has been avoiding contact with humans anyway. He fell into a dark depressive period of self-pity. Tired of meeting people that would soon disappear from his life, or of meeting people who didn't know him or they just thought they knew him. He felt like a stranger that walked on the street and peered for a while through a window into people's lives. Sometimes he would be cordially greeted, sometimes harshly sent away but he would always be passing by and just observing without a possibility of entering and staying.

He was sitting on the coast looking eastward, in the distance over the endless ocean, thinking about Europe again. He was

curious, asking himself which of the four riders has caused the absence of the white man on this continent. He wished he had more time, but after three years of wandering around he surely knew that sixty days were all the time he had left. His calculations showed him that many more decades were ahead before the effect would weaken. Until then his imagination and spare time would line up apocalyptic realities. In his bad days the worst possible scenarios were merging with his worst nightmares and as such were obsessing him. He watched the dark waves that were splashing against the rocky coast measuring their amplitude and imagining a drop of water shifted by the wind from one wave to another and deprived from possibility of return.

He kept on sitting there for a long time, lonely as a yellow leaf that awaited the winter and the first snow, while the nostalgia drilled his bones. He was starrng in the distance until the upcoming darkness didn't force him to move and find some shelter for the night.

* * *

A carriage passed through an iron doorway and turned from a macadam road to an access road roofed by big oaks. The carriage pulled over in front of a long two-story house made of stone whose windows were mostly covered by bars. Few steps lead

to the entrance door where a skinny older man with thin moustache and white coat was waiting.

Three passengers got out of the carriage with their limbs stiff from the uncomfortable trip and walked toward the man. A wind blowing from the east brought a cloud of steam that was spreading from a nearby basement laundry room, suffocating them with a smell of boiled clothes. Two of them waved with their high hats dispersing the steam while the third man covered his nose with a handkerchief that he pulled out of his wide coat.

They exchanged the greetings and curtesy with the man in the white coat, who cordially greeted them at the door and they started walking through a long poorly illuminated corridor.

While they were walking down the corridor, their long shadows in front of them were pushing through the smell and shouts that were coming out from the rooms along the corridor. They bypassed a small portable table on which there was a hammer and a few instruments that looked like leucotoms and orbitoclasts. They stopped in front of a strong steal door with a small widow on it, which the man in white coat opened.

- Gentlemen, this is the impressive case of schizophrenia that I described in my article. Look at him briefly and then we'll go to refresh in my office. I regret that you didn't arrive yesterday as it was planed. The

effect would have been much more fascinating.

- Travelling is very exhausting these days, my dear colleague - the fat man, with blond hair tied in a strong short tail at the back of his head, replied leaning over the window.

Inside the panelled room there was a man sitting on the wooden floor. The man was a broad one and his messed up hair was almost entirely gray. He was tied up in a shirt whose long sleeves were tied at the back and connected with his right ankle by a chain behind the wall.

- Mr. Holt, how do you feel today? - the man in the white coat asked him through the window - do you maybe remember what you were doing yesterday and why are you in this room?

- No, not exactly - Jared looked toward the door - but obviously I did nothing good since you tied me up like this.

- Do you remember who I am? - The face from the window asked him.

- Of course - Jared replied with smile - you are that famous doctor... I am sorry but I forgot the name.

- Never mind Mr. Holt, we will introduce each other again, and it won't be the first time. I hope you will share with us some of your amazing fantasies later.

- Look doctor - Jared said getting up from the floor - really, there is no need for this - he raised his tied hands a little walking toward the door until the chain stopped him? I promise I will behave well if you take this off of me and place me in a room with a bed. And yeah, I would appreciate a couple of books as well.

- Books? What kind of books Mr. Holt?

- Classics are always welcome - Jared replied watching the group that looked through the window - but when I see you I would like to read something modern too. Actually, everything I want in the next sixty days is just a bit of rest, food and some good reading material. In return, I will tell you about as much of my fantasies as you want.

Oliver's main contribution to Croatian science fiction, beside several essays, is a complex and massive three-volume novel Araton, the very beginning of it being published in "Parsek" no. 117, and here is the next instalment.

Oliver Franić

ARATON

(Fragment of a novel)

Chapter One

In Andor

(...)

“I am looking for a place to stay. Do you know the inn called *The Ingar of Lines*?”

“You know what? I was just about to suggest it.”

“Well... I would not like it, exactly... But something in that area.”

“I know of two more, nearby. Not like *The Ingar of Lines*. That’s a better choice to spend the night. The food’s better, too.”

“Still, I’ll take one of the other two. The one closer to the river.”

I did not want to stay at the inn where I was to meet Tul Titan. He was always careful when going north, so I decided to follow his example. For his sake, as I did not believe I myself was in any danger in Andor.

We passed the huge gates and twenty steps of passage through the city walls, dark, damp and smelly despite the draught.

“That’s the new wall, you see,” said my companion. “Andor is now stronger, after having fallen once.”

“When was that?”

“I do not know. Long before I was born. The Southerners came all the way here, then. Today, we are the stronger.”

“They say another war is brewing...”

My words were prompted by the vast conscriptions in the Korimor area, and constant transports of army southwards.

“It is, it is. How many are gone already! I was not enlisted. I know how to handle them... I always avoid them.

“How many fools here, you should see!” he added, turning around. “They trust Atagi and swallow his and Mantas’s words.”

“Atagi is the *ingar*, I trust?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I think someone told me. But I would live comfortably enough without ever knowing it.”

“Stars of Kinel! Yes, Andor is ruled by Atagi, the Korimorian! I should not be telling you this, as you’re from there too, but so what! Listen! Our people are afraid of the Korimorians and don’t like them. Do you know why they have given you the white cape?”

“To mark me as the hated stranger?”

“To mark you, yes, that’s right! Don’t you even know that? The *ingar* doesn’t trust us. As soon as it’s dark, we have to go home. Outsiders are different. They’re usually Korimorians, the state trusts them. That’s why they’re set apart by white robes. Usually you can get away with it, but be careful — strange things happen to them too.”

“Do you mean to say they’re scared of me?”

“Scared, yes. It was fear alone that made the *kutman* let you go. You told him you were no foreigner here. I’m telling you, he thought you were going to see *ingar* himself. I’ve never seen anything like it before! You confused him. Nobody stands up to him like this.”

“I was merely protecting my interests. The man was trying to rob me!”

“So what? They do it every day. Everybody takes it; nobody dares utter a

word of complaint. If you aren’t stronger you must be meek.”

“Don’t tell me I’ve done something special...”

“You have, I only see it now. There, I thought — we all thought - you were one of the important ones. That’s why I ran to you.”

“Do you mind, now?”

“No. Money’s money. That’s one thing. The other... Even if you’re not important, you were brave. How they all curled up! Before just one man!”

“They were polite, as is seemly.”

“Polite? Are you joking? Or are you not from this world? Don’t tell me it’s different in Korimor! Do you know who’s polite? The one who can’t get what he needs any other way. Listen to me, I’ve seen a lot in my ten years... If you can’t reach something by force or money politeness will be of no help!”

“You have just seen different.”

“You were very lucky, *iit ani*. You deceived them. They didn’t know what I know now. Otherwise you wouldn’t have passed with three lads. No, because you humiliated the *kutman* before his men. They’re rude and vicious. They often live only of whatever they take away from the weak.”

“Then they aren’t that bad. They’re fighting for their families. The responsibility is with the one who puts them in such a position.”

“The respon... By the Book! I’ve never heard anything like that! Are you Kinel’s emissary, trying to right all our wrongs?”

“In your ten years... You couldn’t have heard a lot... How did you say you were called?”

“I didn’t. Call me Orak, that’s enough. But I’ve heard and seen more than you did in that Korimor of yours. Be certain of it, because I’ve heard enough. But you, as if you were born yesterday! What’s your name? It’s a name I must remember!”

The poor lad did not even dream how right he was. I could not boast of having listened or heard much.

“You can call me Dir, Orak *ani*,” I replied with a smile. “You say that Andorians, therefore you too, do not like the Korimorians, therefore me either. Why is it so?”

The boy looked at me as if he was seeing me for the first time.

“Listen, Dir,” he said patronizing and overbearing as if he were speaking to an even younger boy but with a certain amount of impatience in his voice. “Here, in this town, there are things you don’t ask about. You’re so ignorant that you don’t even recognise the danger. How did you survive until now? There, at the gates, you were in peril. You were all but run through by the *halaf*... Then you baited the *kutman*... It was by mere accident that it all turned out well for you. Do not stand out so when you have

no power and influence. Am I to care about you? That’s not what you’re paying me for!”

“Dir... Dir! What kind of a name is that? We are all *dir*!” he said when I remained silent.

Dir could be roughly translated into the First Language as man. That was the name given to me by my stepfather, and I took it as my own, even though it often produced wonder.

“What is that rising above the clouds, over the mountain?” I asked instead of explaining. “It seems like a castle. But the size and beauty of it surpass anything I’ve ever seen. And the height at which it sits!”

Orak shook his head and followed my gaze.

“*Ingar* protects us!” he smiled bitterly. “That’s Atagi’s Itagir. It is beautiful, is it not? Beware of it, Dir, we do not even like to look up.”

Andor, the largest city in the north of Līnes, sat near the mouth of Aramal at the Narrow Sea, surrounded in the south by the river and in the north by the high mountains of Almas; I had known that before arriving here. Now, some of it started to open to my view because the clouds had withdrawn not only from the west, where Nēur shone nearing the horizon, but also from the north, uncovering the steep sides and mountain heights. On one of the particularly tall summits there stood Itagir, snow-white, tall and distant, like some far-north bird settling

on these southern slopes, foreign and unattainable.

“Let’s go,” said my companion. “Your pay is poor and you’re neither powerful nor important so I could expect else from you. We’re close now. Let’s cross the street! Hurry, something’s coming!”

At that moment, a light chariot drawn by two *arans* in wild run flew down the winding, narrow street, sided mostly by dilapidated, generally wooden two-story buildings. I had noticed previously that passers-by kept to the sides of the street and crossed carefully, even when the street was empty. Now I saw why! The foaming *arans*, spurred by the cracking of the whip, wiped everything before them, mortally dangerous for everyone on the street. And we, almost in the middle, were more in danger than anyone else.

Orak screamed and jumped intending to cross the street as he had planned. Was there enough time? I grabbed him around the waist and threw myself backwards, barely managing to overcome the force of the young body. We fell to the still wet and dirty paving of the street, feeling the wind from the passing chariot. Orak immediately jumped to his feet and shook his fist at the disappearing chariot.

“That’s Mantas! Cursed Mantas, the worst of all the flatterers!”

I got up too and discovered that my white cape had gathered some of the rich colours from the streets of Andor.

“Is the chariot out of control? Or is the mad run some sort of amusement?”

“Amusement, yes! That’s fun for them! The streets of Andor are as deadly as the Lands of Death in Fandor! Ul Mantas is known by his wild ways! The asshole lives on writing and speaking eulogies for Atagi! And runs over us!”

“And you were hoping I was one such, if I’m not mistaken?”

“I hoped, of course! Don’t you think I would like to ride like that! You bet I would! Over the poor, dirty wretched! They’d throw themselves to the side or get run over! What I’d do to them, by Kinel!”

“So you would do the same foul things that make you angry now?”

“That’s life, Dir, of which you know nothing! I’m angry because I crawl down the street and Ul Mantas doesn’t! I spit on all those stories of equality in the past! Open your eyes, see for yourself: nine crawl, and the tenth lives! I wish to be the tenth!”

“Life has many faces, Orak *ani*. Let us rather continue.”

“Something else, Dir! I’d have passed before the *arans*; I’ve done it before. Don’t think you’ve saved my life!”

(End of the fragment)

THEY SAID ON CROATIA...

Lois McMaster Bujold, USA **2002 SFeraKon GoH**

"(...) In Croatia, I seemed to actually be taken perfectly seriously as a writer. This seems to be something of a national habit -- I saw more statues put up to writers than to generals in my ambles around the city. I can only approve.

(...) Usually, a visiting writer is insulated from knocks and jars by their anxious hosts, but it was pretty clear to me that Americans are actually welcome in Croatia. For anyone who's considering a Mediterranean vacation, I would recommend they take a look at the Istrian and Dalmatian coast; the water is clear, the seafood is splendid, and an astounding number of people speak at least some English. With some good will and an English-Croatian dictionary, I suspect one could get along rather well. And for history buffs, well, there's a feast of Greek, Roman, medieval, and other sites to see.

(...) I was continually impressed by my Croatian hosts' command of English. In part this comes from their interest in SF, as only a fraction of the available work gets translated into Croatian. Croatian SF readers are just as avid as all others I've met, and would soon run out of books to read if they didn't sharpen their foreign language skills. In turn, the exercise improves their English, to my benefit; I felt I was able to carry on high-level and complex conversations about Sfnal and literary topics with little constraint practically throughout my stay.

(...) To my surprise, we didn't bother with translation; all the attendees were expected to follow along in English, which, judging by the questions in the Q&A part, they were well able to do. I'm still deeply impressed that we could fill the room, a hundred to a hundred and fifty people, random fans, all speaking a second language well enough to carry on these complex conversations. Anyway, the interview seemed to go well..."

Ken MacLeod, Scotland

2004 SFeraKon GoH

"(...) The centre of Zagreb looks very West European: Austro Hungarian buildings, red tiled roofs on the houses, and the odd sixties or seventies office block. A few hundred metres in any direction from the centre and it starts to look more like your typical commie downtown, except with brighter neon and better stocked shops. Many of the shops are Western chains, others date back to the Kingdom or the Empire, and some are survivors from the socialist era. (...) South of the river is Novi Zagreb, all post WW2 and mostly huge - and not at all identical - apartment blocks many of which seem to have a ground floor of small shops and cafes.

The general feel of the place is pretty laid back. People dress smartly and behave politely and are friendly. You couldn't ask for nicer. Croatia is both Catholic and nationalist, but relaxed about it, in the style of the Irish Republic today rather than in the thirties, or even modern Poland. (...)"

(...) We left with a very warm appreciation of Croatia, and of its fandom. Croatia used to be a popular holiday destination, and is becoming so again. We certainly intend to come back."

<http://kenmacleod.blogspot.com>

Michael Swanwick, USA

2006 SFeraKon GoH

"Croatia is beautiful, small, egalitarian, a great place for sidewalk cafes and wandering about in Roman ruins and still-functioning Venetian cities, but possessed of a complex and terrible history. And the food is terrific. Marianne and I stayed for several days in an small apartment just within the Silver Gate of Diocletian's palace in Split and while there I imagined my favorite characters, Darger and Surplus, arriving on a packet boat hauled into the harbor by plesiosaurs. We'll see if I ever get around to writing that one. I'd be tempted to set something in the Plitvice Lakes, a long and magical valley containing literally hundreds of waterfalls, but Marianne is convinced that Terry Pratchett beat me to it with "Thud".

No toasts, but we did discover that Croatian men like to sing a capella in the bars - exquisitely melancholy old songs in multi-part harmony. If angels went slumming, this is what they'd sound like.

Mostly, though, I liked the people. Good folks, fun to hang out with, and some of them are great storytellers."

http://scifantasyfiction.suite101.com:80/article.cfm/call_me_prolific

Richard K. Morgan, England

2008 SFeraKon GoH

"(...) Zagreb in fact turns out to be this small, mostly sunny and incredibly beautiful little city on the slopes of green hills, littered with gorgeous Austro-Hungarian Empire architecture, thronging with cheery blue, clanging trams and full of laid-back, friendly people. (...)

Culturally, Croatia was for me (and even more intensely for my wife Virginia, who is Spanish) a weird combination of very familiar and very alien. There is an attitude here to family and to food which is pure Mediterranean. Kids are the centre of attention everywhere, eating is an important aspect of life (rather than just the fuelling up it tends to be in the UK) with thriving open markets for fruit and veg, broad arrays of (*genuinely* - check out the eyes) fresh fish and seafood, and everywhere buyers and sellers who want (and have the time) to *talk about* the produce as if it actually mattered what you put in your stomach. To this extent, it all felt very much like being back in Spain. But at the same time there's a dash of something far more north European in the slightly sober-looking coffee houses, the well behaved traffic, the more sedate, quieter pace of things when compared to the frenetic speed and volume that Spain likes to operate at. And of course there's the language - Croatian, helpfully lettered in

Roman rather than Cyrillic characters, but still a million miles from a Romance tongue, full of harsh slavic sounds and peppered with a selection of loan words that I sometimes recognised from my very rusty Turkish. It's fascinating to read (well, look at) and listen to, but it's not a tongue I had any confidence about getting easily to grips with. My publisher concurs - it is, apparently, incredibly grammatically complicated (as it seems are most slavic languages), with endings for everything, and the antique declensional complexity of Greek or Latin. We spent the whole six days we were there eternally grateful for the high levels of English speaking competence among the Croatians we met."

<http://www.richardkmorgan.com/news.htm>

Walter Jon Williams, USA

2001 SFeraKon GoH

"(...) I was guest of honor at the Croatian national convention, held in Zagreb, and the object of an enormous amount of warmth and hospitality, for which I remain grateful."

<http://walterjonwilliams.blogspot.com>

SOME USEFUL LINKS

<http://sfera.hr/>

Web page of SFera, science fiction club in Zagreb.

<http://nosf.net/>

The premier Croatian science fiction portal.

<http://www.istrakon.hr/>

The most beloved Croatian SF convention.

<http://www.3zmaj.hr/>

The page of the club in Rijeka.

<http://crosf.nosf.net/>

Some Croatian SF in English.

<http://zagreb-eurocon2012.com/>

That's where you wanna go.

<http://www.larp.hr/novi/>

Ognjeni mač, the LARP club.

<http://srebrnizmaj.com/>

Red srebrnog zmaja, they got medieval.

And many, many more. C'mon, people, use the Google!

Dalibor Perković and Boris Švel

CROATIAN SF CONVENTIONS

SFERAKON

Where: Zagreb

When: last full weekend in April

Organised by: SFera

Typical attendance: 800+

<http://www.sfera.hr>

<http://www.sferakon.hr>

The oldest and biggest Croatian SF convention. The first convention called "SFeraKon" was held in 1983, but SFera had been organizing similar events - officially and unofficially - since it was formed in 1976. In 1986, SFera hosted Eurocon with Sam Lundwall as a Guest of Honour. Today, SFeraKon hosts distinguished foreign GoHs and is more inclined towards the "serious" type of programme: lectures, panels, presentations and a yearly SFERA Award ceremony for best Croatian SF. In addition, during the last fourteen years SFeraKon visitors who attend full three days also get annual collection of Croatian SF stories included in their membership fee. However, there are also quizzes and games for those with a more relaxed approach to SF. SFeraKon is also

renowned for its film programme, where people can see up to 20 films ranging from obscure and bizarre to the non-commercial works of art, usually hard to reach.

ISTRAKON

Where: Pazin, Istria

When: mid-March

Organised by: Albus

Typical attendance: 500+

<http://www.istrakon.hr>

If Zagreb has the strongest convention, Istrian is the most beloved one. The first Istrakon was held in 2000 as a part of "Jules Verne days". Today it is a self-standing convention whose popularity among the Croatian fans is immense. Istrakon has strong Istrian flavour, but also started hosting foreign GoHs. Although there are many lectures and panels about SF and F, Istrakon's young team of organizers also likes to keep their guests entertained by an abundance of games, shows and quizzes.

RIKON**Where:** Rijeka**When:** early October**Organised by:** 3. Zmaj**Typical attendance:** 250+**<http://www.3zmaj.hr>**

The most important autumn destination for Croatian fans. In the last couple of years, RiKon firmly established itself as the third most important convention in Croatia. Convention has a diverse programme with a bit of everything.

ESSEKON**Where:** Osijek**When:** early November**Organised by:** Gaia**Typical attendance:** 100+**<http://www.gaia.hr>**

Over the years Essekon (called after the old Hungarian name for Osijek - Essek) is in constant danger of turning into a gaming convention, but the organiser have been resisting it so far, so there is always some literary SF programme included.

KUTIKON**Where:** Kutina**When:** February**Organised by:** SFinga**Typical attendance:** ?

Kutikon had its brightest days during the mid-90s. Today, it is mostly considered defunct, but there may always be some pleasant surprises.

LIBURNICON**Where:** Opatija**When:** late July**Organised by:** Kulturni Front**Typical attendance:** 200+ and growing**<http://www.kulturnifront.hr>**

The youngest and reportedly very enthusiastic convention started several years ago as "Abbacon", with just right mix of entertainment, literary events and popular science. Being held at the peak of summer tourist season is a mixed blessing, however.



