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The Captain of the Long Journey: The Final Days

Translated by Vesna Marić

The story begins with the end of the world, and ends the same way. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and so on. One day God decided to put words into action and created man in his image. And He said: that's it, man; that's where your food is, that's where the drinks are, you can sleep here, shit there and wash over here. I created you, and the rest you can take care of yourself. And so man said goodbye to God and went on his way. He built roads, churches, hotels, stadiums. He invented slaughterhouses, the stock market, betting shops, guns for the boys, irons for the girls, jackets for dogs. He decided that diamonds, petrol and gold were precious, and that water, air and nails were worthless. He decided which wine was to be drunk with which food, and which people could be combined with each other. He decided which animals it was all right to kill, and which it was not. It was not OK to kill monkeys, since they were similar to people. The monkeys also noticed this similarity. The clever little animals did not have the intention to forever be hanging off trees, scratching their armpits; they saw where it was all heading, they monitored the situation, waited for their opportunity - and it didn't take long. Even before the last human disappeared from the face of the Earth, they went into action. They started to mimic people, dress like them, think like them. They learned to drink and smoke, they learned to tell jokes, sing football songs, write tragedies and comedies. (You know that story, give a monkey a typewriter and sooner or later he'll produce Hamlet? That's not a story, it's the history of literature.) Monkeys had, in brief, become so convincing in their role that in the end they started to believe it themselves: we are human and we have never been anything else. Those who realised what had happened tried to get out; they returned to rainforests, lived the lives worthy of monkeys - but it was too late. It was no one's fault that they weren't really human, the human-monkeys said and closed them up in zoos with mini-rainforests where they hung off car tyres instead of trees. The human-monkeys went to watch them in their free time. They found it entertaining. They laughed heartily, gave them bananas, told their children: look at that little monkey peeling a banana! Look at him scratching! Look at how he jumps! And the monkeys watched them from the inside and thought: this is what we have created. In our own image.

So1Eo1 Man at Sea

I met the Captain in a particularly difficult period for the city, the country, and the rest of us. We had long given up any hope of salvation when the news reached us: there was an earthquake coming. The spectacle was as yet unseen in these lands - a seven on the Richter scale, ten on the Mercalli - the images of that catastrophe would travel the planet in a way that we never would.

The last hundred of years it kept missing us; there'd be a kind of rumbling warning in the surrounding hills every now and then, as if it was scouting us out, short enough for our walls to shiver and lights to dance. But the message was clear: I am here, don't forget me, I have not forgotten about you. Lately, it sent more regular messages. We knew it was just a matter of time before it paid us an official visit and, surrounded by blue rotating lights, stop the traffic across town. We waited for it whilst waving little flags, excited like little children, waiting for that lovely moment in which all of the crumbling concrete monoliths would come down, all of the rotting tin cans and awful jars, all of the cardboard constructions with ramshackle balconies; framed photographs, woodworm-chewed wardrobes, orange cupboards, fridge magnets, fruit bowls full of unpaid bills. It was our struggle for liberation, for a new beginning. A liberation from ourselves, but of course also a new beginning of the end - and if someone had deserved an earthquake, it was us.

The main train station filled up with crowded wagons every day. The young and the old, the disillusioned and the ambitious, the sick and the wealthy, those at their best and those who were terminal - all of them wanted to be here when the earthquake came. They wanted to be, many for the first time in their lives, a part of something great.

The Captain too arrived on one of those trains. He brought with him a heavy suitcase made of black samsonite, pockmarked with bullet holes. He shot the suitcase himself so that Zada, who was hidden in a secret compartment, could breathe. He had hidden her there from the customs control, having warned her before not to let out a peep or if she were to be discovered, to play dead. But Zada didn't need instructions. She played dead for herself, for the entire journey; not to exist was the only way for her not to lose her mind in such a tiny space. When I remarked that this hiding game was entirely unnecessary, considering that they had not crossed a single border, the Captain simply said: 'Not a state border'.

Upon their arrival at the main station, they found themselves in trouble. The connection that was supposed to meet them there, a man called Laszlo Fischer - that was all they knew about him - was nowhere to be seen. They waited for him at the arrival gate for at least an hour and a half, until the Captain, tired as he was, sat down and read the newspaper and in the crossword clues found 'an entrepreneur arrested yesterday: the solution was Laszlo Fischer. What Fischer had actually done, he didn't know; there was nothing in the rest of the newspaper about it. He didn't know what to do or where to go next. Instead of road marks, all he could see was adverts for interest free credit, folk music concerts, beer and property. None of it helped at all, and so he decided to follow his inner compass - a bit old now but still precise analogue model that he had implanted somewhere in the mid-1980s in a private clinic in Kyoto.

The compass led him to my door, a safe house in the western part of town. For those of you who don't know: safe houses were go-to places where you could stay if you got fired, and didn't want your family to know. Instead of your loved ones feeling despairing and hopeless, you left them thinking that no matter how bad things were, you still had a job. No pay, of course - but people weren't being paid for years now anyway,

except for those employed by the civil service or the theatres, so you could get away with it. Safe houses were usually abandoned libraries, factories that would turn into worker refuges by default, or they were old emergency rooms, such as the one I spent every day in, from 10am to 6pm. My residence was an old dentist surgery on the first floor - which was really far from the worst thing that could have happened to me. I spent most of the time lounging around in the old dentist chair that looked out onto the park, snoozing or leafing through patient records. Only then, whilst looking at all those root canals and denture plans, did I develop a deep respect for the work of a dentist. One day, when we build a new city, I concluded, it would be a great omission not to consult them.

When I'd get bored of being idle, I went downstairs to the games room. This was where I could always count on a team of people who'd be up for a game of yatzee, charades or a guessing game. That was where I was on that hot September afternoon when the doorbell rang. Jacob the receptionist was sick and it was my turn to cover for him. I got up from the games table and hurried to the entrance where an old man was waiting.

'Mr Kissinger', he said, 'I need accommodation.'

This confused me somewhat, but then I remembered that I had a sticky note on my forehead.

I didn't recognise him at first. He introduced himself as Viktor Bravo: this was an obvious lie, but it didn't make me suspicious, since everyone had a fake name in the shelter. It was only when a monkey stumbled out of the suitcase with a pencil behind its ear that I understood. Yes, his beard was - fake? - longish, yellowed from decades of enjoying a citrus pipe; yes, his eye nerve, on the right eye, the one that did not have a patch over it - just a mask? - twitched uncontrollably, but if I closed one eye, he looked the same as in his glory days, not a day older.

'Excuse my curiosity,' I said, 'but you don't happen to be the Captain of the Long Voyage?'

He was struck by the question. He cleared his throat and said: 'Fischer told you I was coming?'

'Fischer?! I don't know any Fischer,' I confessed. 'You're the Captain, aren't you? And this is Zada, the cynical monkey.'

At the mention of her name, Zada dropped to the floor and lay unmoving. 'Is she all right?!' I got worried.

'It's OK Z, danger's over,' the Captain said, and the monkey opened its eyes. Then he asked: 'Do you take pets?'

'Not normally,' I said, 'but in your case, *Viktor*, we can make an exception.'

'Ohohoho,' he said, somewhat mockingly. 'What have I done to deserve that honour?'

'Come on, Captain,' I smiled. 'I have all your shows on video. If you woke me up in the middle of the night, I'd be able to sing your theme tune. *Tan-tana-nan, tan-tana-tana-nan* -'

'I have always hated that little tune,' he sighed. Typical Captain, the old grumpy man I remembered. It all came back to me. All those Sunday afternoons on Channel 1, waiting for the new episode. All the summers

in the coolness of my brother's room, blinds down, biscuits, lemonade and hours of the Captain of the Long Voyage on the portable TV. And especially the summer when we made a replica of the Meridiana, Captain's ship, with the discarded boards of the outdoor toilet; the summer that ended suddenly with stitches in my finger and the banning of any more TV time, because I was, in the words of my mother, a danger to myself.

'I cannot believe it,' I said, 'the Captain and Zada... And Timor and the Doctor and Yellowbeak. Yellowbeak was my favourite character! I mean, after you. And Zada, of course. And what was the name of the stoker, that big Fin... I'll remember it...'

'The Flemish guy,' he said grimly. 'Geert.'

'Geert, that's it! The episode when that witch on that island turned you into copper statues, when Geert melted and saved you, that was the best one - OK, maybe not the best, but one of the best five in any case!'

'OK young man,' he stopped me, 'do you have a room or not?'

'I have to admit that we are overbooked... but if you don't mind some X ray radiation,' I offered my hand to him, 'welcome aboard.'

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Years after the Captain of the Long Voyage series had sailed away from our screens, many would ask what the secret of their success had been. And why were we no longer able to produce a successful series? The Captain was a product of his time, proclaimed the professional clever clogs. In the times of the forced union, in a country where thinking differently was treated like a weed that needed to be rooted out, the Captain was a national hero. The embodiment of a free spirit, one who always went against the grain, against dogmas, carried forth by a blind courage and faith in progress.

According to others, the Captain was nothing but a soldier in the service of an empire, a coloniser who sailed under the banner of the Company, shipped its cargo and fought its battles. The only thing we knew about the Company, the only one we had met had been the Man, a mysterious figure who appeared as an animated double-headed wolf on the communication screen. The Man gave orders with a 'cruel and icy voice, as icy as an Eskimo's revenge' - Yellowbeak said in his comedian style - and the Captain executed them with a great strictness, although this often bothered him. But all those orders could be boiled down to one thing: the cargo must not be jeopardised. The cargo must be protected at all costs.

But still, if you could go back in time and to that time, and watch a random episode with those eyes, you'd see that all those theories are simply wrong: the Voyage was just the most exciting thing you could see on TV. The series had everything: action and drama, pirates and spies, ghosts and androids, beautiful women, horrible monsters, and most importantly of all - secrets. The secret of the Captain's success were secrets themselves.

The first was buried deep in the past and the plot concerned itself with the events of a night that would be remembered as ‘that night’, or in the extended version ‘the night I became who I am.’ Many thought it was about the tragic loss of his family, until the episode *Gunfight at La Manche* revealed that the Captain’s rival, the Captain of the Short Voyage, was his long lost son. Was Captain Short the product of a brief affair or a love child? We never found out. (In matters of the heart, the Captain was a firm loner, and the only woman who had ever interested him, the only one that was intellectually suitable as a partner, was Jacqueline Riviera. This bold singer from the Amalfites won his heart - which he, of course, didn’t want to admit - with her sophisticated, melancholy songs about longing for a happy love. But that episode in the Captain’s life, *The Songs of My Heart*, ended with a partial disappointment. In an unexpected turn of events, the Captain found out that the real author of Riviera’s songs was the very same monster who wandered the islands at night and chopped up drunken soldiers: her adoptive son, Joan, a terrible human anomaly, who had a phobia of light so that he spent his whole sad life hiding from sunlight in the underground labyrinth of his mother’s villa.)

For a certain time - after the paparazzi caught the Captain leaving a Kyoto clinic through the back door, he’d been for a facelift there - the media circulated a story that there would be a series of the Captain of the Long Voyage: *The Early Days*, in which we would finally get some answers. But the the Captain cut those rumours short by saying: ‘The past is for me a long forgotten country, burned down and depopulated, a land I do not have the intention to sail to.’

The other secret, which drove us crazy with anticipation of what would happen next - a burden in itself - would also remain forever unrevealed. The cargo was kept in a bulletproof chamber in the hull of the *Meridiana* and only the Captain held the code for unlocking it, but the code was all he knew about it. He was allowed to use it only in the case of utmost emergency. What was it that he was meant to guard at all costs - even if the cost had been life itself, as the Company’s contract stated? Diamonds, drugs, weapons of mass destruction or something even more sinister? The viewers, the critics, the characters from the series, everyone had a theory - that it was the God particle, the elixir of eternal youth, the rat that ate Helsinki, and a cryogenically frozen Adolph Hitler - but no one ever saw the cargo, up until the last episode.

So1Eo2 Viktor and Arabela

The news of the earthquake had been accidentally leaked. One of the people working for the Seismic Institute had lost his laptop in the woods, while participating at a union paintball game with his colleagues from the Meteorological Institute. It was found by a poacher who gave it to his son who was meant to clean up the paint and rescue what could be rescued. But when the kid worked out what was on the laptop, he immediately sent the material to some hackers, who crashed all the job seeking pages and published the earthquake study the very next morning. It was very clear: the earthquake would hit by the end of the year. The Seismic Institute

tried to deny the information, claiming that the study had been faked, since it was impossible to predict earthquakes; one can only work out the likelihood of one, but whether it might take place in two minutes or twenty years, no one could tell. But official denials interested no one. Everyone just wanted a reason to go out into the streets and finally stop playing at real life.

Around that time, when everyone started going out into the streets, I closed myself up in a safe house. In the beginning I only went out when I had to buy a voucher or sell some family gold, but as time went on, I moved around town with increasing freedom. Later on, when I started working for the Captain, I stopped going home; I would say I was going on a work trip, and I would not be back for a month. I wasn't worried about being recognised, with my fake sideburns and hare lip, a crutch and hat that, basically, anyone who knows me understands I would never, ever voluntarily put on my head. What's more, there were moments when I saw my own reflection in a shop window and thought: dear god, what sort of people have come to town!

I put Captain and Zada in an apartment next to mine, the former x-ray room: he slept in the dark room, she in the cabin. The Geiger counter measured a lower radiation level in the cabin, but when I asked her whether it might bother her, Zada pulled the pencil out from behind her ear and on one of the blank pieces of paper used to register patients, noted: *Did the cat complain when Shrodinger told her: here kitty, kitty, look at what a lovely box I have brought for you?* I interpreted this to mean that she wouldn't mind the cabin.

Zada felt at home at the clinic; she was raised in a lab, as the direct descendant of Sheherzade the monkey, the first primate in whom they had managed to successfully implant the literacy gene. When she had the cynicism gene implanted in her second year, the greatest monkey satirist was created. Still, despite her intelligence, Zada was a Javan macaque and could not resist her nature. She slid down the banister, sharpened her teeth on the door handle, jumped around the surgery swinging on drill cables, constantly x-rayed her backside and stuck the x-rays on the notice board. The tenants started to complain; some did not like the fact that I had given accommodation to my 'mates', thus using my position to my advantage. Soon after, I noticed that even those who had not complained were giving me funny looks. They clearly believed that I was trying to get the Captain's money, and that this was the purpose of our friendship. But in reality, there was no money; he lived off the small change that his Bulgarian distributor of illegal DVDs paid into a secret account once a month. The Captain was the only person, I am sure, to whom even the film pirates paid royalties.

We didn't see much of each other during the first week of their living in the safe house. They went out and did not return until the evening, often covered in cuts and bruises. When I asked what had happened, the Captain would just walk past me and shut himself off in the dark room, releasing from there a range of swearwords in ten different world languages. I couldn't get anything from Zada either: if I asked her why he was swearing, she would take her pencil and break it in half.

And then, on an evening that was like all the others, the Captain called me to his room. 'Hey Kissinger,' he said, 'I have an important question for you. A question that needs the answer 'yes'. Do you have a car?'

'Not a car,' I said. 'I have a first aid van. It's not in the best of conditions, but it works, including the rotating light. Why?'

'I need an assistant with his own transport,' he said. 'I can't pay much, but it'll be enough to cover your costs.'

'Will you, please, slap me with all your might?' I asked.

'What for?'

'So that I can be sure that I am not dreaming.'

The Captain said nothing, but punched me in the gut.

'It would be my great honour,' I said, gasping for air.

'So that's resolved then, you will be my side man,' he said. 'If you have any questions, now's the moment to ask.'

'I do have one question,' I said. 'What was in the cargo?'

'That's a secret I will take to my grave. Ask me again and you're sacked.'

'It will not happen again, I promise. When do I start?'

'Immediately,' he said and gave me the newspaper with the crossword. 'Your first task: to find Laszlo Fischer, this is our priority.'

'Why are you looking for this Fischer?' I asked. 'And who is he?'

'All in good time, Kissinger,' the Captain said.

I didn't waste a moment. Leaning through the window, holding onto the window pane with my left hand, with my phone in my right, I caught the WiFi signal and typed into the search engine: 'laszlo fischer arrested entrepreneur'. The search gave no results. But as soon as I deleted the word 'arrested', some 88,600 entries came up. Which one of these Fischers was mine? Laszlo Fischer, the importer of small household goods? This makes no sense, I thought, and called Marli. Marli was a journalist who specialised in deaths and accidents, a friend from school days who owed me a favour. He was surprised to hear from me.

'Long time no hear', he said, 'is it time I paid my debt?'

'You were always smart Marli,' I said. 'I need everything you can find out about a man called Laszlo Fischer.'

'Who's he, another debtor?'

'All in good time,' I said. 'Now, get to work.'

He called me half an hour later.

'Right. This Fischer guy, as far as we are concerned, does not exist. The only appearance he's ever made is in a week old crossword. The author was: Xrzah.'

‘Xrz - what?’

‘That’s the artistic name of some guy from the Society of Crossword Makers, don’t ask. They send us crosswords every day, we don’t ask questions.’

‘So what do you think, how did Fischer find his way into that crossword?’

‘Hard to tell. Perhaps it’s an inside joke, a message for someone...’

‘It’s an enigma inside an enigma,’ I said to myself.

‘If I were you, I’d be careful with the crossword makers,’ he said. ‘You don’t know what kind of people they are, believe me. Many of them work for the Secret Service.’

I was not deterred by Marli’s warning. I finally had a job, after many years - and a job that I had dreamed of many years ago, years before I had stopped dreaming altogether - and it needed to be done. The only thing I was afraid of is that the Captain might disappear without a trace again, just like he had disappeared last time, twenty years ago.

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The Final Salvo, the last episode - and particularly its ending - was, in my humble opinion, the greatest event in television history. After being ordered to torpedo a small island in the French Pacific, the Captain hesitated. He found it hard to believe that the primitive, peaceful islanders were about to release chemical weapons into the ocean and thus cause a global catastrophe. The Meridiana crew went on a secret mission to the source of a toxic liquid at the heart of the island, from where a sample was taken and identified by the Doctor as an incredibly tasty tonic. The Captain’s doubts - that there was funny business going on - were thus confirmed, and he immediately contacted the Man and let him know that he had no intention of attacking the island.

I don’t know if you’re aware, the Man said - or rather, his right head did - but what you’re doing is called a mutiny.

If you say so, the Captain responded. But I will not attack the island.

You’re making a big mistake, said the right head while the left growled menacingly. You don’t know what consequences this will have.

I guess I’ll soon find out, the Captain said.

Sooner than you think, the left head said. Goodbye Captain, the right head said, It has been a pleasure to work with you. And the left added: It’ll be an even greater pleasure to see you at the bottom of the ocean.

The Captain gathered his crew on the deck. He made a hearty speech in which he told them that he had had to make the most difficult decision of his life, a decision that would forever change the course of their journey. Meridiana had just become a pirate ship and if there was anyone that didn’t like it, they had five minutes to get on board a life boat. No one said a word.

OK, if this is it, get to your posts, he said, and I am going to do what I should have done a long time ago.

The Captain descended into the hull, towards a door with all sorts of warnings on it - lightning bolts, bombs, skulls, swastikas. He unlocked it and, passing through a tight corridor, arrived before a bulletproof chamber. He entered a code (ARABELA) and the heavy iron door automatically opened. We could not see what was inside, there was only a close up of the Captain's horrified face. Oh my God, he said, although he was not at all religious.

Most of the crew stood outside the door with the warnings. As they waited for him in silence, you could cut the tension with a blade. The Captain finally came out, completely pale; as pale as a corpse in snow, as Yellowbeak might have said, had he been in a mood for jokes. But no one felt like joking, because the Captain looked as if he had just comprehended the meaning of life.

The Doctor was the first to speak: What's inside?

Yes, what's inside, Geert repeated.

Nothing, the Captain answered.

You have to tell us! the Doctor insisted.

I don't have to tell you anything, the Captain raised his voice in anger. What are you doing standing there like some lovestruck girls? They're preparing a war outside. Get to your positions!

The crew did what they were told. The Captain went out onto the deck where the helmsman Timor awaited him. You have to see this, Captain, he said, in awe, and extended him the binoculars. Zada climbed onto the Captain's shoulder.

The Captain looked through the binoculars. A fully armed ship was coming towards them. The image was focused: a flag fluttered in the wind bearing the insignia of the Company, the ship was named MERIDIANA. He pointed the binoculars onto the deck. There he saw the captain of the ship, with a monkey on his shoulder, and the captain was looking straight at him through a pair of binoculars. The other captain lowered his binoculars and we could then see who it was: the Captain of the Long Voyage. The monkey on his back was Zada.

May God have mercy on us, the Captain said and ordered the crew to fire from all disposable weapons. The screen went dark. The final credits came up. The End.

The interviews that followed were alight with questions. What was inside the cargo (but this time seriously)? What was the meaning of all these doppelgängers? Were they clones, robots, a collective hallucination? Or had the crew travelled in time? And who was Arabela? The Captain was firm: whatever I had to say, I said it in the series.

Yes, but how can we know, the journalists insisted, how can we be sure that you're the real Captain, that you're not the other one, from the other Meridiana? And how can you know, he said, that the captain from the other Meridiana is not the real Captain? And now that we're asking, how do you know that you're a real journalist?

The secret of the Captain's success was in the secrets, and it was also the secret to his failure. They talked about a film that would round up and put an end to the whole story, they mentioned astronomical fees, and then the Captain disappeared, just like that. No one could find a trace of him, and everyone was convinced that the Company had finally finished with him. The Company neither confirmed nor denied it; no one could find any trace of the Company either.

Soon after, the war came and the only thing that people wanted to see on TV were classical music concerts. By the time the war was over, everyone had forgotten about the Captain and the high budget movie production. The only thing we knew about him was that he had been killed on the enemy side; there were also rumours that he had poked out people's eyes with his hook in battle, although he'd actually never had a hook. Such stories were enhanced by the fact that the enemy had used Meridiana as a battleship. When our army sunk it somewhere behind Molpa, they sent divers inside the wreck, but they came back empty handed: the bulletproof chamber had been looted, it was empty. It was impossible to establish exactly what had gone on there, considering that they could not find a logbook of any kind. Many years later, when the time came to straighten things out, the enemy navy would claim that they too had found the ship in the same state.

Knowing the Captain, I would not have been surprised if his disappearance had been yet another trick, the pinnacle of the great media manipulation. He had never cracked a smile in all of the seventy-six aired episodes or at public appearances, but somewhere under this mask of dignity and professionalism, I was convinced, was a little kid sticking his tongue out at all of us - not in order to make fools out of us, but because it was all part of the game. I don't doubt that he would be sticking his tongue out at us to this day, had I not decapitated him.

So1Eo3 Operation Enigma

Finding the Society of Crossword Creators was not an easy task, as I had expected. There was nothing at the address that Marli had given me, Grada Savone 39. To be precise, nothing plus nothing at all: above the fence with a sign PROJECT NAME: LIVE AND WORK SPACE there were the long necks of diggers, with the remains of the half-demolished new build in their jaws. The whole city was full of such building/demolishing sites: the buildings that had just been finished and that no one wanted to move into were sold to new investors who then built new buildings on the same spot, into which no one would move in again. I stood there wondering if we might have had it all wrong - maybe the earthquake had come to town long ago but we had totally missed it, busy as we were dreaming about the future - when a guy with a yellow helmet came up to me. 'Looking for someone?' he asked. His helmet read: BUILDING SITE PRESIDENT.

'Yes, for the Society of Crossword Creators', I said.

'There are no crosswords around here.'

'But I was told that this was their address.'

'Well, if you don't believe me, take a look around.'

He took off his helmet and put it on my head.

'Objects may fall from a height,' he said, 'and sometimes they throw them at you on purpose' - and then he started running, as if someone had wound him up.

'Hey stop!' I shouted, but he didn't turn. It took a couple of seconds for him to completely get out of my sight.

I opened the gate and entered the building site. As soon as he saw me, the digger operator turned off his vehicle and asked: 'Hey boss, any news about our salaries?'

'Tomorrow,' I said, and quickly, before a brick landed on my head, went on my way.

There was a white tin cabin in the very middle of the building site, a builders' shack that emitted the smell of baked beans. I went in.

The room was small. It was furnished in a modern style, like a private health clinic, although this place had a small kitchen in the corner. A bespectacled, good looking woman stood behind the cooker, wearing working overalls and slurping the beans. The only other door, except the one I entered through, had the sign THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE.

'Good afternoon,' I said.

'Good afternoon, boss,' she said, barely turning towards me. 'Want some beans? I've done a great job today with the beans.'

'Thanks, I've just eaten. What's our plan for today?'

'Demolishing. And unless we go bankrupt before, building.'

'That's what I thought,' I said. 'If anyone looks for me, I'll be in my office.'

Only after touching the door handle, I turned around and added: 'Oh yes, nearly forgot. Get Krzrah for me.'

She put down the ladle and approached me. She eyed me up and down, as if I were a second hand car that she might consider buying. And then she took off my helmet.

'You're no boss,' she said coldly.

'You're right,' I admitted, 'I lied. But I did not lie that I was looking for - '

'Xrzah. Sit down', she said and pointed at the leather sofa. 'If you want to talk to Xrzah, you'll first have to answer a question.'

I sat down. The secretary took a sizeable book from her desk and leafed through it for a while until she found what she had been looking for.

'Aha, here it is, I have a great one for you. What is fat in the morning, skinny at noon, and fat again in the evening?'

She laid an hourglass on the table in front of me.

'What do you mean, fat in the morning?'

‘Well, do geese see god?,’ she said. I must have looked very confused because she added: ‘Forget it. Don’t listen to what I say but focus on the question, because your time is running out.’

This is ridiculous, I thought. Two days wouldn’t be enough to solve this riddle, let alone two minutes. I watched the sand glide down, taking with it my dream job - when I suddenly got it.

‘I know!’ I said. ‘The answer is: an hourglass.’

‘Let me just check that,’ she said and turned the book upside down. She pushed her glasses up higher with her finger and dove into the book. She dove out looking slightly surprised: ‘The answer is right?!’

She picked up the phone and said: ‘Was it a rat I saw?’

I turned around, but there was no one else in the room.

‘A palindrome,’ she said. ‘Was it a rat I saw - was it a rat I saw. The same thing with the geese earlier on. Please come with me.’

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There was an Art Nouveau building on the other side of the building site, with a freshly renovated facade. But only after we came closer I saw that the entire facade, if that word could be used at all, was a large 3D photo: the tiles, balconies and water sprites above them were all painted, not even the glass on the windows was real. I stopped, fascinated, trying to work out how they had done it, but the secretary warned me: ‘Don’t stop there, it’s dangerous, the tiles drop down.’

She dragged me into the building by the sleeve. I followed her through the long quiet corridor with a line of offices which had signs like RIDDLES, ANAGRAMS, CRYPTIC CROSSWORDS and so on. There was a green door right at the end of the corridor with a sign that read: SOLUTIONS.

‘Here we are,’ she said, unlocked the door and let me in.

The room was decorated in the style of police interrogation rooms; a wooden table, two school chairs, a bare bulb that hung low off the ceiling; someone had really made an effort, I thought.

‘Wait here,’ the secretary said and laid down a folder and pencil on the table, which she had brought with her. ‘You can fill out the questionnaire while you wait.’

Lovely, I thought, another riddle.

She went out and locked the door. I sat on the chair that faced the door and opened the folder. There was a piece of paper with a mosaic of white squares and the instruction: *Fill in the dotted squares and see what the picture reveals.*

I took the pencil and got to work. I filled in one square after another, until I could see a question mark before me.

The key turned in the lock. A blond, ten-year-old boy entered the room; he held a fruit juice with a straw in his right hand. He did not greet me, just sat at the table, looked at the questionnaire and said: ‘Great.’

He put the paper back into the folder, closed it and wrote down: VOYAGE, CAPTAIN OF THE LONG.

'How do you know my name?' I asked.

'Don't be naive,' he said, 'we are in the solutions room.'

'And, do you have a solution for me?'

'You want to know who Laszlo Fischer is?'

'Who he is and where I can find him,' I said.

'Well, there you go, we know the questions and the answers,' he said and smugly slurped his juice.

'Listen, this is not normally how we do business, but the party wanted to make sure you came to pick up the solution in person.'

He took out a folded envelope from his pocket and handed it to me. The envelope was marked with SOLUTION NUMBER: 3-KDP-ZC-935/11-582.

'Is this it?' I asked.

'That's it, if you have no more questions. If you do, for each question you ask, you'll have answer one of ours first.'

'No, thanks,' I said and put the envelope in my pocket.

'I wish you a pleasant day then,' the kid said.

I got up and went towards the door.

'Not that door,' he said and opened a door in a wall that had looked perfectly whole. How the hell did they do this, I wondered, but then I felt someone kick me in the butt and I flew outside.

'Hey,' I shouted, 'that's no way to treat a person!' - but the kid had already shut the door behind me. I stood in a wide, luminous passage, in front of a massive panel where a model family was enjoying a picnic. A few people went past and stared at the picture, enthusiastically as if they were in a museum, wanting to absorb every detail of the work. On the picture, mum and dad sat on the grass, there was a chequered table cloth with a baguette, home made butter, marmalade and a basket full of fruit in season. In the background, their little son ran around joyfully with a kite on a string, while their daughter blew at a dandelion. In the sky above them, a small plane flew and spelled out, with its exhaust fumes: LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL. An advert like any other, I thought, every cliché was there, but still, there was something disturbing about it. I carried on down the passage, but I could not find the way out. I started feeling dizzy. Wherever I went, I came across other passages with similar pictures: gigantic families cosying up in front of the TV, with a good book, riding bicycles, families swimming in various styles and easily hiking mountain tops. DON'T GO DOWN THE PREDICTABLE PATH, I read, GO OFF THE BEATEN PATH, AND LEAVE A TRACE. A DAY WITHOUT LOVE IS A DAY WASTED. WHATEVER HAS TO HAPPEN CANNOT BE STOPPED. LIVE TODAY - LIVE FOR TOMORROW.

That's when I understood: I was in a shopping centre. Or really, a shop graveyard. None of the adverts were promoting anything; they were sealing up the closed up shop windows.

When I finally found the exit, I needed at least fifteen minutes to find where I'd left the van. I was already afraid that someone had stolen it, but the van was untouched, if we discount the leaflets that had been left in the wipers.

I got in behind the steering wheel and opened the envelope.

*

'Enjoy your meal,' said the Captain.

ENJOY YOUR MEAL, wrote down Zada.

We sat in my office and contemplated furiously. It was incredibly stuffy; the thermometer showed 35 degrees Celsius, the Captain was smoking one pipe after another, and all the windows were sealed shut. Not a single word could be heard outside.

'I did everything the way you said,' I said. 'Invisible ink, hologram reader, I even went over it with liver wax... and nothing. And I looked through the envelope, just in case, but all we have is 'enjoy your meal'.'

Zada manically moved the letters around, making new words out of the letters in 'enjoy your meal' until nothing made any sense.

'Maybe it would help if you told me more about Fischer?' I said. 'Just so I know in which direction to think.'

'You want me to tell you more about Fischer? Fischer is someone who is seriously pushing my patience,' the Captain said and crumpled the solution. '*Enjoy your meal!* What kind of a solution is that?? In my time solutions were solutions, not new riddles!'

I nearly laughed out loud, but this was not the right moment for laughter.

'True,' I said, 'we can wrack our brains over this all day, but I am afraid that the only conclusion is that we need to get something to eat.'

Suddenly Zada started to jump and shout, waving around a leaflet and scribbling on the back of it. She looked like she might take off.

'Go out for lunch? No, Z,' I laughed, 'I was only joking. One can't eat in this heat...'

The Captain grabbed the leaflet out of my hand.

'Restaurant 'Endrigo'... sea and river water fish... sushi ... seaweed salad... house speciality' - he looked up - 'Captain's carpaccio. Where did you find this?'

'I found it wedged in my windscreen wiper,' I said. 'I normally just throw them away, but I must have been a little ... shaken up by the day.'

'Hah, even if you had thrown it away,' said the Captain, 'no doubt this fish would have found its way to us.'

He went up to the window and, hiding behind the curtain, looked out at the park.

‘I can’t believe how blind I was,’ I shook my head. ‘If it hadn’t been for you, Zada...’

If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t be here. Let’s not go any further than that, she wrote.

‘Kissinger,’ the Captain said. ‘Help me push this wardrobe against the window.’

‘Why? What for?’

‘If you want me to tell you what I know about Fischer, help me and don’t ask any more questions.’

The wardrobe was much heavier than it looked. We managed to push it a few inches when it crashed on the floor. Zada screamed in fright, and jumped onto the lampshade. The whole surgery looked as if it had been shaken up by an earthquake.

A minute later there was banging on the door.

The Captain pulled out a gun from his sock. ‘Carefully,’ he said and leaned against the wall next to the door and motioned for me to open it.

Jacob, the receptionist, stood at the door.

‘Is everything OK here? I heard some noise.’

‘No, no, everything’s OK,’ I said, ‘we are just redecorating a bit.’

‘Aha,’ Jacob said, ‘OK, I’ll be downstairs. If anyone’s up for a game of pictionary, let me know.’

‘Of course,’ I said and closed the door.

‘OK, will you tell me...’ I went to ask the Captain, but he signalled for me to shut up by putting the gun to his lips. He opened the door quietly and only when he was sure that Jacob had really gone down the stairs to the reception, closed it again. He picked up the officer’s hat from a hanger and put it on his head.

‘Was it really necessary to push the wardrobe to the window?’ I asked.

‘Perhaps it was, perhaps it wasn’t. I don’t know, my brain doesn’t really work when I am hungry,’ he said and bit into the pipe. ‘What do you say we go grab something to eat?’

So1Eo4 The Tentacles

Silas Volta and his Electric Circus sold out the Carnegie Hall in New York in April 1984. It was the crowning end to a phenomenally successful world tour, a social event of the decade that no one in their right mind and with deep pockets wanted to miss. The news had been going around for years about a genius scientist who had grown a particular kind of electric eel - eels that produced electricity with such a high voltage that a single bed could, they said, light the whole of New York. Finally, they could put this daring claim to the test.

But something went wrong and the thing that was meant to be a triumph of modern science and the entertainment industry turned into the greatest tragedy since the Great War. Thirty nine people, among them Volta himself burned to death on that night inside Carnegie Hall; and around five hundred people ended up with heavy burns. The days that followed were full of victim counts and discussions of whether it was all about

the bad earthing or whether it had been the fuses that started the fire, but soon after that, the bloody demonstrations of the plantation owners would bring about the so-called rubber tree revolution and Solas Volta fell into oblivion. At least until next autumn and the *Snake Island* episode.

On one of its non-sea water adventures, the Meridiana crew came across a map of Silas Volta's hidden treasure, a billion dollars in cash which he had earned with the Circus, hidden on an island in the middle of Balaton Lake, which was also home to several endemic sorts of snakes. After several complications, the map took them to underwater caves full of human bones. Silas Volta, it turned out, had survived New York after all, but only just: he was turned into a plant that the eels kept alive by constantly feeding it low voltage electricity. But they needed fuel to keep producing the electricity - this fuel was human flesh, or in other words, naive treasure hunters. In a spectacular finale, the island exploded, and the whole of Balaton turned into a hellish light show and our heroes only just survived.

But that was not the whole story. What had been discarded in the editing room, which is what the Captain told me while we drove to our meeting with Fate, shocked and depressed me.

While the Captain, Zada, Timor and Yellowbeak wandered around Snake Island, one of the poisonous snakes sneaked into the hull of Meridiana and hid there until the final episode. In the final episode, after the Captain left the bulletproof chamber, and before he came up to the crew and told them to get back to their positions, the snake woke up. It bit him without his noticing; the way it had curled up, he mistook it for a piece of rope.

'For twenty years the poison slowly circulated through my veins,' he said as we left the motorway. 'For twenty years I have been thinking - this is it, a while longer and it will all be over, but the end just won't come. And then one day this damned Laszlo Fischer contacts me and says: I have the antidote snake from the Snake Island, the only one that survived. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. And I never laugh. And I've only cried once in my life, that night and never again.'

'Twenty years?' I said. 'That's impossible!'

'Impossible?' he spat through the window. 'The last time I uttered that word was before I met the rat who ate Helsinki.'

'But if you had been bitten by a poisonous snake you wouldn't have survived for more than two minutes!'

'It's a different kind of venom. This one slowly destroys your mind. In the end, the body has no option but to give in.'

I thought about this for a short time.

'How can you be sure it's the venom doing it?' I asked.

'What are you trying to say, that I have made it all up? That I can't tell the difference between illusion and reality? Another Meridiana, another me, another Zada - *that* was an illusion! But this - this is definitely real.'

When he said that, I turned into the emergency lane so suddenly that Zada fell from the roof onto the windshield. Holding onto the wipers she sneered and bared her teeth in such a way that it looked like she was going to attack me head on. I turned on the emergency lights.

‘I’m sorry Z,’ I stammered in fright, ‘I don’t know what came over me.’

She flipped me the middle finger and climbed back onto the roof. The Captain gave me a searing look that was filled with curses in ten different languages.

A moment later, when we started moving again, after I had collected myself, I realised that I was a bit disappointed with this plot resolution.

‘But then, in fact,’ I said, ‘if it had all been an illusion... Then you were in no danger at all?’

He looked at me as if I’d said the silliest thing in the world.

‘For God’s sake, Kissinger,’ he said, ‘since when are illusions not a danger?’

I went quiet. I decided that for our safety it would be better if I asked no more questions. Why were we talking about this in the car? If they had shoved a leaflet under the wiper, who was to say that they had not bugged the van too?

Only when we had reached the fish restaurant, I remembered that Zada had a gene for discovering surveillance contraptions.

*

Endrigo Restaurant was located one one of those eternally beached ships which would sail only after big rains, when the river level would rise. The interior was a fisherman’s wet dream, with trophy tuna samples, sharks and swordfish hanging on the walls; half of the restaurant was taken up by a plexiglass aquarium in which an enormous Holborn eel snoozed. But despite the exciting interior, it seemed that the restaurant was not doing a lot of business. All the tables were empty.

A smiling waiter ran to us as soon as we were at the door, with a pair of carp whiskers on his face, and sat us down at a table next to a stuffed Mediterranean monk seal.

‘Gentlemen, would you like something to drink?’ he asked.

‘No, thanks, we shall go for the main course right away,’ the Captain said.

‘Excellent! I can recommend fantastic dolfilets, dolphin filets, caught this morning in - ‘

‘An antidote snake,’ the Captain interrupted him. The smile dropped off the waiter’s face.

‘Antidote snake, excellent choice,’ he said sadly, noting it down.

‘Two portions,’ I added. Zada nodded her head, but the waiter didn't take that as a food order.

‘Two antidote snakes,’ he said. ‘And the monkey?’

Zada grabbed a napkin and wrote: *The monkey would do well to hurry up because we are very hungry.*

‘Three antidote snakes,’ said the waiter, sweating, ‘coming right up,’ and disappeared towards the kitchen.

‘Does this look like a trap to you too?’ I asked.

‘Of course it’s a trap,’ the Captain answered, ‘but what can we do but jump inside it? Or would you rather keep on solving crosswords and riddles for a while longer?’

The kitchen door opened. The waiter turned up with a bowl full of water inside which swam dozens of creatures that resembled a cross between tadpoles and slugs.

‘The starter is on the house, sea jaguar larvae, first class. Enjoy your meal!’

He had not even moved when the Captain started eating.

‘Stop,’ I grabbed his arm. ‘What if they’re poisonous?’

‘Of course they’re poisonous, he said and bit in. Zada did the same. I had no other choice but to join in. With great heaviness, I took the first larvae and swallowed it, without chewing.

‘Good night,’ the Captain said.

Everything turned blurry in an instant. I saw an enormous shark through a fog as it swam towards me. Then it opened up its jaws and the world disappeared.

*

On his last adventure, the Captain of the Long Voyage awoke in chains, in the hull of the fish restaurant. Next to him slept the Dentist and Zada. A voice came from somewhere: Look at you, lined up like sardines in an army. A human figure approached them from the dark.

You know what your problem is, the Captain said with disdain. You always lacked a sense of humour.

Ha, Captain, the viewers would disagree with you, the stranger said and it was only then that we could see his face. In the latest viewer polls, Yellowbeak was the favourite crew member, Yellowbeak said.

If you’re so popular, the Captain said, how is it that your restaurant is so empty?

Times are tough, Yellowbeak shrugged, there’s a crisis, everyone is having a hard time. You especially. But I can help you get rid of your troubles. Plus you get a snake.

If you’d only said who you were and what you wanted straight away, you could have saved us some time, the Captain said.

Sorry, said Yellowbeak, but we had to play this game. In case the Company was following you.

The Company went bankrupt long ago, said the Captain. And my answer is, in case you haven’t understood: I’d rather die.

Yellowbeak laughed out loud. That’s what I call loyalty, he said through laughter, they wanted to kill him, but he is still loyal, loyal like a dog who never cheats on his wife. And I don’t want to kill you, I am offering you life!

The snake is not for me, you fool, the Captain said. If it had bitten me, I'd not have lived for two minutes, let alone twenty years!

Come on, Captain, Yellowbeak said, I may look naive, but I'm not that stupid. What do you think, where did the Bulgarians get the footage? I found it, all original tapes, together with edited scenes!

The Captain looked at him steadily, giving him a look that was murderous in ten world languages.

All right, said Yellowbeak, I see you don't want to collaborate. But can you then at least tell me what you think, who Neptune might prefer first, Zada or the Dentist? You've met Neptune, no? An eight-metre eel, without tentacles, always hungry.

At the mention of her name, Zada moved. When she saw Yellowbeak, she was wide awake.

Basically, for those of you who have just joined, said Yellowbeak: Yellowbeak has offered the antidote snake to the Captain in exchange for the cargo, but the Captain said that he'd rather see Zada and the Dentist die. Yellowbeak has tried to reason with him. He said, I will give you the ship, you can enjoy your retirement, fish as much as you like rather than live in misery and be responsible for the death of your friends. And the Captain's answer...?

Drop dead, said the Captain.

You disappoint me, Captain, said Yellowbeak and shouted: Garcon! Encornet!

The waiter came down the stairs.

The monkey goes first, said Yellowbeak. The waiter grabbed Zada, who was tied up, by her tail, and Zada squealed. While he dragged her up the stairs, the chains sounded, and the waiter smiled with his whiskers.

Lucky Zada, Yellowbeak gloated, just a few moments more and she'll see nothing but darkness. A darkness as thick darkness and black as a traffic jam in Harlem. A dark as deep and black as a philosopher in a coal mine. A dark as murky -

Yellowbeak paused in the middle of his thought. Human screams could be heard from the restaurant, and a splashing of water. Water started dripping through the ceiling. The waiter stumbled to the top of the stairs, covered in blood, with a pencil stuck in his eye, but an enormous tentacle grabbed him from behind, wrapped itself around his whole body and dragged him back.

You know what your problem is, Yellowbeak, the Captain said victoriously. You always underestimated Zada.

Holy Virgin, queen of the depths... he was caught like... as if... Yellowbeak tried to find a comparison, but the sound of the cracking of the waiter's bones disturbed his concentration.

The screams from the restaurant suddenly died down.

His hands shaking, Yellowbeak pulled a key out of his pocket, hurriedly freeing his prisoners and said: Go, I give you life!

It's too late for my life, the Captain said and punched him in the nose. Yellowbeak fell to the floor. At that very moment, Zada cartwheeled downstairs and jumped straight onto his head.

The Captain and Zada tried to open the round window, but it was tightly screwed. The tentacle came down the stairs, greedily snapping its claws. Zada found a pneumatic drill. The tentacle was followed by a head with a pair of enormous eyes, and a look that ate everything in its path. The Captain broke the window with the drill; water flooded the space. Yellowbeak tried to get away from the monster, but tripped over the sleeping Dentist and fell. While the Captain and Zada dove out, dragging the Dentist along, to freedom, the water turned murky with blood.

Moments after they reached the shore, the gigantic tentacle wrapped itself around the ship and dragged it to the river bed. Whacked by the waves, the Dentist awoke and asked what had happened. Zada grabbed a beached menu board with the daily offer and wrote out in chalk: *Next time you're offered baby jaguar larvae, make sure you chew it well first.*

So1Eo5 A Stowaway

We greeted early autumn on the terrace of the dental surgery. Tipsy from the excellent American Blue Savoy cocktail that Zada had made, leaning back in deck chairs, we watched the sunset. The wind, which was only an illusion, brought the sounds of music to us. There had been a music festival going on for a week now; around fifty thousand people were having fun from morning to night, hoping that the decibels might cause the earthquake.

When the sound of ovations and applause crashed through the air, signalling that a new performer had come out onto the stage, the Captain looked at his watch.

'It's time for my medicine,' he said. He took out a silver ampule from his pocket and poured its contents into a glass.

'Medicine for what?' I asked.

'For life,' he said and drank half of what was in the glass. 'Hm... Either that snake fed on bananas or I know nothing about antidote snakes.'

That's how I found out about the epilogue of the story about the battle in the fish restaurant. Not long after Endrigo had sunk, a snake swam out of the boat. Red with black lines on its belly, looking like the negative of the one that had bitten the Captain, black with red lines.

'But how can you be sure that that was the antidote snake?'

'I can't', said the Captain, emptied his glass and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. 'Do you have any more questions?'

Not far from us, Zada was climbing the old antenna, a fish bone, trying to keep her balance.

‘Actually, I do have one,’ I said. ‘Something is bugging me. How come you took me as your side man straight away?’

‘Because you knew who I was right away,’ he said.

‘But it’s impossible not to know. I mean, what are we saying, you’re the Captain of the Long Voyage!’

‘And how come no one but you recognised me? Everyone else sees me as an old man with a monkey on his shoulder.’

‘People have changed,’ I sighed. ‘TV has changed.’

Hanging by her tail, Zada endlessly spun around the antenna.

‘But how can you be sure I’m not a Company agent?’ I said. ‘The Company would always recognise you.’

‘Listen to me, Kissinger. My inner compass brought me to a safe house, to you, and that’s all I care about.’

‘But how do you know that it was really me that you had to find? Anyone could have opened the door for you. The receptionist, Jacob, had fallen very ill and - ‘

‘Trust me, the compass is far more precise than you think. Compared to it, all these modern GPS devices are nothing but fluff.’

Zada had climbed up the chimney and was about to dive onto the electricity pole.

‘Zada, what's the matter with you!’ Captain jumped up. ‘Get down here!’

She flipped him the finger and went back to the antenna. The Captain sat back down.

‘The damn monkey, she has got to an age where she’s gone all silly... Look, Kissinger, as far as I’m concerned, your job here is done anyway. Why don’t I pay you some redundancy money and we can go our own separate ways.’

‘Because you need a driver,’ I said. ‘I promise not to sleep on the job again.’

I laughed. And Zada laughed too. We all laughed so sweetly that I at some point, seeing his lips quiver, thought: look, the Captain might laugh too.

But I was wrong; it was not a smile, but a grimace. Not even a moment later, the Captain was dead.

*

We buried him the next day, in Sailors, a village in the south of the country, separated from the sea by a mountain range. We did not know if Sailors was his birthplace, but it seemed somehow right. A burial at sea, we had agreed, would not have been something he wanted, because anyway, even if he had not despised salt waters towards the end of his life, it was not about the sea.

There was no one but two burial men, Zada and me at the graveyard. Only towards the end of the ceremony an older peasant turned up, not being able to hold back tears. He must have confused him with someone else, since we buried the Captain under the name of Viktor Bravo.

The burial was short. No one held a speech. There was only Jacqueline's otherworldly voice coming from an old tape player:

If I could be made out of tin so soft
That I could bend around the saw and not break
They would call me the She-Beast from Portmanteau
A bird that kisses but feels nothing

It was magical, until the cassette player chewed up the tape. I pressed STOP and threw the last handful of soil on the coffin.

The peasant approached us and shook my hand: 'Thank you, it was a beautiful funeral.'

He went on his way, and we went on ours. We walked in silence, I wore shiny shoes, Zada was barefoot, there were stones and grass. When we got to the fig tree, under which I had parked, Zada tore off a leaf and wrote: *Zada is crying and thinking: it should have been me.*

'Come on, Z,' I hugged her, 'don't say that.'

I am a lab monkey, I should have tried the antidote on myself.

'But you had not been bitten by the snake,' I said. Then she climbed up the fig and shook the tree, until all of its leaves fell off. One by one, she picked them off the ground and started writing: The story starts with the end of the world, and it ends the same way...

For the whole of next year, I received packages from all over the world; new pages of Zada's manuscript, on baobab and sequoia leaves, rice paper, on the back of circus tickets, on torn rear view mirrors, squid bones and torn old dresses.

The earthquake did not arrive for a whole year. The town died slowly and unnoticeably, as it had done for a while. Life went on, and with every new page, the more of it there was, there was less of it left to go.

When the book reached its last chapter, the one in which we had buried the Captain and Zada had started writing the story of her life, the cynicism that had protected her from the snake's venom dissipated, along with the arrogance that made her growl at death, and Zada's life ended.

It ended with the sentence: *He took the secret to his grave.*

*

'Stop!' I said. I took the pencil from her hand and broke it. 'The story doesn't have to end like that.'

She looked at me, opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but then she turned and climbed the tree. She jumped from one branch to another, from a fig tree to a fig tree, to a hill and further, until she disappeared over the mountain.

*

I returned to the graveyard under the cloak of darkness, armed with the biggest shovel I could find and I started digging. When I had dug him up, I put him in a large cardboard box. I put the box in the van and covered it with a pirate flag.

I drove all night; I arrived in town before the morning. The trip lasted longer than I had planned and now I didn't know how to take him into the house without anyone seeing. But then Jacob the receptionist turned up at the door and offered to help in exchange for a small tip. I agreed and explained, although he hadn't asked, that it was my new wardrobe.

Upstairs, at the clinic, I pulled out the corpse from the box, put it over my shoulder and took it through the corridor to the X-ray room.

After I X-rayed him, I went into the dark room to develop the scan. I am not a radiologist so it did not come out looking its best, but still, the alien object at the bottom of the brain was clear enough.

I lay him in the dentist's chair, took a saw and started on the top of the head. I soon realised that it wasn't going well - the saw would not go through the bone, and it could take ages, plus the smell was starting to spread - so I cut his head off with an axe with only a couple of whacks. I separated the head from the body, broke off the bottom jaw and stuck my hand inside the skull. I dug through the blood and the flesh, until I felt something hard, harder than bone.

I took out my hand. I had a small round object on my palm. I wiped the glass with a towel.

The needle was still vibrating, showing the direction in which I ought to go.

So1Eo6 The Final Salvo

My brother travelled to the end of the world when he was eleven years old. One Sunday afternoon, while mother was making lunch and father lay under the car with pliers in his hand and the radio on, I sneaked out of the house. I was the only one who knew about his plan; a few days earlier he called me into the store room, locked the door and announced: I am going on a trip around the world. I am going too, I said - actually I begged him to take me along - but he didn't want to hear about it. When I didn't know how else to convince him, I threatened to tell on him. But he wasn't worried; he knew I'd never do it because to have an older brother on a trip around the world is sometimes even better than doing it yourself.

When it started to get dark, mother got worried and started to ring friends and cousins. When dad saw that this was useless, he took the car keys and told me: let's go.

We went around town in circles slowly like tough guys in movies, dad at the wheel, me in the passenger seat. We went everywhere, the fair ground and the city park and every bar with a pinball machine,

but we could not find my brother anywhere. Dad swore under his breath the whole time, and I tried to comfort him, although I was secretly rooting for my brother: wherever he was, he couldn't have gone far, I said. He couldn't get across the river, in any case; the bridge was destroyed, and the raft couldn't get across because of the fog. Finally we had no other option but to go towards the edge of town.

Which is where we found him, behind the Gypsy area. He sat on the shore, watching the water. The fog over the river was so thick that it looked as if there was nothing on the other side. I couldn't go farther, he told me that evening, after receiving a beating. I had reached the end of the world. The world is small, boring, foggy and gray, and it looks nothing like it does on TV.

I was a kid but I was not an idiot, and it was clear to me that the thing with the end of the world was not realistic. He knew that I knew, but he didn't care. He had gone on the road in order to come back with a story to tell - and there he was, and the story goes: my brother travelled to the end of the world, when he was eleven years old.

I didn't think about my brother for much longer. I was too busy, I thought, in order to think about stuff I couldn't change, but it was only now that I had too much to do that it felt that I had more time than ever. That's exactly why my mind was spinning with thoughts, I was singing, telling myself stories, talking to myself. That was how it went, I guessed: when a person is drilling holes day and night, or hammering nails, brushing glass, there has to be something that shortens the journey from A to B. It could be music from the radio, a programme, whatever. But I didn't have a radio or a TV here, I had no neighbours even. It was better that way. I had to do the work as well as I could, I didn't need any distractions. I was working day and night and couldn't remember the last time I slept. I slept so little that every time I did fall asleep I dreamt about sleeping.

How long had I been there for? I didn't know. I could only remember the moment when I stopped counting days - the morning I arrived, when the van coughed and stopped. It had managed to keep running for years, but the hill was too much. It might have been better that way, I thought, I'll make myself invisible. I pushed it off the edge of the road and covered it with leaves; if someone did find it, considering the state it was in, they would have thought it had been dumped long ago.

It was dark by the time I found the house. It stood in a clearing, surrounded by forest from three sides, without neighbours, without light; the only light came from the moon above, and from down below, where the city looked like a flock of sparks had been caught in a spider's web. Whenever I advertised a house for sale, I said: this is your piece of paradise, surrounded by nature, with a beautiful view of the whole town.

Inside at the kitchen table were two plates, a hardened piece of bread, and knives with remains of pate on the blades. An unfinished game of chess was on the floor; the black side was winning. There was a calendar on the wall of the current year, with a picture of an iceberg in a cold sea; every date on it, up until the beginning of June, had been crossed out. The fridge was empty, but I did find tin cans in the basement - tuna, sardines, salmon, peas, chick peas, processed meat - it was enough for at least a year. But that's not all I found.

The basement was unusually spacious, like an underground cave that opened up out of nowhere, larger than the house above. It was full of wooden boxes from top to bottom (and it still is), with all kinds of warnings on them: lightning bolts, bombs, skulls, swastikas. How the Captain had brought the cargo up here, onto the hill, with no road, paths, all this way and without anyone noticing, I could not imagine.

But what I did find out after opening the first, second, third, all of the boxes, was so impossible, but still the only possible thing, that I could do nothing but sit down and weep. I didn't cry out of sadness or joy, but from that feeling that has no name, so much bigger than everything that the body can not come up with a better response than the irritation of the tear glands.

There was nothing in the boxes.

No, I have not expressed myself well: the boxes contained nothing. The nothing that had, after all those years of hiding, keeping and dragging around the world, all the lost lives and all those adventures, gained gravity. Nothing, more grave than anything you could imagine. So grave that it could flatten an entire city.

The Captain had been a great illusionist, an expert for questions dressed up as answers - but his greatest trick, the joke of the century, was the one time he told the truth: even when it looked that he had things under control, he had thought of everything, and he had left nothing, *nothing*, to chance. He had installed a ramp and left tools, materials, detailed drawings for a catapult to be built.

The sky is clear, cloudless, the wind is right. Time is on my side, and if it remains like this, I could start soon. There's still a bit to do, to calibrate the optics and oil the weights, but if I follow the instructions blindly as I have done so far, I think I'll need only a day more. Just a bit longer and I'm done. Just a bit longer and I'll begin. I know I have to finish this job as soon as possible, because I'm running out of time. Last night, from the window of the room I sleep in, in which I dream of sleeping, I saw two pairs of eyes. Eyes as green as a cold flame stood at the edge of the woods and watched me out of the darkness, unmoving. At dawn, as soon as it started to get light, I walked over there and found footprints. If there had been anyone around I'd have asked what kind of a beast had left them. But I think I already know the answer.

Only a little bit longer and it'll all be over. Just a little longer and I will find you through the telescope. I'll dial the number, the phone will ring in your flat, I will see myself through the open bathroom door as I brush my teeth and shout, voiceless: won't you pick up? Then I will see you, beautiful and tired, as you run from the kitchen to the telephone and the way you, almost tripping over the toys that lay scattered all over the floor, pick up the phone and say hello. There will be a silence on the other side. Who is it, you will ask, and I will remain silent; I'll bite my tongue to keep silent. Hello, you will repeat, and then I will hang up. And I will pull up the lever.

If anyone has deserved an earthquake, Arabela, it is us.