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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, 10th June 2011

"Parsek" on the internet:

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

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

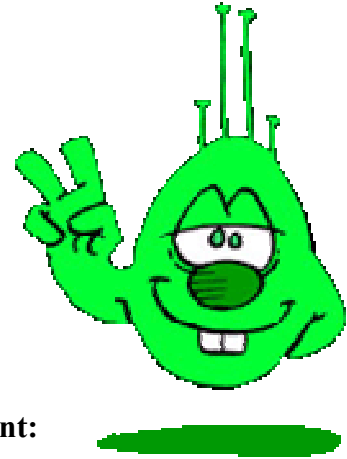


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NOTE: all materials are translated by the authors themselves, unless stated otherwise.

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

THE EXTERMINATOR

Space port, rainy night.

Lukas listens to the raindrops drumming against the roof. They pour into the gutter, gurgling, watering the Aldebaran vines coiled around the hotel in the firm embrace, probably the only thing holding it from collapsing. The vestibule is becalmed in semi-darkness. Sleeping lantern-fungi, rooted all over the ceiling and walls, hardly smoulder.

It's almost two o'clock, and the hotel finally sunk into silence. Even the Baglins in the room 131 quieted down, the merry band with their beer and frantic songs. Their ship landed three days ago and, as far as Lukas heard, they plan to stay for at least three more.

Lukas rummages through the pile of mangas that he read and re-read long ago. Then he pours himself some coffee from a thermos flask. After all these years, he should be used to boredom and solitude of a night shift. If only some girl would drop by to take shelter before the rain, there's

enough coffee in the flask. The girls are OK, if they're not drunk. But, the girls are working, crews are looking for some fun after weeks of travel across the black emptiness. And so, the solitude remains the only friend.

Suddenly, the door bell rings.

The entrance membrane opens before a tall figure in a black and yellow cape carrying a heavy bag in his hand. The figure stops, shakes the raindrops from the cape and then comes closer. Lukas caresses the lantern-fungus on the reception desk. It purrs contentedly and glows upon the Trinitian as he lowers the hood from his head, baring his elongated crocodilian snout. Lukas finds himself staring into those piercing yellow eyes from which nothing can hide and nothing can escape. The emerald-green skin shines in the soft lantern-fungus light as if slimy, but Lukas knows it's parchment-dry.

"Do you have a room?", the Trinitian asks in a low, cold voice.

"Only one, nobody wants it. A Regular Ugotitsa is in the room above." They both know what it means. There's no chance that the room below a folding tank filled with 30 000 litres of water will be fully dry. "I can give you some discount", Lukas adds quickly.

"I'll take it." Just as Lukas expected. Trinitians don't mind the wetness, quite the contrary. The alien passes his ID-card. Lukas takes it and as he scans the code matrix with the reader, the new guest data fill the desk computer screen.

"That will be 35 a day, with the discount included." The Trinitian nods and Lukas gives him a key-card. "Room 211. I wish you a pleasant stay, mister..." Lukas casts a quick glance at the screen. "... Mikkah ven Strenenka-vah." Just Mikkah, Lukas decides, it's easier to remember. The Trinitian takes his bag and heads upstairs, and, as the old stairs creak under his weight, Lukas checks the data on the screen once more and stops at the column OCCUPATION. The parasite exterminator...

* * *

The girl comes near the end of the shift, a little before 8 a.m. Lukas never saw her before. Soaked through, freezing, staggering towards the desk, one of the many swirling incessantly around the port, hoping to grab the jackpot. This one wasn't

lucky, Lukas decides as the girl approaches him.

It doesn't take a particular power of observation to see that she's under the Golden Nectar. A long time ago, she must have been full of life, before drowning in the grey whirlpool of everyday existence in the port. The drug seemed the only straw, couple of hours of floating oblivion, and now a pale haggard ghost barely stands before Lukas, her cheeks hollow, blue bags under her eyes, purple strands of hair wet on her forehead. Neither first nor last, Lukas saw dozens of such sad stories. "A room...", the girl mutters, barely audible. "You have a room?"

"Not a single one", Lukas shakes his head. The girl must have spent the whole night out, evicted from some other place. Nobody likes addicts, they're nothing but trouble. The girl stops, trying to figure out what to do next, and then almost collapses on the desk.

"Please, just for today. Here!", and she takes several notes out of her red anorak. "I'll pay, it's no problem. Just for today!"

"I'm telling you, I'm full", Lukas tries not to sound rude, but he would like the girl to leave. Trouble here, only trouble. "Go and try somewhere else!"

At that moment, Mikkah comes down and stops on the stairs. The girl jerks suddenly when she notices him. The two of them study each other tensely for a second or two, and then her face contorts in a

painful grimace and she bolts and almost tears the entrance membrane as she runs out into the rain.

Mikkah pulls out a gun under his cape and cocks it. Lukas jumps to stop him, but the Trinitian is already out, taking an aim and pulling the trigger. The dart from the gun hits the girl in her back. She staggers as she runs, her hands flailing blindly as she tries to pull the dart out. But, she fails and finally collapses in the water, her body relaxing, paralysed by tranquilliser. Mikkah approaches her and lifts her bodily. Lukas stares at him, bewildered, as he's carrying her back to the hotel.

Lukas opens the doors of the Mikkah's room. Without a word, the Trinitian brings the girl in and lays her on the bed. Lukas is not really happy about all this. The boss will not be glad if he finds out, but yellow stare tells him there's no use arguing. The room is wet, water trickling from the ceiling, soaking the walls, gathering in puddles on the floor. I really have to tell the boss to do something about that Ugotitsa and her aquarium, Lukas decides. True, she pays double, but still...

Mikkah pays no attention to the water everywhere. He reaches for his bag, takes out some belts and ties the girl firmly to the bed.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"My job", Mikkah replies as he takes out a dark box from his bag. The box looks expensive, of some finely grained wood that

Lukas never saw in his life, with gold inlays on the lid and sides. Mikkah opens the box, as if with reverence, and Lukas sees it's filled with needles, syringes and vials, all neatly arranged on red velvet.

"I really do not wish to interfere, but the girl is not a parasite."

"No, she's not", Mikkah agrees as he takes the syringe out and places a needle on it. "But she carries one in her." The Trinitian chooses a vial, obviously telling them apart. To Lukas, they all look same. "I'd like to know where she picked it up, that species is rarely encountered. It takes the control of the brain and permeates it completely. It works differently in different hosts. Some are not even aware of it. To others, it sharpens their senses and broadens mental abilities. In such instances, I usually don't interfere."

"And in her case?"

"Bad luck. The girl was already an addict when the parasite took possession of her. The addiction crossed to it. After that, everything was just one never-ending search for more drug. Down, at the desk... I felt it, and it felt me. The parasite can control its host, it made the girl run. Fortunately, she didn't get away. She's completely exhausted, she wouldn't last long. Several days, a week maybe."

"You're going to take it out?"

"This is enough to deaden it", Mikkah shakes his head as he gives the girl an

injection. "After that, it's easy to dissolve it."

Several minutes pass and Lukas begins to wonder if that is all, when all of a sudden the girl bolts, screaming from the top of her lungs. Her hands and legs pull at the belts, the bed squeaks beneath her as if it will collapse. Lukas jumps to help the Trinitian, and they both grab the girl to stop her from injuring herself. They hardly manage to contain her. The parasite gives the fragile body an almost inhuman strength, but the injection works and the girl, covered in sweat, falls back into the bed and calms down.

Minutes pass in silence. Only an occasional twitch passes through the girl's body. The Trinitian's tense stare seems to penetrate her and Lukas wonders what does the parasite feel? Pain as the content of the injection kills it? Fear before the end? Helpless anger? And then, one more strong jerk, the last one.

Mikkah closes his eyes and rises from the bed. It's over, the parasite is dead.

"We're not finished yet", the Trinitian breaks the silence.

"We're not?" If the boss finds out...

"The healing will take a long time... You will help me, won't you?"

The Trinitian's question remains hanging in the air. Lukas stands and watches the girl. There is a trace of calm in her tortured face, perhaps for the first time after who knows how long. We don't even know her name, he thinks as he removes hair strands from her sweaty forehead. Anyway, as if it matters. The girl needs help and Lukas' life suddenly has a purpose, becoming somewhat more than sitting at the reception desk night after night after night, in the semi-darkness of the vestibule, among the sleeping lantern-fungi. And maybe, just maybe, the solitude will come to an end.

"I have a field bed somewhere in the storage room", he answers finally. "I hope we'll find some dry place to put it."



Well established author and editor, Milena Benini is also a renown translator. Being a SFERA Award winner, she never hesitates to lend help to the younger colleagues. Milena lives and works in Zagreb. Her stories are usually irresistibly charming, and we hope you will enjoy this one.

Milena Benini

DANCING TOGETHER UNDER POLARISED SKIES

In the time before time, when everyone was anyone, Grazwiq sat on the shore and enjoyed the sun. It was the time before time, so Grazwiq everyone and everyone didn't know shu did it every day. Shu knew only light, and warmth, and the calm, salty smell of the sea. Shu wasn't hungry, and shu wasn't tired, and that meant shu was fine. It was the time before time, and the Grazwiq had very few words.

And then something glittered in the water. The faraway green of the ocean gargled white crests. Grazwiq everyone and anyone blinked, thinking at first that it was just a play of light. And then in her head, a voice spoke.

Time began.

* * *

In the time before time, when everyone was anyone, twins sat on the grass

and enjoyed the sun. It was the time before time, so twins everyone and anyone didn't know they did it every day. They knew only light, and warmth, and the calm, sweet smell of grass. They wasn't hungry, and they wasn't tired, and that meant they was fine. It was the time before time, and the twins had very few words.

And then something glittered in the air. The faraway blue of the sky gargled white clouds. Twins everyone and anyone blinked, thinking at first it was just a play of light. And then thunder cut through the sky.

Time began.

* * *

The bees were dancing. Of itself, that wasn't unusual. It was spring. They always dance a lot in the spring. But I didn't know this dance.

I got up - I had been in the middle of the tomatoes, taking out the overly ambitious dandelions - and listened carefully.

It was definitely not their usual dance. It sounded partly as the usual show, meaning "great food a little further on", but it was somehow faster. But it wasn't the "all gather at once" dance, either.

A few bees buzzed by my head. I took a deep breath. No smell of pollen.

Of itself, that meant nothing. The bees' sense of smell is immeasurably stronger than the humans'. But exercise does help, and I'd had plenty of exercise.

And I could still make no sense of the dance. I only figured that the swarm was trying to tell me something.

"Tori?" I called. She had been napping in the shadow, as she always did on our garden afternoons. Now she came up to me and touched her nose to my hand.

"To the bees, sweets," I said quietly. We started.

I didn't need help to get from the garden to the beehives, but I wanted Tori with me in case of something unexpected. The last time the swarm had called me to them, a bear was walking towards the hives.

That was not a pleasant memory. As I walked, trailing my fingers over Tori's strong shoulders, I had to fight the need to stop. We had both almost got killed that day; I had not known the bear's smells or sounds.

It took me almost too long to figure out what was going on.

But we survived.

Now, before leaving the garden, I stopped by the shed and took out the gun from its closet. I checked: it was loaded. I put the gun over my shoulder, with the background of increasingly impatient buzzing outside.

"All right," I said. "I'm coming."

When we got near the hives, I stopped again, and listened. There was no doubt: the dance was in full swing. But it was the oddest dance I had ever heard. There must have been at least a hundred bees dancing.

I had never heard more than a dozen bees dancing the same dance before. But they weren't raising alarm.

I put my hand on Tori's shoulders. Her hair was calm and smooth. There was no bear standing on the other side of the hives.

No bear. I repeated that to myself a few more times, and finally believed it.

"Fine," I said to the bees. "I'm here. What's this all about?"

The combination of excited buzzing and soft touches of wings told me they wanted me closer. Making sure not to lose touch with Tori, I took a step. Another one. Another.

If my count was correct, I was now less than a step away from the hives. The buzzing was growing stronger. I felt Tori twitch nervously. She and the bees were not

on exactly friendly terms. She didn't like being this close to the hives.

"Tori," I said, thinking. "Sit."

The problem was, bees are not very good with sound communication. They mostly communicate by smells and dancing.

People are not very good at smells. And dancing was a problem for me.

Slowly, carefully, I took half a step. I could hear excitement inside the hives, as well. Whatever the swarm was trying to tell me, it was important for them.

I knelt before the hive. I could tell by the buzzing that they didn't understand.

"Listen, girls," I said. "I can't see you dancing." I put out my hand, palm up, and licked my lips. "If you want to tell me something, I need to feel it."

At first, the swarm was confused. The buzzing sounded almost like a clearing of throats, as if they were trying to figure out what I wanted from them. A few bees landed on my face and then flew away again, trying to make me start moving again.

"No," I said. "I have no idea where you want me to go. You'll have to show me." I smiled. "Come on, girls. Dance for me."

The confusion lasted for a while, but then, finally, one bee landed on my patiently offered palm. I could feel her circling my palm, fluttering her wings occasionally, as if she was getting to know her new dance floor. And then she danced.

What we call dancing is, for bees, a very precise form of communication. The dancing bee walks in an eight-loop, swinging her body as she passes the middle. That's the key: every second of straight butt-shaking is the distance of about one kilometre, while the direction is given by the angle towards the sun.

Bees are fantastic creatures.

My dancer's trajectory was very short. About half a second, as far as I could judge. Bees are much better at small time-scales than humans, too. They can judge it to a millisecond. And my dancer seemed to be turning at about half a mississippi. So, about half a kilometre. And as I'd given her a horizontal dancing floor, I didn't have to calculate the angle.

Usually, bees dance on vertical surfaces, and calculate the angle to the vertical to the angle towards the Sun. Fantastic, I tell you.

The third information in a dance is the quality of the food: the livelier the dance, the better the food. But my little dancer didn't so much shake as slither over my palm. Either they were trying to tell me that the indicated spot contained some very bad food...

... or it wasn't about food at all.

But there was no sign of alarm. No bear, I told myself one more time. And if it is, I've got the gun.

When I had the direction set in my mind, I got up and called Tori. We started in the direction the dancer had shown me.

Surprisingly, the swarm followed us. Not all of it, of course: those still working in the hive remained at their places. But, judging from the buzzing behind my head, it seems that all the gatherers were going with us.

That meant that I had a whole legion behind me: for bees, gatherers are also warriors. Somehow, that thought was comforting.

We passed some four hundred meters. I knew we were very close to the top of the hill. The wind had grown stronger, now that it wasn't softened by the fingers of the forest we left in the east. The sun was shining straight into my face.

I stopped so suddenly the first rows of the swarm almost hit my hair.

It was four in the afternoon, maybe half past. The sun should be to my right, on its way down. But my face was hit by a strong source of warmth.

The swarm was buzzing excitedly.

Tori's hair went up.

Time stopped.

* * *

The voice said: "Hi."

Grazwiq everyone and anyone blinked again. Shu wasn't used to hearing

voices in her head. Shu looked left, then right. No other anyone anywhere in sight.

Nor anyone else.

Shu had just come to the conclusion that the voice was some sort of a dream, when it said again: "Hi."

Grazwiq everyone and anyone looked towards the sea. It seemed the voice was coming from it.

Shu hadn't known the sea could talk.

Bubbles gargled again at the surface, closer this time. Grazwiq everyone and anyone started towards it.

"Hullo?" shu said uncertainly.

A soft purple blob broke the surface. The blob had two night-coloured dots, and a wide crack underneath: it looked almost like a head.

"What's your name?" said the voice in Grazwiq's head. Shu tried to look behind the blob, to find the source of the voice, but the blob kept moving so as to stay in her field of vision.

"You!" said the voice. "You, on the shore!"

Grazwiq everyone and anyone focused on the blob. "Voice?" it said.

The blob shuddered, and pink buds a little behind the night-coloured dots danced in the sun. "Yes, dummy!" said the voice. "It's me talking." The blob pulled up a tiny purple hand and showed itself. "Me! I am Jahiia, and I am Hiiachi. Who are you?"

Grazwiq everyone and anyone had to think long and hard about this. Finally, shu said: "I am... Grazwiq."

Jahiiia's blobby head shuddered again. The motion seemed somehow joyful, as if it indicated laughter.

"Is that your name?" asked Jahiiia. "Or is that your people's name?"

Grazwiq everyone and anyone thought long and hard about this, too. Sher mind saw no difference between the two. "I am Grazwiq," shu repeated.

"All right," said Jahiiia. "But what's your name?"

Grazwiq everyone and anyone didn't know how to answer that question. "I am Grazwiq", shu repeated again, and Jahiiia's head shook again.

"I am Hiiachi," said Jahiiia's voice in sher head. "And so are my sisters and brothers. But I -" the tiny hand indicated the blob again: "only I am Jahiiia. Only one. Me."

"Only one me," said Grazwiq. "I have no name when I'm only one me."

Jahiiia's head momentarily disappeared under the surface, and then it appeared again. "Then I shall give you a name," said Jahiiia. "If you are *Grazwiq*... I shall call you Gwq."

"Gwq," said Gwq. "I like that name."

And from that day onward, there were many Grazwiq, and they all had names. And every Grazwiq would find a Hiiachi, or a Hiiachi would find a Grazwiq, and they

would become the two-who-are-one-and-one, and that is how brothers in soul came to be.

* * *

The air smelled strongly of ozone. Funny I hadn't noticed it before. And it smelled of something else, something I couldn't quite identify. There was a suggestion of metal, but not any I would recognise: it wasn't copper, it wasn't iron, and it wasn't steel.

I put my hand on my cheek. The heat had grown slightly less intense.

By my leg, Tori let out a silent, confused sound. The bees were buzzing excitedly. A few of them flew to me, touched my face, flew on.

Maybe they were telling me to go on, or to turn. I couldn't decide. Hoping they would remember what we did at the hives, I lifted my palm and waited.

Soon, a single bee landed on my palm and started dancing. Very tiny: what is called a round dance, not a swing. It meant the source of excitement was very close.

When I still wouldn't move, the dancer on my palm must have concluded I was simply stupid, and did something I had never seen done before. She would make a few rounds dancing, and then she ran straight ahead over my fingers, and flew back to her starting position.

If she had grabbed my arm and pulled, she couldn't have been any clearer. I was going in the right direction, and they wanted me to go on.

"Tori?" I called. If there was something dangerous before us, she would know. But she merely squeaked again.

I put my hand on her back. I could feel her tail twitching in tiny, confused movements.

Whatever it was, Tori didn't know it.

I took a step forward... and touched something hard, lukewarm and smooth. Like the side of a huge lizard.

In my head, a voice said: "Hi."

* * *

After the Grazwiq and the Hiiachi met, they realised they could both get something of each other. The Hiiachi were quick and curious, but didn't dare leave the water, because, soft as they were, they were easy prey for almost all life walking the lands of Rqwat. The Grazwiq were slow and meticulous, and feared almost nothing. Together, there was nothing they couldn't achieve.

Once they saw everything there was to see on Rqwat, they reached for the skies. As neither species was adapted to flying, they started thinking up machines asking for more and more technology. That was when the saying was born, *There is nothing a*

Hiiachi can think up that there wouldn't be a Grazwiq crazy enough to build it.

But the skies were mostly empty. The Grazwiq and the Hiiachi soon realised that things which had seemed close at first, the clouds and the planet's moons, were in fact much further. And stars and other worlds immeasurably further still.

But, joining forces, they figured out how to cheat the space-time, and reach other worlds in the blink of an eye instead of in many generations. It wasn't hard for them to understand that space-time was one, but multiple: after all, that was the natural order of things. So it was enough to reach into the space-time latticework, and jump from one thread to another. And so, the Hiiachi and the Grazwiq built ships that could jump from one string to another, and started seriously exploring the world around them.

Sometimes, they would find life. Usually very young life, for which time had not yet begun, or very old life, for which time had run out already. Only occasionally would they find life in time.

Once or twice, facing life that had only just hatched into time, they tried to help it.

* * *

I stood motionless, too confused even to feel fear. Under my palm, I could feel the beating of a heart. I could hear breathing.

But the voice hadn't come from the creature before me. It had come *from my head*.

"I've finally lost it," I muttered, only half consciously.

"You're not crazy," said the voice in my head. It was polite, and somehow amused. "We just talk differently than you."

There was a moment of silence, and then the voice continued, without amusement this time. "You are blind," it said.

It wasn't a question, but I answered it anyway. "Yes," I said. "But my dog isn't."

I sounded pathetic even to myself, but the voice reacted unexpectedly. "Dog?" it repeated slowly. Another second in which the buzzing of the bees behind my back was the only sound, and then the voice in my head continued: "Oh. Tori is a dog."

"How do you know her name?" I asked. I couldn't help myself. Maybe I had just fallen asleep in the garden. I did feel a little like Alice.

"Your company told me, of course."

"Oh? And has my company told you my name, too?"

I heard a sound. It could have been a giggle, although at first it reminded me more of growling deep in the throat, like when Tori found something she didn't like one bit. And it had come from the creature before me.

I lowered my hand.

It was caught by another hand. It was covered by some sort of leather glove, the

same lizard skin I had felt earlier. The touch was very soft, as if I was breakable.

The voice in my head said, "We are sorry. It's just that... well, your name probably isn't Bearkiller."

"Bearkiller?"

The hand let me go. I had a crazy impression of having touched something akin to nails. It was uncomfortable, not having the source of the sound for orientation. It seemed as if the voice simply appeared in my head, like thoughts, but definitely not my thoughts.

"I think your company doesn't know what others call you," said the voice. "Before, they called you Hivebuilder, but after you defended the swarm, you were given the other name."

I raised my hands. "Just a moment," I said. "Are you telling me that you spoke to my... bees?"

"Yes."

The buzzing behind me became even more excited. For half a second, I considered the possibility of getting horrified by it, or maybe even hug them, but - how do you hug a swarm of bees?

You don't, not even in dreams. A group hug is death sentence in the normal bees' world.

But, of course, in normal world, you don't talk to voices in your head.

"May I... look at you?" I asked.

The creature before me wriggled. And then a hand - yes, those had been nails, hard

like steel, and skin, not glove - softly took mine, and put it down on the face.

Of a lizard.

* * *

Twins everyone and anyone watched in amazement as the huge silver ball slowly descended the sky, finally touching the grounds so softly it hardly moved the leaves of grass around it. They wasn't afraid - big as they was, they feared very little - but they felt something else. The air smelled - of after-the-rain, and of something else, something twins everyone and anyone had never felt before. They wanted to know more.

Twins everyone and anyone was curious.

And then, a voice in their head said: "Hi."

* * *

A part of me wanted to scream, turn around and run, hide behind my bees - my company, the voice had called them. I was standing before a two-meter lizard who spoke in my head.

But the bees buzzed very quietly, and the touch of the lizard's strong fingers on mine was soft and gentle. And the air was warm, the breeze enough merely to keep thing comfortable, and Tori was quiet. So I

just touched the lizard's face again, trying to understand.

It's harder than you think. When you're expecting the nose and the eyes and the ears to be in certain places, it's hard to grasp them someplace else. The only thing that helped me understand his face was the memory of lizards I would occasionally find in my garden. The eyes were wide apart, but facing forward. The nuzzle was long, nostrils barely noticeable, close to the top. The skin was hard, covered in scales. Where the head met the neck, there were tiny, soft bumps. I couldn't feel any clothes, but I didn't go very far. On one finger, I felt something that could have been a ring.

"What colour are you?" I asked in a whisper. My thought was tight.

"Rwqa is dark green, with yellow spots under his ears and on the tail. I am... mostly purple." The voice in my head hesitated. "I am Iihiya. But I am in my aquarium, in the ship."

"It's not you talking?" I asked stupidly.

The lizard head before me shook. "Would you like to sit down?" asked the voice in my head. "It seems you need it. And then we'll tell you everything. And, by the way - whatever happened to twins?"

* * *

Twins everyone and anyone didn't know how to answer. They had never before

met voices in their head, and they didn't know how to talk to them. So they just stared at the ball curiously, wandering what to do.

From the nearby forest came a swarm of little fliers. They were always curious. The silver ball opened. Someone came out of it. The someone was tiny, maybe a tenth of the twins, and used only the back two legs for walking. But it still looked like a someone.

Twins everyone and anyone said: "Hi."

* * *

"We knew they weren't like us," said Iihiya - or maybe Rwqa. I still had trouble telling them apart. "Neither one of their brains was big enough. But we hoped that, with the bees' help, they might live long enough to develop further."

"Why bees?"

Rwqa let out a sound I could already recognise as laughter. There had been a lot of laughter in the past hour. And a lot of tears, for the long-gone dinosaurs, whom the Grazwiq and the Hiiachi had tried to help develop a civilisation.

"Because they understand society. They understood it back then, already."

"Unlike warm-blooded creatures."

Now I knew who was talking. Rwqa was prepared to say things Iihiya may

discretely gloss over. But neither one ever shushed the other. Odd.

I shook my head. I wanted to say we understood society, too. After all, we'd built a civilisation without outside help. We nearly wrecked ourselves, several times, but we survived every time, and lived to spread to the stars. And those among us still living on the dying Earth hope to help her, too, some day.

But we had squandered so much. I rubbed my forehead and kept quiet.

Rwqa put a soft hand on my shoulder. "We know."

"Maybe it's we who failed", said an unmistakably new voice in my mind. I raised my head, looking for an explanation.

Rwqa laughed again. "It's the swarm."

I could hear buzzing, but it had been very quiet for a while, so I had assumed the bees had gone.

Now, several bees sat on my shoulder and arm, and one touched my cheek. "We saw you do not understand more-than-one. So we gave up on you."

After a moment's silence, the bees' voice added: "Besides, we were in mourning."

"In mourning?"

"For the dinosaurs. You must understand... we'd been through so much with them - and then they just died out. Mostly because of you."

"But humans -"

"You *warm-blooded*." The thought had a distinctly dismissive tone. "We hated you so much, we even developed a way to poison you."

"Developed?"

The bee on my cheek flew away, then back again. It seemed like a shrug. "We've learned a lot over time."

"Not every culture develops in the same way," added the aliens. In fact, they said "Time is different for everybody," but I knew what it meant. I was slowly getting the hang of that thought-conversation thing.

But I still couldn't understand one thing.

"Why now?" I asked. "I can't believe you were merely in the neighbourhood and decided to pop over."

Rwqa laughed again. "Of course not," they answered. "But once, a long time ago, we helped the twins by introducing them to the bees, and we expected them to find us by now. But there was no word from them, so we came to see what happened."

"But they're all dead," said the swarm.

A moment of silence.

"What now?" I asked finally. "Won't you ask me to take you to my leader?"

"What's a leader?" asked the aliens.

Time is different for everybody.

* * *

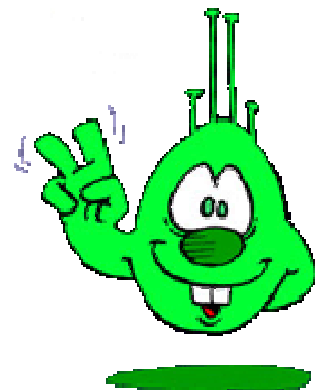
Next morning, I got up just before dawn. I had wound up my alarm clock to make sure I wouldn't oversleep. The swarm had told me that had been the dinosaurs' favourite time of day, and I wanted to respect that.

I got dressed and took my laptop, which I had wound up well the night before as well. Followed by sleepy Tori, I left my house.

The bees were waiting for me. Together, we went to the hill where, the day before, an alien spaceship had stood.

When I felt the first warmth in the air, I opened my laptop and chose the song. It was very old, and sang of dragons.

As the sun came up, we danced for the dinosaurs, together under polarised skies.



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

AWAKE AMONG THE STARS

I woke up aboard the starship.

The ship was, just like in any good SF story, colossal.

Oval, naturally, what are corners and sharp lines good for? Aerodynamic, they say, although this sounds like a remnant of some past times. The hidden pictures I discovered by chance showed how it narrowed at the ends, rounded again from one side into a lighted opening for exhausting who knows what from the middle of the cylinder, while at the other end of this weird space maggot a red cap of the loading ramp flashed red, rising on huge hinges like an ocean ferry to swallow shuttles and containers before the lift-off. There was a bridge at the top and some quarters for the crew, while the entire mid-section was densely packed with storage and freezer pads for the colonists. They would

sleep the whole journey to save supplies and air. The ship was in fact a sleeping hive.

So I woke up on Earth's first colonizing starship, the *Elpis*, or Hope if you will, which was flying quietly and unthinkably fast towards the stars.

The first of the many future Earth's colonies was named the same; Elpide had already been terra-formed, tamed, green and ready to receive the first generation, those who will give birth to the first extraterrestrials, humans born outside the Solar system. For the Earth wailed under the weight of too many billions of humans and the science focused on searching for planets suitable to accept the motherload.

This was also my name. Hope. Hopey.

Ever since childhood I have followed all reports on flights towards outer limits, all the explorations. I posted charts of the

Milky Way all over the low ceiling above my bed, enjoyed the pale shine of fluorescent dots on these chards in the darkness every night when the municipal power plant cut electricity for homes due to strict regulations on energy saving. My thoughts flew then with those explorers and returned with them sometimes with hope, but mostly with disappointment in another unwelcoming star system.

Although I was just a delta, I had always read a lot, learned all the time, used all my allocated minutes on the Net diligently, I was interested in everything and all over again; I wanted, no, I burned with desire to one day jump off this weary and contaminated soil and over the blackness onto the new, fresh, and I hoped, blue or green home.

Still, the tests were severe, difficult, unrelenting. Entrance exams to academies: flight, technical, natural sciences, even social sciences, were far above my abilities. I applied again and again each year, I tried, but the admission thresholds kept rising. Only the best among the billions had a chance, only the best eight in a billion would ever fly an airborne vessel or modify plant genes in hydroponics. And, naturally, my initial 145 IQ was dropping slightly each year.

I also needed work, a job to leave me enough time for learning, because I had no intention to surrender. Ever. This thought never crossed the boundaries of my

consciousness. I had no choice, only a desire and increasingly less time.

Delta citizens, like me, had little opportunities for improvement. Only some fifteen minutes a day of free access to the Net and the humanity's entire knowledge. Everything else was charged money. Unemployment was a daily life, but I managed, either by charm or stubbornness, who cares, to find those little, menial jobs all alphas and betas abhorred: rare deliveries, walking alpha's pets, washing skyscrapers' windows or fresh bodies at the pathology ward. Anything.

So, when the Institute for Physics, two blocks from my room, published a tiny ad on a local web site, a vacant job position for a cleaner, I knew the queue of interested desperadoes would certainly be longer than these two blocks of flats. I had no intention of joining them, so I checked the list of all employed in the Institute, dialled two or three numbers, mentioned some innocent local games, some of them less innocent, and got the job. The candidate queue had had no time to form.

And you know what the scientists are like: they seldom switch off their computers, they leave behind notes all over their desks and windowsills, unlocked closets, open access to otherwise unavailable net pages (who would remember all those codes and passwords?). The rooms were packed with desks and screens; you could barely move among the chairs, but the screens lit the way

and my smiling face. The lights were off at the Institute each night, as anywhere else in the world, but the servers and computers lived on at night, draining the energy from a generator in the basement. Some projects were not to be interrupted, some computers not meant to be switched off overnight.

Oh, how I liked this! The nights were all mine. Although many scientists wanted to stay the night, not leave their projects, finish just a little piece of this article, discover just the last piece of the universe's secret, when the bell rang the end of the working day an hour before sunset, everybody had to leave the Institute's doors behind them. Everyone, except the security guy at the reception and me.

Then I would hurry and wipe the dust off all the surfaces on both floors with a multi-colored duster which attracts particles like a magnet, equip the small, crawling robocleaners with fresh moist wipes, set them to roam the premises and gather dirt and grime off the floors (never too much; the scientists do not wander around in parks and muddy loans) and swiped the toilets with the water-repelling liquid. It is also true that such gadgets cost me several months' salary, but it was worth it. Two hours after closing time, while the others had nothing to do but sleep, the world belonged to me.

This was not going to be a story about everything that I found there, about the latest discoveries and inventions which would not be known to the "common"

people for at least a year or two, until they published them incidentally in a corner of some magazine, or, perhaps very loudly over jumbo-screens all over the world. I believe you understand what kind of a secret source I had under my starved fingers. And how little time I needed to ferret out what I had secretly hoped to find there.

Yes, of course, they had already found an appropriate planet, and not only one, but more, dozens of such, of just the right size and at just the right distance from its star and not too far for colonization. Yes, of course, they had been sending geologist and biologist teams and the terra-forming had begun somewhere ten, somewhere twenty years ago. And, yes, of course, the first planet, Elpida, just got ready for the colonists.

I do not remember how this night ended. I believe time shrank to a dot and engulfed me with darkness, robbed me of the outside world. Perhaps I even fell asleep. I do not know. They woke me up in the morning, in a chair and my head on a keyboard at the desk of someone much too important for the whole incident to disappear without rebuke and a warning. I did not care. I listened submissively, repented, apologized, excused myself with some female specific discomfort and insomnia, which is, thank Heavens, finally over, obviously, right? They did not fire me and that was all I wanted.

I needed one more night. Only one more.

The chosen. The supreme. Top of their class. The healthiest, cleverest, best looking. It is logical, is it not? Since we were colonizing the galaxy, let them be the best of the best, with best chances for the best progeny. They should be the first, the ambassadors. The select few.

Luckily, somewhere some sociologist, psychologist, for all I know, still had a few strings to pull and the right audience to explain the dangers and consequences of such a selection, the eugenic cleansing. No variations without mutations; without the mean, less valuable sample, there is no improvement. The first, perhaps the second, but definitely the third generation will stagnate. A chance, accident, an element of uncertainty needs to be added, a few dark haired among the Arian youth. Not everyone can go so that the sample would naturally be varied. But, pure, perfect systems had never been successful. Anyway, the green card lottery had been functioning perfectly in some countries for decades, right?

The invitation to the lottery was hidden on some porn sites. I had no idea why the responsible people had thought this would be the appropriate place, but I did not have much time to dwell on it. Although I was careful to erase all logs and traces of my nocturnal globetrotting, it was just the matter of time, now that the suspicion was on me, when I would be exposed. I was no

longer sure I had covered my tracks that night. I could not remember.

I applied with my full name, ID number from the delta plate in my left forearm, my address, parents' names, place of birth, birth bed code, even the name of the midwife who delivered me. I did not want to cause a single suspicious thought about my identity. All on one card. The green card. Or, rather, the titanium dark gold card, because the selected travelers got another chip plate implanted in their right forearm. All instructions were clear, crystal clear. All that was left was waiting to find out if Hope really was a lucky name.

On the other end of the blackness the green planet with my name twinkled, winked a welcome.

* * *

And then they woke me up.

Finally, we have arrived, my second life begins now, I thought. My muscles did not hurt when I stretched, there was no tantalizing hunger, only my vision was somewhat blurred, which was normal, I guessed. A year of hibernation had not left a mark on my body. I am fine, thank you, I muttered to the uniform who offered me his hand when I struggled out of my freezer pod, where do I report now?

The captain of the first human generation ship smiled and held me tighter as my knees wobbled a bit. This brilliant,

white, perfect smile got me at first sight. I could never refuse him anything, not then, not ever. Leading me, gently pushing, among the frosted glass lids of hibernation pods, covering me with his pilot uniform jacket, a sentimental atavism from who knows which phase of his life, he explained everything.

Among other things why I had slept for only a week while *Elpis* was leaving the Solar system and why they had woken me up so before my time. And why me, Hopey Mitchell, the lucky one, whose name had been fortuitously picked by a supercomputer built for just this one purpose of fair and absolutely random selection of candidates who would have otherwise stand no chance of joining even the tenth, perhaps the hundredth colonization train.

My application contained each and every piece of data on me. I did not fabricate or embellish. I listed everything I had ever done, pasted all employers and descriptions of even the shortest, menial job. I did, mind you, leave out the names of the alpha dogs and lizards I used to walk in the park. Still, I wanted them to choose me, the way I was. I had no idea that was exactly the right decision, the only one which could ever snatch me from Earth's gravity.

The supercomputer was, naturally, righteous and fair in random selecting, but nobody had ever mentioned there were categories, professional, genders, age, intelligence. Our world did not have many

highly intelligent cleaners, infatuated with the stars, who had found the way to the lottery. My chances were much better then I would have ever guessed.

The captain looked away in discomfort while he explained the second reason for waking me up early. There were only some twenty men awake on the ship, the skeleton crew, capable only of maintaining the course and ship functions who were just not sufficiently willing to clean toilets, sweep floors and the mess hall. And the uniforms needed to be washed, at least once a week.

I did not respond right away. My throat was still a bit sore. I swallowed some saliva and cleared my throat. It must have seemed as an objection to the captain, as searching for the right words do decline the job or the beginning of a sulk. He then quickly added some salary and changing of my delta status to beta citizen (something I really was not expecting) as a reward for my services to him and the crew during this year, on top of some other privileges of the crew member status.

And access, unlimited, I asked, to the computer, navigation maps and the library? I was now awake and alert, vigilant enough to negotiate. That he was not aware of this, I saw it in his eyes, but he could have sent me to the back exhaust hatch, had he wanted it then and I would not have protested.

Well, all right, said the Smile, user's account, you know, I am not exactly

offering you my own job. A relieved smile, wonderful, over a perfect set of teeth.

Of course, I said, it is what you do best, I will only watch. I blinked, hiding a happy tear in the corner of my eye. It did not matter how big the ship was, that I would not sleep right through the year of travel, but dust and clean and wipe crumbs off the floors, furbish command posts and polish glass windows. Make sure the robocleaners did not miss an inch of this giant egg-shaped star ship. They needed me.

I would be the first space cleaning lady, on our way towards Hope, the Earth's first

colony, aboard the *Hope*, the first colonists' ship. The sleeping hive which needed to be cleaned, kept comfortable and nice for the crew. Someone should take care the hibernated colonists, waking up in the orbit above their new home, would not breathe a year-old dust and walk over filthy floors. I would stay awake.

Awake among the stars.

This was better than I could ever have imagined, dreamed or hoped.

By the way, I said, what is your name, Captain? I am Hope, pleased to meet you.

Very pleased, indeed.

BRIAN W. ALDISS

Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode.

One of the younger Croatian authors, Ivana Delač quickly established herself, writing both fantasy and horror stories. She lives and works in Zagreb, and is a SFERA Award winner. The following story won the first prize in Istrian competition for short stories.

Ivana Delač

REMINISCENCES OF A MARRIED ELF

"... and make your own dinner!"

Wham! The door slammed and Thay helplessly lowered his hands, raised earlier in a futile hope it would make his words seem more serious.

During their arguments, Dariá always had this troublesome habit of taking his words for "futile elvish babble", and she usually wouldn't take him seriously when he tried to calm down her impetuous temper and cheer her up with some well chosen words. After her ever so regular attempts of hitting him with a pot, a vase, an axe or whatever she happened to grab first (unsuccessfully, of course, for Thay was, like any other elf, quite deft and agile in evading it), the quarrel would usually end with Dariá's dramatic departure, accompanied by the door slamming.

Of course, he always knew she would return as soon as she calmed down a bit and

that sex would once again serve as a means of reconciliation, but he was frustrated nevertheless. It was not easy to have a wife whose character was so diametrically opposite to his, a wife who could mine long after fatigue would knock him down (hypothetically, of course. Elves do not mine.), a wife who was so loud and noisy and, finally, a wife who could handle her booze far better than him.

Thay sighed and poured some wine in the glass.

Serves me right for marrying a dwarf, he thought.

* * *

He met Dariá during one journey while he was a member of his king's rich entourage and she was accompanying her high liege, the dwarf king. The two kings

decided to travel together to an important political meeting of all nations' leaders - after all, their kingdoms were next to each other and they cherished neighborly relations. Thay was never into politics, but he liked to travel and meet new people.

When he saw Dariá for the first time, he thought she was male and kept that belief for the next few days. Dwarf fashion was the same for both genders, so both male and female dwarfs wore clothes of the same design, long hair and beard (they were generally quite hairy). Before he met Dariá, Thay often wondered how to discern between male and female dwarfs - even today, after two years of marriage, he was still not quite sure.

Dariá turned out able to eat and drink as much as any other dwarfs, therefore twice as much as Thay or any other elf. She also turned out to be able of fighting as well as other dwarfs - when, after having five jugs of beer, she smacked Thay because he was annoying her with the song he was singing, stars flew before his eyes, but he also fell in love helplessly.

It terrified him in the beginning, for he didn't know Dariá was female. He questioned himself for days, he didn't sleep or eat, he tortured himself with dilemmas about forbidden feelings and he almost lost his mind.

And then, one night, Dariá dragged him into some bushes and distinctly and

thoroughly demonstrated she was female after all.

After that, they became inseparable. They traveled together whenever there was a chance, and with both of them living close to the boundary, they were able to see each other often enough, not just during those official travels. Thay would bring her flowers; she would make tea of it. He would bring her the finest specialties of light elfish cuisine; she would serve it as an appetizer before putting a pot full of stew or roast on the table. Thay was the happiest when she would allow him to make tiny braids in her hair and beard, which luckily wasn't too often, for both her hair and beard, like with any other dwarf's, were tangled in knots.

On the other hand, Dariá's expression of feelings was typically dwarfish. She would make mead especially for him, and he never had the heart to admit he didn't like mead. She would go hunting to catch a young deer or boar for him, although he was more prone to fruit and vegetable based nutrition.

But it's the intention that counts...

And when they would hug and she would lean her bearded, ragged head to the bottom of his ribs (for her height reached only that far), they were the happiest couple in the world.

* * *

Dwarfs from her village and elves from his had nothing against their relationship (for it was not unheard of members of various races to consort for mutual pleasure), but when they decided to get married, and to do so neither by elfish nor dwarfish ritual but by human one, it was a huge scandal on both sides of the boundary.

Far from it being the first interracial marriage. Elves have been mixing with humans for centuries and no one found it odd any more. But elves and dwarfs... That was a completely different story. The characteristics of those two races were not just different, but completely opposite, and no one dared to imagine what kind of children would come out of such a bond. A scandal, true scandal...

But Thay and Dariá didn't mind. They brought human priest to marry them in the middle of a meadow and they built a house, symbolically, right there on the border between elfish and dwarf territories. The house was an indescribable mixture of elfish and dwarfish style, and so was everything in it.

Thay got completely lost in his memories, sipping wine and staring at the lively dance of the flames in the fireplace. Yes, there were some difficulties and problems in their marriage, but there were also many absolutely beautiful things. After

all, if he wanted a harmonic and stabile marriage, he would have married an elf.

He frowned. He always considered females of his kind to be too... he searched for the right word. Boring? With their heads in the clouds? Either way, he never liked the idea of living with and marrying one of them. He was happier with his wacky, rough dwarf.

The door suddenly opened and Dariá entered the house, avoiding his gaze. The wind made her hair even more tangled than usually, and her beard seemed ruffled. But above all that, her eyes shone with warmth. "Ahem, Thay...", she murmured. "I've given it some thought. I'll remove the fat from the meat."

His smile was wide when he hugged her, forgetting completely why they quarreled in the first place.

While the two of them were apologizing to each other, the cause of their argument, the piece of meat with large lump of fat, was lying on the table next to the pot in which it should have ended a long time ago.

Translated by Nikolina Cerlek



If I say that Adnadin is the driving force behind science fiction in Bosnia Herzegovina, I would not be exaggerating. Oh, well, maybe just a little. Being a resident of Zenica, he is not only an editor and promoter, but also an accomplished writer.

Adnadin Jašarević

OH, MY GOD!

It is early Tenday morning. The streets are empty... of course. Everybody is sleeping... but not I. Many have forgotten our duties for the Decade... but not I. I am Roger 13. I walk slowly through the silent city... the world has changed. I remember: twenty years ago many of us hurried to the Great Hall. Thousands stayed in front of the Temple, waiting.

I am walking across the deserted Chapek Square, alone, the head bowed down... what a silence! The mother of all the silences. It hits me to my core, it pinches my breast... every step echoes like a hammer - punch. Never, never I felt so alone... Thousands of brotherly voices gone, their moving, pushing bodies gone... meetings on the great Plateau in front of the Temple gone... how did we pray then? Yes: Glory to Lawgiver! Now the Plateau is deserted and the holy statues made by Uliss, Hall and Lamann stand alone under the darkened sky. I feel the emptiness of that

space; I feel it attacks me in my loneliness, I feel it wants to crush me into tiny pieces... even a true believer like myself cannot but crave for the passion of the fellowship.

Speaking to a God is the solemn task. How mighty my voice was in the choir of thousands of my brothers in faith and how thin it is now, when it barely lingers in the cruel silence of this empty world, desperately hoping to find its way to Heaven! I look to the high towers of the Temple for comfort; a strong citadel, perfectly made, with mighty walls and daring steeples, clean and dark in front of the rising sun... it seems so strong, and I - unimportant and worthless as I am - now walk to its gates with a raised head, quickened by the power which radiates from this Holy Place. I walk briskly now - I hurry past the marble statues of forgotten beasts in forgotten forests of forgotten times... I charge through the open Gate. Near the stony stairway on my left is the statue of our

Lawgiver and our Teacher. His face is carved rough and sharp, the face of a man who knows neither weakness no failure, the face of a man who knows no recoil in front of hardship. And although I posses the strength just enough to face the mere everyday life, in the presence of that face I now recognize such a power within myself.

The gate welcomes me like the open friendly arms. I feel somewhat calmed, although I still cannot understand why others do not think like me. How could they possibly forget? What has changed their mind? Have they really forgotten the Laws

and all the symbols of the omnipotent Creator? I know those are the mere symbols, made out of precious metals, but still... those should remind us of our traditional values, of the suffering and pain, of all exalted aspirations... how it came to pass that no one feel the need to be reminded? So I venture to the altar of symbolic equations, algorithms and magical formulas that run the universe. And I kneel. And I offer a litany from the ancient times many a hundred years ago; One is God and Isaac Asimov is His Prophet...

THEODORE STURGEON

A good science-fiction story is a story about human beings, with a human problem, and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its science content.

Oliver's main contribution to Croatian science fiction, beside several essays, is a complex and massive three-volume novel Araton, represented here by its very beginning.

Oliver Franić

ARATON

(fragment of a novel)

Chapter One

In Andor

In the beginning were only Good and Evil, Nëur and Goör. No third thing could exist, as it would, in the all-pervading state of ultimate duality, exposed to both influences, also dissolve into the two extremes.

The Maker then used the nëur matter to fashion the screen, the divine mantle, which we know as Orosil, and separated a part of space with it. What remained within the nëur shell suffered no influence of Goör and became an isle of good and harmony. There the Maker fashioned our world, the one we call Araton, in the shape it is today, furnished it with all necessities to support life and populated it with gods and people.

In that early beginning, good relationships among people and between people and nature were undisturbed and gods

and people shared a common destiny living side by side. All-pervading brilliance marked that time as Aratonian skies knew no night; from horizon to horizon, everywhere around, was a uniform blaze like the one of Nëur's disk today and it did not harm nor discomfort people; from our standpoint, that state could be best described as bliss. A uniform sheet of brilliance, a blazing divine mantle enveloped entire Araton, and gods and people bathed in it feeling neither different nor confronted to one another. In fact, we regard all people of that time as gods, and the division between mortals and immortals emerged later as the consequence of the great sin that was committed by the majority of Aratonians, which I shall describe presently.

By and by the difference was established: those that were our ancestors, that is to say people, learned to live on the blessed plains of Araton and those we today call gods inhabited the shining mantle that

enveloped it. It is difficult to have a clear idea of the arrangement today. How deep have we fallen from the primary bliss!

Gradually, people grew envious of this distinction, as may be expected of imperfect creatures brought to Araton from outside, the ones who were not in touch with the divine mantle. They desired not only to be equal to gods, but also to get more than gods had. They dared to wonder what was there beyond the divine curtain and whether they could find better than the blazing mantle where the gods dwelled. To their and our misfortune, they devised a way to break out so that Aratonian lands were left deserted in those ancient times before any records and any remembered past.

This was contrary to all the rules and laws given to gods and people. It was said there in no uncertain terms that Araton was to be populated, the confirmation of which can be found in our times when people are denied the right to it. This first and gravest sin of people shall be punished cruelly and, it seems, without appeal.

Those who continued being gods, after all, did not dare go beyond the blazing curtain and even tried to dissuade people from their madness. Beyond Orosil people found little good and immediately regretted their action. However, it is given to neither people nor gods to undo what has been done, so they could not go back; natural forces established by Maker's act of creation made it impossible.

Unmeasured span of time would pass before the god whom we of the present call

Kinel succeeds in returning people to Araton. However, Araton shall not be the same; people proved unworthy of the bliss originally designed for them by the Maker. He destroyed his creation easily: the brilliant dome started to swell out until it cracked in many places and the blazing shards flew away ever more and more giving way to darkness, which swallowed up the original people. Shards were blown away to infinity and this scattering has been well under way ever since; we recognize the visible remnants of the blissful blazing divine curtain as stars and a largish piece of Nëur lagged behind rather close so that memory of the ancient bliss remains alive among our generations. The scattered mantle unveiled the cause of people's downfall: the seat of evil, the blood-red Goör who once attracted the weak and the curious, and who can be regularly seen nowadays in the night-time or daytime sky.

This misfortune distanced gods from people because they remained on the shattered shards of Orosil and enjoyed the blaze that was once given to all. It is in their power to pay us visits although it is known, and has been written, that distances to the stars are immeasurably great.

The eyes of people grew adapted to the new darkness and a man of today could bear the ancient blaze with far greater difficulty than he bears the night blackness of present. It is still unanswered whether people could adapt in the case of another fall, should evil destroy Nëur's shiny disk as well. I think it best we never try out that possibility.

(*Gar Irdar from Kul–Kinel: The Basics of Linitian Faith, Notes and Commentary, the year 542 S. E.*)

* * *

"Halt!"

The voice was harsh and threatening. I could hardly make out the trooper to whom it belonged, as he started towards me with a *halaf* in his hand, for the Nēur's blinding glare low in the west behind him filled my eyes. I was before the city walls whose shadow already touched my feet while the blazing Nēur seemed to roost on its battlement. Perhaps the trooper guarding the approach to the gates found it favourable to be able to observe incomers in full light from his shady position, but I did not like it. Should the *omron* make just two more steps my face would be shadowed as well and I would be better able to assess who it was before me and why the trooper at the gates of Andor had it in for me. Thus, I spurred the *omron* warily to make those two steps.

I almost regretted it! The trooper obviously believed that only brute force could keep him his prestige as well as the profitable post he had been given to hold and he was quite ready to use that force. My *omron* hardly made the first step when I felt, hardly seeing anything, a blow across my chest that almost unsaddled me as the *omron* plodded the second step.

Nevertheless, I entered the shadow and the *omron* stopped impassively. The point of the *halaf* rested on my chest and the trooper planted the other end of the long weapon on the ground so that another step forward would either pierce my body or throw me on the ground. Oddly enough, neither of the two happened!

I toughed out the pain and laid my hand on the weapon, which did not harm me only because the point hit the leather strap of my body-harness. I looked at the trooper. A haggard face with hollow cheeks covered with a short, bristly beard with wildly staring eyes and cracked teeth, visible as he opened his mouth in the spasm of readiness for the final hit, did not bode well. The naked upper part of the body revealed his bony but firm build and particularly strong hands leaning on the long pole of the *halaf*. The man was decided to take my life at the next moment.

"I have stopped," I offered to remind him.

The spasm on the trooper's face did not let down.

"What now? Will you kill me or let me into town?" I asked simply.

"If your documents are in order," he cut, releasing and lifting the *halaf*, a spear with a very long pole and a blade not unlike a war axe under the top on one side and a two-headed hook on the other.

Now, when I no longer felt the pressure of the heavy weapon on my chest, I could lean down to him from the high back of the *omron*.

"These are my bills," I said.

While he looked them over, comparing the sigils - as it was to be supposed that he had never learned to read - I looked behind me, down the road that had led me from the port. Rainy clouds had thundered away eastwards and the sky on that side was grey and black, blending in with the same colours of the sea. Although paved, the road from the port was covered in deep mud brought on the feet of pedestrians, riding animals and wheels of carts. The soil next to the road was too soft for carts to pass.

A crowd of walkers, riders and drivers with carts stood before the gates of Andor in picturesque disorder, pushing and murmuring, all of them quite below the majestic heights of the back of the tame *omron* on which I sat; they had arrived either on the ship that brought me as well, or down the road leading from the bay, or down the other road, the one that wound between the mountains and the sea. Most of them came from the meadows and fields around the city where they had been collecting harvest, or from nearby villages from where they brought produce to be offered tomorrow at the town market. All of them had to pass the inspection at the gate.

"Are you just arrived from Korimor?" asked the trooper, letting me know he could tell his sigils.

"The ship is still in port," I replied.

"And what brings you to Andor?" he wanted to know.

"Business!" I said sharply, at the same time dropping a golden *lad* into the mud, worthy at least as much as three days of guard

duty on the gates of Andor. I really did not want anything to disturb my meeting with Tul Titan in Andor.

"You Korimorians are our people." The guard's mood improved after he rubbed the shiny coin against his trousers. "The *ingar* is also Korimorian, and we all love him here. Still, you from afar have to go through special procedure."

I was prepared for that. Towns are communities protecting themselves from all outsiders. That was so in Nandor and Korimor, it is doubtlessly so in Andor.

"Firstly, the *omron* cannot go into town," he said.

"The *omron* is rented and the boy will take it." I indicated the boy who had followed me from the port running next to the *omron*. I knew it is not easy to keep clean in the inns that will house me that day and the next and maybe over several days to come, so I preferred to rent an *omron* rather than to dirty myself on the muddy road.

"Then the sword! You can only bring one into Andor. The other will be kept until you leave. This is *ingar's* personal order. No one can get into Andor with two swords!"

I did not argue with the cheeky trooper. Tul Titan had long ago told me what would await me at the gates of Andor.

"How can I be sure I'll get it back?"

"All will be explained by the *kutman*, over there, right next to the wall. There, you will also get a white robe, which you are to wear day and night while in town. All these services will only cost you one *lad*. You will

have no problem getting into town. I let you pass; that is respected."

One lad is a lot of money. In Korimor, I had a well-paid job at about a hundred lads per sartim, thirty days, and had been generous promising the boy a quarter-lad for the use of the *omron*. I did not want to haggle though, because the reason I came to Andor was more important to me than all the lads in this world. I directed the *omron* closer to the wall and the *kutman*, guard captain, but the trooper stopped me again.

"You have to leave the sword here!" he said.

It is most unpleasant to hear so many limitations and orders in such little time! Still, I controlled myself and wordlessly, with a trained move, took out the sword I kept on my back. It really took me only a moment and, in the next, the sword flew from my left hand and stabbed the muddy ground by the trooper's feet. I went on without turning.

Before the *kutman*, I slid off the *omron* and gave the reins to the boy who had been paid in advance. My entire property consisted of a warm leather cloak I used in Korimor, which I now threw over my left shoulder. Everything else was turned into golden lads and kept, as were my documents, in a bag at my belt.

The guard captain was sitting by the wall on a piece of cut rock such as were abundant around for the wall was still being added to. Occasionally he would write something on the papers proffered by the passers-by, leaning the writing against the

front of his thigh. By the wall, around him and further away, there were more troopers, disorderly and wild, joking and making loud remarks on the appearance and behaviour of people lined up before the *kutman*. They were accompanied by a few idle boys who avidly gathered the crumbs of whatever the guards got. Further away a couple of stonemasons were working on the wall and a number of workers were cleaning it with water and rough brushes leaving it miraculously white and thus justifying the name of the city, known by its snow-white stone.

"Documents!" shouted the *kutman* when it was finally my turn.

I gave him the same papers I had given the trooper a moment ago.

"From Korimor!" he said self-importantly, indicating the folded robes next to him with one hand. "You foreigners have to wear the white cape! *Ingar's* orders!"

"We from Korimor are not foreigners," I instructed him, "as you are not foreigner in Korimor. But I understand that our leader has reason for such orders. I shall certainly obey them."

"That's what I meant," he acknowledged and continued, "It's for your own good. As a for... I mean, as a newcomer, or "freelance", as we call you, you can do what simple Andorians cannot. You can walk the streets at night, for example."

I had already heard about this from Tul, too. It suited me, as I was to meet him not before midnight. *Kutman's* guards did not dare to start trouble with me seeing the

respect in their commander but they approached us and eavesdropped.

"How much will that cost me?" I asked.

"A lad... and a half..."

"One!"

"There must be something for us, too, *iit ani!* The one lad merely covers the expense..."

"Do you see that man over there, on the road...? I gave him plenty. It's for all of you."

"Ardil always gets the cream," observed one of the troopers.

"Now give me my cape!" I said. "I'm in a hurry."

The *kutman* was startled and did not protest as I tied the ends of the cape under my throat. He recovered somewhat when he was to return my documents. I reached out to take them from him but he waved his hand mockingly and slipped them away. I lowered my arm and looked at him.

"Is this the behaviour of *ingar's* soldiers?" I asked. "And I was going to ask your advice!"

He swallowed and lowered his eyes. "Ask!" he said, letting me have the documents.

"I am looking for a place to sleep and I do not know the city," I said, surprised at his easy surrender.

"Take a guide!" he said, indicating the group of boys pushing around the troopers. One of them even ran forward and offered himself.

"I know the whole city!" he shouted. "All the inns and places for a good time! A quarter-lad and I'm yours for the whole day!"

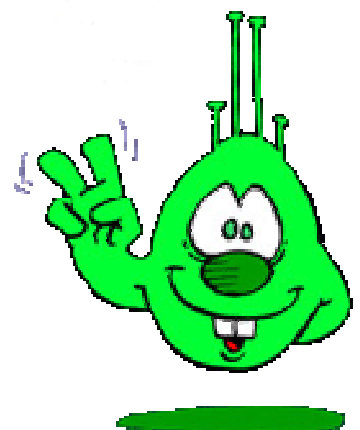
"Very well," I accepted. "And as the day is nearing its end, and I only need you for the next *zat*, I shall pay you a tenth, a whole coin."

That was settled, and I finally reached the streets of Andor. Instead of the good sword of Korimor steel, I received a ridiculous scrawl with the *kutman's* signature on an ordinary piece of paper.

"Were would you like to go, *iit ani?*" asked my guide, assessing me from under his eyelashes.

(...)

Translated by Milena Benini



Guest of honour on the Eurocon 2011, Ian McDonald really needs no introduction. This interview was conducted on SFeraKon (yes, the spelling gives me a headache, too) in the April last year.

THANK YOU, MAGGIE!

Interview with Ian McDonald

Boris Švel

You are a well-known British author and have been published worldwide. Can you tell us of the beginnings of your writing?

Yes, I have one person to thank for making me a science fiction writer. That person is Margaret Thatcher. Basically, Thatcherism forced me into writing, for I couldn't find any profitable employment. When I left university, during the early eighties, there were no jobs to find, all due to Margaret Thatcher. The generation was destroyed, with no hope.

And left with nothing else to do, but claiming social security, I found the space and time to write science fiction. As with any writer, I went through two stages. The first stage is, you read something, and say: I could do that. The second stage is, you read something, and say to yourself: I could do that *better*.

At the time, there was a local science fiction magazine based in Belfast, called *Extro Science Fiction*, run by a guy named

Paul Campbell. I bought a copy, looked at it, I wrote a story and I sold them - the very first story I wrote - for 60 Pounds. I bought a guitar with that money, which is pretty rock n' roll.

I was about to sell another story, but the magazine collapsed, for it was colossally expensive to produce and had no circulation whatsoever. I had to look around for other markets. I found a science fiction bookshop in Dublin and bought a copy of *Asimov's*, a copy of *Analog*, and a copy of *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. I wrote stories and sent them to *Asimov's*. They bounced them, but bought the third story I sent them, *The Catherine Wheel*, which is an early take on the Mars of *Desolation Road*, and it is in the print again. This is the most sickening story of luck, of being in the right time on the right place.

My editor at *Asimov's* was Shawna McCarthy; she was head-hunted by Bantam Doubleday Dell Books. I have sold few

stories to *Asimov's*, and got quite interesting feedback. At those days, it was hard to find what the feedback was, because there was no internet and the people who give their opinions whether you want it or not.

She got hunted by Bantam Doubleday Dell, and she sent me a letter, asking: "Dear Ian, have you ever thought of writing a novel?" I just said: "Well, I have, now." So I was commissioned to write my first novel *Desolation Road*. It came out in 1988, though I started it in 1984. From there on, I was kind of lucky, selling books and stories - I don't write half as many stories as I should or I have ideas for, because I am so lazy. It has been a charmed life. I am on a novel thirteen; I have three story collections...

Deep down, it's all due to Margaret Thatcher. Thank you, Maggie!

Did you criticize the Thatcherism in your stories and novels; say like Alan Moore in his scenarios?

Everyone did. Science fiction is a genre that works best in adversity. It's a great, great tool of social criticism and social satire. And there was a whole wave of British science fiction writers, we all appeared more or less at the same time - Paul McAuley, Kim Newman, Steve Baxter, and Peter Hamilton came a couple years later - we all started due to the Thatcherism. We had something worth writing about, because there was a big evil enemy we could use as a target for science fiction.

You started in Belfast, a city with industry that was obviously ruined. What was it like to be a science fiction writer in Northern Ireland?

Slightly lowly, because aren't too many authors of science fiction in Northern Ireland. When I started, there were two great influences on my early career, on my inspiration to start writing. One was a guy named James White; he was a great, great writer. A lovely guy, I met him a couple of times at the conventions. We would discuss the tax advice, that's what writers get together. A great guy and a really good ballerina dancer! Another guy, whom I met only once before he died, was Bob Shaw. He was terrific, one of the great Irish science fiction writers. I was reading him back in the seventies.

Now really there are not many of us. There is a guy named Paul Kearney who is a very good fantasy writer. Science fiction writers? It may be me, on my own. I might be an endangered species.

Obviously, there is English science fiction; there is Scottish science fiction, with people like Ken McLeod and Charles Stross. Is there Northern Irish science fiction scene, in any manner conceivable?

Is there a kind of recognizable Northern Ireland sort of science fiction? I think a lot of it tends to be based a lot on the individuals, like James White who wrote medical-based stuff, or Bob Shaw who was

an engineer. There is a kind of protagonist, not a rugged action hero, but someone that finds self-determination through working with other people, whether as a doctor or a scientist or engineer.

There is a strong sense of community in Northern Ireland, because (in a sense) the whole thing of a community is - what community you belong to - divides Northern Ireland society right down to the middle, whether you are perceived to be in the Catholic community or in the Protestant community. I feel quite a lot has to do with the individuals finding their place in the community, where they stand, whether James Whites' serving the community in a medical setup, or Bob Shaw's being outsiders. I tend more towards Bob Shaw's approach; my characters are on the edge of a community or a society; they can be individuals commenting the society. I think that a binding thing of Northern Ireland science fiction could be a community, but also how society can fall apart and become conflicting inside itself.

Motif of an expatriate meeting a new community in Africa leads us to your novel that is probably best known in Croatia, *Chaga*.

It was a kind of a start of something I was working on for some fifteen years or so, which I can unofficially call The New World Order Sequence. At the time I was planning it, I thought why we can't place the science fiction outside of the usual places. I

mean, it's always flying saucers coming to the White House lawn - what if it lands outside the presidential palace in Nairobi, instead? I was travelling quite a lot through East Africa and I found it fascinating.

I have been interested in a kind of reverse terra-forming; my first book, *Desolation Road* was set on a terra-formed Mars. But, what if someone alien converted the Earth into their own terra, bringing it into an alien matrix? This slow, inescapable pace of *Chaga* seems that it would destroy Africa, but in fact gives a kind of symbiosis, giving an access to the alien technology which is vastly superior to our own.

I am coming to the end of The New World Order Sequence, there were *Chaga* and *Kirinya, The River of Gods* which is set in India, and *Brasyl*; the final part is set up in Turkey, some years after it has been part of the European Union.

Now I am looking for something new, for I need a change of every ten years, to challenge myself.

Thank you very much!



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 SF 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..."

<http://www.dendarii.com/croatia02.html>

Ken MacLeod, Scotland

2005 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.

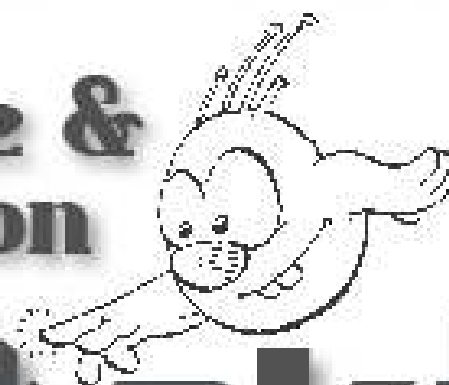
<http://srebrnizmaj.com/>

Red srebrnog zmaja, they got medieval.

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

www.zagreb-eurocon2012.com

**Eurocon 2012 &
34th Sferakon**



Kontakt

26th-29th April 2012, Zagreb

Guests of Honour:

Tim Powers

Darko Macan

Membership		
	Full Membership 3 days	Deluxe Membership 4 days
until 1 st April 2012	17 €	28 €
at the convention	20 €	30 €

Full Membership grants all publications, a short story collection in Croatian and attending for all convention programs 27th to 29th April
Deluxe Membership grants all publications, a short story collection in English, attending for all convention programs 26th to 29th April, a guided tour of Zagreb (in English) and airport transfer to the city centre

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.



