

Ana Bačić
Time Machine

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Vremeplov

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ANA BAČIĆ

TIME MACHINE

**TRANSLATED FROM THE CROATIAN BY
MARIJAN SUNDRIC**

Za tatu koji više nije s nama.

Roman *Vremeplov* je dobitnik Plakete “Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević” Hrvatske matice iseljenika za najbolju prozu u inozemstvu 2010. godine.

CHAPTER 1

The rays of a gentle autumn sun peered through the thick fir forest. Along a narrow path, snaking between the trunks, two fourteen-year-old boys were making their way. The first was a diminutive blond haired boy. His restless eyes scanned the surroundings, while he nimbly navigated the terrain. It was plain to see that he was sure-footed on mountain paths, such as these. Following him, was a tall boy with an athletic build. As they progressed, the forest grew darker and the follower called out to his lead.

“How much longer do we have to walk through this damn forest?”

“Just a little more and we’ll be in the beech forest. It’s not so thick there and you’ll be able to see the entire valley.” Dinko pointed out the various features of the forest path, to his friend, who was having a hard time getting oriented.

“You’re not afraid are you? You know you’re with an expert guide.”

On hearing this, Toni perked up. Irritated, he flipped his head back, which only made his bangs fall across his tanned face. He was insulted at the thought that he was afraid of anything...

“I’m not afraid. I just don’t feel like wandering around aimlessly all day.”

Just as he finished his sentence, the two emerged onto a clearing. Right before them, there appeared a beautiful vista of Ogulin, a small city sitting at the foot of Klek mountain. Both of them were speechless, still catching their breath. They managed to climb the slope at a quick pace, but now their strength was exhausted. These were city boys from Zagreb, unaccustomed to the sharp mountain air. They spent their youth breathing smog on the streets of Trešnjevka. Despite the gasping, Dinko still felt more at home here in the hometown of his parents. He would come here every weekend to visit his grandmother and go on nature excursions. Toni was more curious to find out about this place, which Dinko had always praised so highly. With a wonder-struck gaze, he traced the silver path of the river Dobra. It vanished between the red roofs of the distant city houses. The most distinct structures in the whole bunch were the two round towers. They were the remains of a fortress and walls built near the end of the 15th century to defend against the Turks.

Not only was Toni tired, he was also hungry. He could barely wait to get to Dinko's grandmother's house. Toni recalled the mouth-savouring dinner that they had eaten earlier. It was obvious that the grandmother was an excellent cook, though he never ate such food before; potatoes baked in their skins in an old wood burning stove. Who would have imagined that it would turn out so good! It was excellent, as was the sauerkraut and the smoked bacon. Even the cheese had a special taste; it smelled like smoke and squeaked as you chewed it. To get his mind off of food, Toni asked Dinko a question.

“What kind of story is your grandma Janja cooking up tonight? What will she make up this time?”

“She’s not making anything up, all her stories are about things that actually happened.”

“Come on, the woman is bored, she’s alone all day long and daydreams out loud,” insisted Toni. “She even has illusions of some giant who sleeps on the mountain and takes on a human form.”

“That is not just some giant! That is Kraljević Marko, sleeping his eternal slumber on mount Klek. For your information, that story is not made up. It’s a legend that’s been past down for over a hundred years, about a brave nobleman that fought against the Turks. Following a fearsome battle, in which he killed many of his enemies, Marko fell asleep and transformed into a gigantic stone,” Dinko proudly retold the legend of Kraljević Marko.

“That’s no legend, it’s just a plain lie and someone’s imagination getting carried away ... Fairy tales about giants stopped being interesting to me after kindergarten. You could get me excited, thinking that Gulliver and the Lilliputians were real, back then, but don’t bore me with that stuff now.”

Toni finished talking and Dinko’s gaze wandered skyward. The sun was setting and cast queer shadows upon the mountain. At the peak, the unmistakable outline of a reclined human body could be seen. The exposed rock, near the very top, traced a face in shades of white and grey. The sheer cliffs below formed a torso with broad shoulders and an abdomen. Two boulders jutted out from the cliff side – the kneecaps. The lower parts of the legs were shrouded below the treeline. These sheer crags have long delighted its observers. It is unlikely that any other moun-

tain has inspired as many fairy tales. At midnight, its summit would be the gathering place for the witches of Klek, who would arrive on their flying brooms. Even the mountain nymphs would join in play and dance, coming over from Kapela and Velebit. His grandmother's stories would always awaken Dinko's imagination.

"You have no appreciation for real legends," Dinko blurted out.

"Sure I do! Šuker was a legend. A legend of Croatian football and the best striker our representation has ever had. That number nine jersey made everyone stand up and take notice of us all. So yeah, that's a legend, he walked the Earth, kissed beautiful women and scored goals ... not your thousand meter tall stone giant," Toni made his views, on what makes a real legend, clear.

"Šuker's not a legend yet, even the sports commentators say the same. Maybe he'll be a legend a thousand years from now, when some grandfather talks about the famous striker that scored against the German side, to take Croatia to the semis of the 1998 World Cup in France. The German powerhouse was one of the biggest and richest European nations, while we were small and had only, ten years earlier, been added to the European map. When we defeated Germany, we became giants. The world admired us, we had skills greater than theirs, even though we are so small. Like specs of dust, compared to them."

Dinko was no slouch and showed that he was as much a football expert as Toni, but Toni would not give in so easily and kept challenging the weird giant story from folklore.

“So you’re telling me that in the beginning Kraljević Marko was a speck of dust, compared to the Turkish army which threatened the whole of Europe?”

“Well hold on, the Turks started their invasion at the beginning of the 16th century, leaving Asia Minor and moving into Europe. They pushed west and even into our lands: Bosnia, Herzegovina, Slavonia, South Dalmatia all fell to the Turks. Northern Croatia managed to hold out, but was exposed to constant raids. Wherever the Turkish cavalry passed through, all that remained was a wasteland...”

“Let me tell you a story, blah, blah, blah! I’ve herd enough of your history rants,” Toni interrupted his friend, who was off in his own world again, somewhere in the past to no surprise.

“You didn’t let me explain the difference between a legend and a historical fact.”

“From what I understand, a legend exists so that you can transform a little man into a giant just because he did something heroic and because he killed some Turks.”

Dinko saw that Toni was not about to let up and that he was not at all fascinated by stories of the noble warrior; a man who was the sole defender of the beleaguered common folk of Croatia. Thus he asked:

“What would be a legendary deed, according to you?”

“I want to be a legendary hacker. I would crack the encryption ciphers that the secret terrorist organizations use to plan attacks on Western civilization. In the future we’ll be threatened from the East again and this time it’ll be China. In their most densely populated centers there

is already an economic crisis, the people are threatened by famine. They're running out of living space and arable land. There is only one possible outcome..."

"You, Toni, will save them. The great liberator riding in, on horseback, with the flaming sword of justice in your hand," now it was Dinko's turn to poke fun at his friend.

"Don't interrupt me! What do you know about the future? And what's this about horseback and swords? Leave that in your grandma's stories."

"At least my grandma doesn't make up science fiction stories. She talks about things that really happened. You just combine Mel Gibson, Bruce Willis and James Bond," Dinko was adamant about defending his grandmother's honour.

"Just you hear me out, this is a likely scenario. So, as for the chinamen, there is only one possible outcome, spreading West. First they will conquer Russia and do so from within. They'll just recruit defectors from the once mighty Red army. The KGB will be used as henchmen. They're already schooled in unconventional warfare, they're ruthless and have no problem getting rid of their own people if they get in the way. All the chinamen need to do is pay off the poor Russians. You see, getting at the Russians' nuclear arsenal is the what the chinamen are really after."

"I see that you've seen *The Jackal*," Dinko interrupts again.

"That's got nothing to do with the movie, but *The Jackal* was a good example of how the powerful players use hit men and terrorists to achieve their goals. Russia will soon be conquered and its weapons will be used by the enemies

of the West, in the conquest of Europe. So, do you know what happens next..”

“A computer genius from the Middle! The hacker who infiltrated the computer systems of terrorists, from the East and saves the West. The great redeemer of mankind!” Dinko laughed out loud.

“Let me finish!” Toni was wild eyed and unnerving. He continued to talk with great passion about how the yellow-skins and the KBG are the real enemies.

“Like I was saying, what happens next is the fall of Uncle Sam. When they’ve taken over America, the entire world will be under their control. We will become robots, the labour force for our new global overlords. They’ll be mercilessly cruel. Their hunger would have turned them into wolves or better yet hyenas, complete scavengers. There won’t be any sympathy for anyone that is not their skin colour.”

“Go on then, hero, don’t keep me in suspense. Tell me how you plan on saving all of us from the yellow-skins?”

“That part, I’m keeping confidential. In any case, you don’t understand computers well enough to get it. The main point is, that you’ll hear about me, in the future.”

“Well then, I’m sure Jelena will definitely think you’re be a big shot, a new Bill Gates.”

“What do you care, what Jelena thinks of me?” Toni stood upright at the mention of her name. He was pulled out of his fantasy and stuck right in the middle of reality. Dinko was well aware of Toni’s weakness and while Toni scowled, Dinko continued with his provocation.

“Maybe then, princess Jelena will fall in love with her knight in shining armour; since up until now, she hasn’t been too intrigued by any of your attempts. Are you going to have to save the world before that girl even begins to notice you?”

He had hit a nerve. Toni was silent, tapping the floor with his foot, frustrated. Both of his fists were clenched and the anger was building up inside of him. He was right on the edge of socking Dinko right in the face. Dinko realized that he had pushed a little too far and tried to bail himself out.

“Come on bud, we’re not gonna fight because of some chick.”

He patted him on his shoulder but Toni was unrelenting. His blood was boiling. He wondered if it was so obvious that he was in love with Jelena. If Dinko knew, then it is likely that everyone else in the class knew as well. He would rather be dead than have it known that he sends Jelena emails everyday. Through those sweet messages he bares his, seldom shown, gentler side. Yesterday he wrote: “I watched you answer questions in Chemistry class. You’re cute when you get confused and blush.”

Through this and other messages, she could have easily guessed that he was someone from her class. Him being of course, her secret admirer! The thought that someone else might figure this out, gave him the chills. After all, he had a certain reputation in school. Captain of the school football team, he was also active with the school newspaper; editing the sports section. His made the last call on what went to print. On top of all that, he was an excellent student and well liked by his teachers; and even better liked by the

girls in his class. At home the phone would ring constantly. When his sister relayed a message, he would just wave it off and say: "Forget those little girls, they bore me." As a matter of fact, he was indeed completely uninterested in all the girls that would go out of their way to invite him to birthday parties, camping and the movies. He had his own, concealed, secret love. In his eyes, Jelena was completely different. She was petite and tender, with a supple body of a ballerina. He had followed her often, but never found her more beautiful than when after hours of rehearsal, she would rush flustered onto the tram. Her blond locks would flick in front of his face as she passed by. If she only knew how much he loved her flowing curls, she would probably never tie up her hair. She had warm brown eyes that were always off somewhere, lost in contemplation. He could never figure out what was going on beneath the surface. She was the class beauty, but everyone considered her a little odd. The other girls were envious and made no effort to include her in their cliques. They would tease her and call her a teacher's pet but she would just stand on the side, alone with her thoughts.

One day Toni actually admitted to himself that he was in love. Since then, he has made attempts to get closer to her. His friendship with Dinko had a clear ulterior motive. Through Dinko, he would get closed to Jelena. Dinko himself, was a weird character. He was the class nerd, with his head always buried in a book, he never played any sports, never got into fights and never even swore. "He's like a girl", the guys would say and excluded him from their group. Jelena and Dinko were a lot alike; they were both dreamers. A close friendship blossomed between the two

of them. They would eat together at lunch time, walk to and from school together, lend each other notes and have endless discussions.

Toni wanted to know what it was, in Dinko, that made him so interesting to her and how he had managed to earn Jelena's friendship. What did she see in that nerd? Gradually, he gained Dinko's confidence, bringing him books from his mother's library, joining the same alpine club. He also began to slowly realize, that Dinko was an alright guy. He was not boring, like everyone said. Sure, he over did it with his history lectures and found mountains and hills more interesting than derby matches, but on the other hand, he was a true friend. He knew how to keep a secret and never flaunted his knowledge. Toni could not make sense of how someone could find more joy in books than in surfing the internet or playing video games. Still though, he tried to imitate some of Dinko's manners, figuring that it would be the key to Jelena's heart.

He started accompanying Dinko on his weekend nature outings. He even missed a few Sunday night spectacles at the Dinamo stadium. This did not make him unhappy, for he felt that he had made a true friend.

"All right! You're story's not bad, maybe you can become a legendary hacker who saves the world," this time Dinko let out the "and wins the love of a certain lady" part out.

Colour returned to Toni's face. He knew that Dinko was not being malicious and had faith that he would never reveal the cause of his weakness to anyone else.

"How did you know that I got a thing for Jelena? Maybe it was those witches riding around mount Klek that told you?" Toni tried to clear the air.

“Hey, so you do remember grandma’s story. Those witches are a product of the imaginations of our people. They had to talk about something, during those long winter nights. Oh and I didn’t need any witches to tell me about Jelena, it’s as clear as day.”

“What do you mean, it’s clear? Are you clairvoyant? Did you see it in a vision?”

“Whatever, Toni, there’s no point in arguing. Let’s head back. I’ll show you a cool place along the way and tell you its story. I’m sure you’ll like this one, because it is a love story.”

“Don’t give me all that love talk nonsense. I admit that Jelena is hot, but to say I’m in love, well that’s just not true!” Toni doggedly defended his position.

Returning back through the fir forest, they exited onto a vast meadow. Darkness was falling and they hurried past the river and headed for the city. Ogulin city was built on the clifftops of a 38 meter deep canyon, into which the Dobra river cascades and disappears. It was the ideal location for the construction of Duke Frankopan’s fortress; a place that no enemy could approach without being hindered by the adverse terrain. Encircled with formidable ramparts and overlooked by musket embrasures, Frankopan’s fortified city was ready to ward off any Turkish attack.

The boys had made their way to the inner city walls. Dinko continued to follow the roar of rushing water that was getting ever louder. At the base of the two towers that had been converted to a museum, the sound of the waterfall thundered the loudest. The two had reached the edge of the precipice. They paused and leaned over the metal fence.

“This is Đula’s chasm,” explained Dinko. “Here the Dobra disappears into the depths of the earth and only emerges some six kilometres downstream.”

“Why is it called Đula’s chasm?” Toni felt inquisitive.

“These towers once housed the noble families Zrinski and Frankopan. They were taken, along with nearly half the estates in Croatia, by the powerful House of Habsburg. You can still see many of these fortresses anywhere from the North in Čakovec; spanning through the interior in Ozalj, Ribnik, Bosiljevo, Novigrad upon Dobra, Modruš; and reaching along the coast in Senj, Vinodol, Bakar, Bribir, Krk ...”

“So how did the Habsburg manage to capture all these forts?”

“They came up with a clever tactic: accusing Zrinski and Frankopan of conspiring against Vienna, a charge punishable by death. By lopping off the heads of the two most powerful Croatian feudal lords, the House of Habsburg acquired all of their lands.”

“Okay, I got it. They were taken out because they were in the way,” interrupted Toni as Dinko was starting the recount the entire history of the Zrinski-Frankopan rebellion plot, “I could have sworn that my question was about Đula’s chasm.”

“Well, you’re about to hear it! It starts like a fairytale. ‘Once upon a time, there was a beautiful duchess named Julija. She lived in her father’s fortress. He was the powerful lord of a city. One day a prince appeared on a white horse, to whom Julija gave her heart...’ The rest of the story is nothing like a fairytale and their love ends in sorrow.”

“What? He couldn’t fight to succeed to her father’s position? What an idiot! I mean if she was ugly then there’s no point, but...” Toni was confused.

“It is a mystery as to why their love ended in tragedy. Maybe he died battling with the Turks. All that is known is that Julia threw herself off of this cliff into the Dobra and vanished into the chasm. So people named this place after her and she became a legend.”

The boys stood in silence, as if though the shadows of the past gloomed over them. The dark green water trashed about the bottom of the canyon, foaming violently, where it crashed against the rock. An unexplained dread overtook them both. They looked away from the water and at each other. Toni suggested that they descend down Đula’s chasm to convince himself that there was nothing to fear.

“Let’s see what’s down there!”

“You mean you want to climb down, all the way to the bottom? I once heard that there is a cave entrance down there that leads to corridors beneath the city.” Dinko was on board.

Both of them were resolved on testing their courage that night. In an instant, they had climbed over the fence and were carefully making their way down the steep cliff side. The stone was wet and slippery. Dinko lead the way. Tentatively, he placed one foot in front of the other, while firmly grasping the rock face. Toni followed close behind, fighting the urge to look down into the abyss below. He had always been afraid of heights. To distract his mind, he called out to Dinko.

“How many more meters to the bottom?”

“Around twenty.”

“Ooh yeah ... we’re real bad. Wait a minute, we’ve only covered 18 meters?”

“I’m not sure.”

Dinko’s voice was getting lost in the sound of the waterfall. Not being able to hear their own words, they continued in silence.

“Here it is, I’m at the bottom,” announced Dinko after a strenuous descent into the unknown.

“Finally! Another meter and I think I would’ve turn into Spiderman,” exhaled Toni with relief.

“Alright then Superman, enough of your Hollywood fantasies. Follow me through the water and see if you’re tough enough to go swimming in November.”

“I can see the cave, let’s go,” the mention of Superman had emboldened Toni.

They trudged across slick rock, with water flowing up to their waist. Dobra’s water level had risen with the autumn rains. The lights of the city towers flickered in the distant sky, as they entered ever deeper into the darkness. An opening, two meters in width, became visible. They stopped in their tracks. To go in or not to go in? Curiosity conquered caution.

“Let’s go!” Toni initiated.

“Let’s do it and what ever happens, happens. The worst that we’ll run into are rats and spiders,” Dinko was feeling just as confident.

“What about those witches, dragons and ghouls from your grandma’s stories?”

“Like you believed in them anyways. Oh, oh, from here on, I can’t see anything. It’s pitch black.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’d rather not see this cave. It’s ugly enough in the dark. Just feel the walls. It feels like it’s narrowing here, into some sort of tunnel.”

“Should we continue?” Dinko was reconsidering the risks.

“Quiet, do you hear that humming sound in the distance?”

They stopped and strained to hear the noise. It was emanating from the depths of some cavern and was muffled by the sound of flowing water. There was nothing familiar about the noise and their imaginations quickly filled in the gaps.

Toni pictured a secret underground bunker, housing a nuclear facility. Some clandestine forces were concocting an evil plan for world domination. And there he was, just in time to foil their efforts. With such a cause, Toni banished his fears and spurred on his friend.

“Come on, Dinko, do you think that there is something scary holed up in here. What would Vlado say, if we were to come back and tell him that we made it down Đula’s chasm, into the cave, feeling our way through the darkness and than ran off, after the hearing some noises... No man, it’s just our mind playing tricks on us. I don’t want to bolt out of here and than have to admit to Vlado that we got scared.”

“I don’t know if I’d even tell him. We’re not like him. He’s not scared of anything. He’s lost all fear long ago.”

Vlado was Dinko’s brother. He was twenty seven years old and had been through the war. In the autumn of 1991, he along with a group of boys from Trešnjevka, left to fight on the Kupa front. Since joining, he had operated on battlefields from Slavonia to Dubrovnik. At the end of the war, he was serving with the First Brigade, the now renowned Tigers. He was an idol to Toni and that is why he thought of Vlado in his moment of cowardice. The effect would have been similar on Dinko and the two pressed onward. Flowing, from the depths of the tunnel, the sound was getting stronger.

“I think that it’s some sort of music,” Toni said happily.

“Sounds like church organs,” agreed Dinko as he started to pick up the pace through the cold water. The tunnel started to open up and a faint glow scattered the darkness.

“It’s a lake!” Toni’s cry mixed with the now audible organ melodies. The cave had gotten considerably wider. It stretched some ten meters and the floor was flooded with water.

“It’s not so strange. Probably an underground course of the river Dobra,” with the air of an expert, Dinko explained this Karst phenomenon.

“But the music isn’t really clear. It’s like a second sound is overlapping it.”

“The organ music is probably coming from the church. Right now we’re in the bowels, beneath the city. I can also hear that other sound. Hey! Look over there to the left.

Looks like a little green light. Ha, ha ... maybe it's a little green man!" Dinko smiled though he was not so self assured.

"No, not little green men, but I do hear a rumbling sound, like a car idling."

"Maybe the aliens are warming up their spacecraft," teased Dinko, who personally did not believe in extraterrestrials.

"Mock all you want. Doesn't bother me," Toni said unaffected and dashed toward the green light.

"Hey, slow down, you might fall into the lake and then the aliens won't let you into their ship."

Dinko continued to tease his friend, describing ridiculous future possibilities to Toni. Nevertheless, he followed after him, feeling his way along the edge of the lake. His eyes started to ache as the green light intensified. His pupils had dilated in the dark and he was unable to discern the shape of the strange object before him.

"I can't believe! Impossible!" Toni mumbled in English which, back then, meant that he was really excited. He was face to face with a flattened sphere, some four meters in diameter. The contraption looked like a rugby ball. There was an opening at the top, from which an orange light shone.

"Now I'm convinced, that U.F.O.'s exist among us," came Dinko's voice from the darkness. Toni had completely forgotten about his friend.

"Unidentified Flying Object, U.F.O.," Toni repeated Dinko's words and then it hit him.

“Maybe it’s not a U.F.O., you don’t know if it can fly!”

“You think it might be just a U.O., without the F. We ought to see what’s inside,” suggested Dinko.

“We could try and enter this, this...” Toni searched for the right word.

“We’re sooooo brave, ‘ought to, could try...’ Enough with the discussions! Let’s climb up to that opening at the top. It should be the way in and it’s not even two meters off the ground,” Dinko had made up his mind.

They had made it to within an arm’s length of the strange device, but were too afraid to touch its glowing surface. Since it was not radiating any heat, they figured that the green luminescence would not burn them. Toni finally placed his hand on the skin. It was cold and coarse. The bottom of the ship was parked in the shallows of the lake and the two started pondering on how to get to its opening.

“I know! Give me a boost and I’ll pull myself on top of the U.O. and get inside,” suggested Toni.

“Oh you’re luminary! While you’re inside, I’ll be out here saying ‘Open Sesame. I’d like to come in, open Sesame!’”

“No, no, when I get up there, I’ll give you a hand up.”

“And what if you fall inside and I’m left out here!” Dinko was not convinced.

“Come on man, I do pushups every day. I’ll hold on to you as I climb up and pull you up once I’m up there,” Toni was confident in his strength and conditioning.

“Watch out, we got a little Schwarzenegger here!” Dinko was still sceptical, but it did not matter as Toni got on his shoulders and climbed onto the ship. He stepped toward the opening.

“Hey, everything inside is lit orange.”

“Who cares about the colour? What do you see inside?” Dinko was eager to find out.

“I can’t see anything, the light is really bright. Ha! I know what this U.O. is: it’s an Unviewable Object, ugly green on the outside and blinding orange on the inside.”

“Where is that noise coming from? Can you see a motor?”

“I don’t know, here grab my hand, we’ll figure it out together.”

Dinko had, at last, joined his friend on top of the U.O. The opening was about half a meter wide and both jumped in without stalling, before they had time to talk themselves out of it. They were momentarily blinded by two tracks of orange lighting, but fell into a room that was lit with a less intense light. Looking around in awe, they tried to make out the individual details. Since the U.O. was elongated, each of them moved to one corner of the machine.

“I think these are levers of some sort. Maybe a gear shifter,” Toni called out from his end.

“If it is, put it in first gear! Do you see any numbers above it?”

“I do. There is 1999, then a space, then 11, then another space, then 19,” Toni read the dials.



“Same thing here, a bunch of ones and nines.”

“So you don’t know why it’s only those two numbers.”

“Honestly, I haven’t got a clue!” Dinko was baffled by the sequence of numbers.

“Boy are you dense! It’s today’s date 19.11.1999,” Toni laughed loudly. “You’re really off your game.”

“Whatever, numbers aren’t my strong point. So what do you think the lever does?” Dinko tried changing the subject.

“Maybe pulling it changes the date,” Toni answered.

“So what does that mean? If we change the date on the dial, do we transport to another time?” Dinko started brain storming.

“Thinking time’s over buddy! I’m moving the lever.”

Toni pushed up the lever excitedly and the pulsing hum of the U.O. grew louder.

“The numbers are changing: 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003. We’re entering the third millennium!” announced Dinko excitedly from his corner.

“Awesome, we’re gonna meet the future!” Toni was delighted.

In his childhood dreams, he was always navigating the wide open expanses of a distant future. He already saw himself meeting with the future civilization.

“Time Machine! Go to future! Come on, time machine!” he was mumbling in English again overjoyed with the situation.

Sitting in the opposite corner, Dinko was not too keen on the way the dial was spinning. Stepping forward in time did not suit him well. Vremeplov! The word for time machine in his native tongue. It should be able to travel back in time, should it not? The anxiety got the better of him and he grabbed the lever and pulled it down. The entire U.O. shuttered, the pulses stopped and all went silent. A moment later the pulses started up again and the hum got even louder. The dials started to count back down: 2003, 2002, 2001, 2000, 1999, 1998. He felt relieved, knowing that the Vremeplov could travel back through time. Brill-

liant! He was ready for an adventure through history and looked forward to seeing the stories of old, firsthand...

“What’s going on?” yelled Toni staring at his control board. “We’re going back in time!”

“The secrets of the future are hidden in the past,” Dinko rebuffed gleefully, pleased that the Vremeplov was already in the 19th century.

“I knew this was your doing and I don’t feel like meeting any fossils. How did you manage to change its direction?”

“Simple. I pulled my lever down. The Vremeplov has room for two pilots and I guess it chose to listen to me.”

“But I gave it a command first. It’s not fair! You bastard!” Toni’s yelling in English meant that he was really aggravated.

“Come on bud, take it easy. A little while longer and we’ll be in the ninth century. I’ve always been interested by the Early Middle Ages. We’re going to the age of the old Croatian rulers: Trpimir, Krešimir, Domagoj, Višeslav and king Tomislav.”

“You can forget the middle ages. You belong in the stone age. I’d put you in a cave with a couple of cave bears and give you a club to defend yourself. I’m out of here brother. I’m going back to the future!”

Toni reached over to push Dinko’s lever up, but Dinko anticipated the move and clutched onto his lever tightly. Dinko pulled it down with all his strength, while Toni pushed it up awkwardly. The Vremeplov jolted violently, wobbled and came to a sudden stop. For a moment, they

sat in the gentle orange glow of the control instruments and then daylight came streaming in. The blinding sunlight completely incapacitated their vision.

CHAPTER 2

After they stumbled out of the subterranean darkness, the boys remained as blind as bats. They could not see a thing, but heard the murmuring voices of a crowd and then trumpets being blown.

“Turuuu.... turuuu.... turuuu...” the trumpets sounded three times.

“Hear ye, hear ye, common folk of Ogulin! This is a reading of the decree, as issued by His Excellency the Duke Petar Zrinski, Viceroy of Croatia.”

Their sight had all but returned and what did they see? It appeared that they were in a town square, surrounded by all sorts of peculiar looking people. Some wore the blue uniforms of soldiers, with thick red overcoats, from under which sabres protruded. On their heads sat unusual hats, with markings that the boys had never seen. The rest of the crowd was mostly made up of peasants looking types. They wore white collared shirts made of thick linen and wide trousers with ropes tied around their waists. In place of shoes, they had wrapped rags around each foot and secured them with leather straps. There was one person that looked like a monk, dressed in a black and white habit and surprisingly, wore Opanke. The boys recognized the traditional leather shoes. A few other people were moving about the square: merchants, rotisserie men, bakers and crafts-

men. Wine was being poured from small earthen jugs.

“A fine dump we’ve landed into. Check out what they’re wearing and look at those rags for shoes?” Toni was shaking from laughter

“Never mind, take a look at yourself,” Dinko cut him off. “What’s up with that hat and that feather?”

Toni grabbed his head and felt the cap that he was indeed wearing and the feather that was stuck in it. He looked down and saw that he was standing in a pair of black boots, into which the pants had been tucked. Further up, he saw a blue jacket with large, glistening, gold buttons.

“Aaaggh, who am I?” Toni cried out stunned. He was not laughing any more. It was clear that he somehow belonged to this bizarre mob. Where had he arrived? What time? What place? There were endless questions, but he had no answers. He hoped Dinko was faring better and looked to him, but with his vision fully restored, he was very disappointed at what he saw. Dinko wore the same outlandish outfit and the same silly hat, except he also had a bag over one shoulder.

“This is 17th century Ogulin. All we did was climb out of a cave. It was the Vremeplov that brought us back in time,” explained Dinko sensing Toni’s confusion.

“This is a nightmare! And why are you dressed just like me? What are we even supposed to be dressed as? Are we at a masquerade, or a Carnival, or some sort of village ball?”

“No, this is market day. You see how the merchants have set up their stands all along the square. That wagon is loaded with wheat, those barrels are full of wine and these

sacks of salt probably came from the coast,” Dinko had an answer for everything.

“We couldn’t have ended up in a stupider time period?! How are we supposed to fit in with all this nonsense?” Toni was fuming.

This made Dinko pause for thought. Reflecting on Toni’s questions, he remembered the bag slung on his shoulder. He hoped that it would give them some answers. Inside, they found a leather case with an embossed coat of arms on the cover. Opening it frantically, they discovered a folded piece of parchment, that had been sealed with wax and signed. The cursive letters were unfamiliar, written in a bluish-black ink. They tried deciphering the writing but had no luck. Toni was the first to give up.

“A woman must have written this. They’re the only ones that can write calligraphy this neatly. And still, I can’t make out a single word. What about that symbol, on the leather case.”

“That’s the Zrinski family coat of arms. In the left field you have the wings of Daedalus and in the right field a tower, flanked by two six-pointed stars.”

“Some wings, a tower and a couple of stars... What were they trying to show, a flying tower heading for the moon?” the symbolism made no sense to Toni.

“You’re way off. It’s not some animated hallucination, the coat of arms is just a symbol of recognition. It’s a testament to the wealth and lineage of the Zrinski family and separates them from the other families. You can think of it like the trade mark of a big company. Like the Mercedes-Benz

logo, for example. The three-pointed star symbolizes quality, luxury and everything else associated with the brand.”

“I understand! So not everyone could have a coat of arms, just the counts, dukes, kings and other jet-setters,” Toni ended the debate, even though he was not especially impressed by the Zrinski corporate logo.

On the square, the trumpets were at it again. They were blown three times and followed by the town crier’s message.

“Hear ye, hear ye, common folk of Ogulin! This is a reading of the decree, as issued by His Excellency the Duke Petar Zrinski, Viceroy of Croatia.”

The boys decided to listen in. They looked in the direction of the speaker, who was standing on a raised platform, in front of the city doors.

“People of Croatia! Your God given rights and freedoms are being trampled upon by the boots of Austrian generals. They have taken your cities hostage, occupying Karlovac and Varaždin. They have robbed nobleman and serfs alike, while supporting an unjust peace with the Turks. They have given the wild hordes their blessing to freely kill us, rape our wives, burn down our homesteads and abduct our children. All the while, they sit comfortably up North, assured that Vienna will not be touched. They make treaties with our sworn enemies while leaving us with our hands tied behind our backs. The world is not blind to this injustice, perpetrated by the Habsburgs and the Emperor Leopold. We have allies in this struggle, the French, the Venetians and the Hungarian, who share in our ill fate. Brave sons of Croatia, you must rally to guard your divine

rights and return to glory, this country in bondage. Do not expect your freedoms to be won for you. You must raise up and stand united, behind the banner of your Viceroy, to defy this foreign rule. All men of age twelve and older are asked to enlist with their

local garrison officer. We march against the Austrian tyrant, by the grace of God.”

DULCE PRO PATRIA MORI.

IT IS SWEET TO DIE FOR ONE'S COUNTRY

DUKE PETAR ZRINSKI, VICEROY OF CROATIA

IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1669. IN THE CITY OF OZALJ

They listened attentively to the entire address. Dinko looked down at the paper he was holding and gathered that it contained the same message. Suddenly it came to him.

“We’re messengers for Petar Zrinski and if the letter was drafted in his castle, then that is where we must have come from.”

“Do you mean Ozalj? I’ve never been there in my life and until now, I’ve never even heard of it,” Toni had objected.

“That is one of the most beautiful fortified cities in Croatia and where Zrinski most often resided. It’s built on the hill above the river Kupa ...”

“Never mind Ozalj, did you hear what he said about “age twelve and over”. I got a feeling that we are going to get mobilized.”

“Sweet! We’re going to get a sabre and a steed and we’ll attack the emperor’s forces all along the Military Frontier.

Hurraa, there's gonna be a fight!" the prospect of war got Dinko excited.

"I'm not going to war without an assault rifle and flak jacket. Wait, who are the enemies supposed to be? Aren't the Turks the bad guys?" Toni was getting excited too.

They had already missed one war, the War of Independence, because they were too young. It did not seem possible that someone would enlist boys as young as themselves. Perhaps this Zrinski character would provide them with a grand adventure. Toni fantasized, while Dinko tried to explain who they would actually be fighting.

"In the 17th century, Croatia was divided between the Habsburgs, those are the Austrians, the Turks in the East and the Venetians, who held most of the Adriatic coast. Just the small Kingdom of Croatia was actually free and it was ruled by Zrinski and it looks like we already work for him."

"So we're messengers. What's our job description?"

"Well he had to be able to send his messages all the way from Karlovac to Senj. He couldn't just fax a piece of paper," Dinko tried to convey the difficulties of this long ago century.

"Oh ... yes! There is no telephone, no radio and no TV, so you just send out a guy with a letter and hope it gets delivered. What happens when it's urgent? I guess we're pretty trustworthy messengers, since he sent us out to announce a rebellion. But still, why are we going against the Austrians and not the Turks."

"Since 1527 we've been under the rule of the Habsburg

Emperor Leopold I. He was the autocratic ruler of the whole of the monarchy, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia...”

“Autocratic?”

“That means he ignored the decisions made by the parliaments of the oppressed countries. You could forget about the will of the people. He had all the power, the type where it’s all me, me, me ... and everyone else doesn’t matter.”

“And?”

“It was not in his interest to help the Croats and Hungarians free themselves from the Turks. That would only make them harder to control. So he made a peace deal with the Turks, on paper, while in reality the Turks kept invading Croatian lands, killing and pillaging. So Petar Zrinski teamed up with Fran Krsto Frankopan to start a rebellion. Frankopan who the second most powerful Croatian noble and his sister, Ana Katarina, was Zrinski’s wife. The two conspirators had support from most of the Hungarian nobility, who also wanted independence from the Habsburgs. They searched for other allies, reaching out to the kings of France and Spain, the Venetian Doge and then ...”

“Get to the point, did the conspiracy work?” Toni was impatient.

“No. The help from the French, Poles and Spaniards never made it. Zrinski and Frankopan, the two main conspirators, were discovered and killed.”

“That’s horrible! You want to join a war that we know we’ll lose. Do you want to end up being labelled a conspirator and get the electric chair?” Toni was picturing the worst case scenario.

“There are no electric chairs in the 17th century! The worst they can do is chop off our heads, like they did to Zrinski and Frankopan,” Dinko corrected Toni.

“You can go to war and I’m going to be a deserter. I value my head.”

They would have continued bickering for a while, if they were not interrupted by the blowing of a horn from the tower. It blew three times and then a guard yelled down for the city drawbridge to be lowered. The boys hurried towards the gate to see who was entering the city.

There was a large company of men riding along the city walls. Riding tall in his saddle, the head man wore red garments and a lavish black cloak. Even his horse was elaborately dressed and looked nothing like the rest of the company. There were ten pike-men, marching along and five riders, armed with muskets and elegant sabres.

“Some big shot is arriving. Check out his bodyguards,” noticed Toni

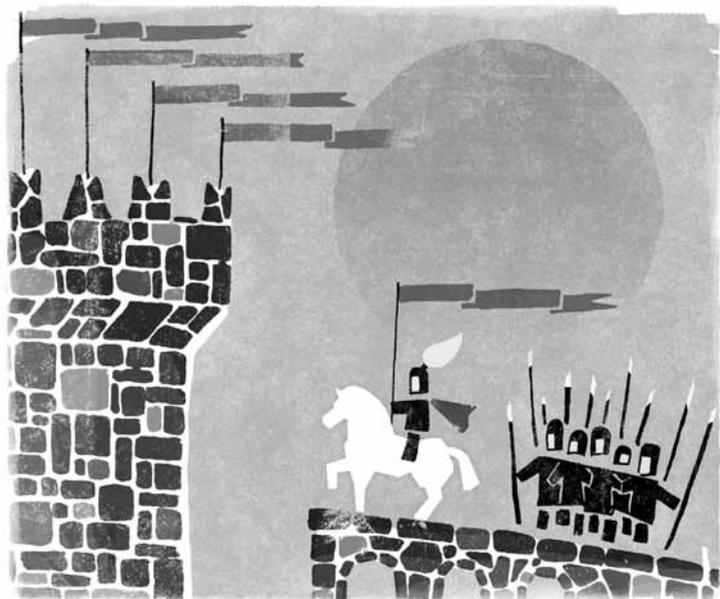
At that moment the guard announced from the top of the tower.

“Presenting His Excellency, the Duke Fran Krsto Frankopan.”

Dinko jumped from excitement.

“What luck? We’re going to get to see Krsto in real life.”

“You won’t be so lucky, if he drafts you into his army. You most likely won’t even be alive,” Toni tried bringing him back to reality



The company entered the city, all of the people began to bow and then cheered on the exalted duke and fearless warrior. He returned the greeting by raising a closed fist up in the air. He dismounted and the boys got a better look at the young duke's face. His hair was draped over the leather collar of his dark, military overcoat. He moved quickly and entered the office of the Ogulin commanders.

Shortly after, a lieutenant exited the small house and addressed the crowd.

“His Excellency, the Duke Fran Krsto Frankopan, has come from his fortress - city of Bakar, on the coast. He wishes to meet with the troops before that fateful moment is upon us. Gathered friends, in honour of the duke, there is free food and drink until nightfall. Tonight we feast in

delight and tomorrow, to arms. Muskets and sabres will be distributed following the holy mass.”

The people cheered the duke’s name and the lieutenant made his way through the crowd. His walk was firm and bold, just like that of a soldier, but then he stopped and looked at the two misplaced messengers.

“You two!” he order.

“At your service!” answered Toni and Dinko, promptly.

“Follow me. The duke wishes to see you.”

They entered the large room that served as the office of the Ogulin commanders. The young duke was sitting by the fireplace and writing, using a large goose feather quill. He payed no attention to them. Dinko was excited and stated fidgeting, while Toni, as cool as usual, started crack-ing jokes.

“Check out his haircut, he looks like he belongs in an 80’s rock band. If he shaved of that moustache, he might actu-ally look half normal.”

“Shut up!” Dinko yanked him by the sleeve. “It’s the 17th century. Be happy that they’re not wearing big wigs, like the French did during the time of Louis XIV.”

“Is that the guy that never showered and instead doused himself in cologne, to cover up the smell.”

“No, I think that was Louis XVI. This guy wore the latest fashion in wigs, but underneath them his head was cov-ered with lice. Frankopan is a warrior and he wouldn’t be caught dead in a wig. He also doesn’t smell and have lice, like the French. His hair is natural and shiny.”

“He’s shiny all over. Look at the golden chords on his cloak and the golden buttons and those frilly shoulder straps. Even the belt for his sword is golden. Why is he all glittering and what’s the point of that massive ring?”

“That ring is a symbol of the duke’s honour. It is inscribed with the Frankopan coat of arms. His ancestors would have worn the exact same ring. Did you notice his marvellous sabre?”

Toni glimpsed at the table and caught a glint of sunlight, which reflected off the resting sabre. The hilt was the most captivating part, pure silver, encrusted with precious stones.

“That was given to his ancestors by the Pope, as a token of gratitude for defending Christian lands from the Turks and Islam.”

As Dinko drew Toni’s attention to Krsto’s weaponry and away from his outfit, even Toni began to perceive the duke with reverence. The duke had finished writing his letter, folded the paper and sealed it with wax.

“Where are my envoys?” the duke spoke in a deep voice. The boys stood at attention, but the duke’s steely gaze made their legs go numb.

“This letter is to go to my sister, Ana Katarina Zrinski. Make haste to Bosiljevo castle. It is urgent that she know the outcome of my mission, concerning the Venetians.”

“At your command, your Excellency!” Dinko answered quickly, while Toni was lost for words. He just wanted to warn the duke of his impending doom. The duke had turned out to be a likable character and Toni did not want

to see him lose his head. He looked no older than twenty seven. It would be a shame that he should die.

“Supply my envoys with two Belgian muskets and a pair of fresh horses. Let them be ready to leave before night fall,” Frankopan issued the order to one of his attendants. The boys followed the attendants and readied without speaking a word. Before they could process all that just transpired, they found themselves outside the city, leaving the tall walls in the distance.

“At least now, we don’t have to become deserters, ha, ha, ha! We’ll do our part as carrier pigeons,” Toni was quiet pleased that he had escaped joining the ranks of a condemned army.

“Buddy, we are in deep trouble. It’s at least a couple of hours riding time to Bosiljevo and that’s plenty of time to get captured by an Austrian patrol. If they find the letter and realize that we’re a part of a conspiracy, we’ll be jailed, interrogated and tortured. If on the other hand, we run into a band of Turks, they’ll kill us without thinking twice about it. They might even impale us alive.”

Hearing the magnitude of their situation, Toni turned pale. His hand moved to his musket belt and then he gripped the steel barrel. That calmed his nerves. Being armed was a small consolation.

“Ana Katarina was no ordinary woman. You could even consider her the founding member of the conspiracy. Her father was Vuk Krsto Frankopan, a Karlovac general, a capable soldier and a very powerful man. He made sure that she got the best education and was brought up in the Croatian tradition. She could speak Italian, German and

Hungarian but would only correspond with her sibling in Croatian. She even published her own works and supported others financially, in doing the same. Her brother and husband also wrote poetry, so undoubtedly, it was a family passion.”

“Who? Duke Krsto, a poet? He comes off more as a rugged warrior and fighter. Are you sure you don’t have him confused for someone else?” Toni disliked the idea of the duke sitting at a desk composing little poems.

“It was a different time. Frankopan knew that life was short and fleeting and his poetry was a way of becoming immortal. Anyone who reads his works is returned to the 17th century and sees how men used to express their feelings, without shame. Beautiful women had many suitors, declaring their undying love for them.”

“Oh yeah. Who was Frankopan chasing after?” Toni wanted to know a bit more about the duke’s love life.

“He got married very young to an Italian noblewoman, Julia da Navalao. She was the niece of a cardinal from Rome and it was allegedly a marriage of convenience. It was arranged by Ana Katarina and was meant to firm up relations between the Pope and the families of Zrinski and Frankopan. Vatican support was needed for any attempt at succession from Austria. Ana also arranged a marriage between her eldest daughter Jelena and a powerful Hungarian nobleman, Rakoczy.”

“That was pretty sneaky of the duchess. Too bad for Jelena. Her mom picked out who she had to marry!” Toni found Ana Katarina’s marital meddling distasteful.

“It wasn’t completely cold-hearted. In most cases they would have gotten along. Why are you so quick to defend Jelena, anyways? You weren’t bothered by Julia’s marriage to Krsto,” Dino knew full well the effect that name had on his friend. “Everyone sought after Jelena because she was both attractive and affluent and being a Frankopan gave her great prestige.”

“Ohh, Jelena, Jelena... I guess all Jelenas are beautiful. This one, the most prized bride in the kingdom and the one back home, the hottest girl in school. Maybe even the neighbourhood,” Toni did not bother concealing his admiration. He got to thinking of how long it had been since he last sent her an email. A couple of days at least. He decided the next email would be more daring: “I want to kiss your lips, feel your beautiful body and play with your golden hair”. If these 17th century warriors could put themselves out there, at the risk of being publicly humiliated, there was no reason for him to be shy on the internet. He was inspired and wanted to get to his computer and type it all out, but then he realized where he was. Surrounding him, was an endless, shadowy forest and his ears could only hear the clip-clop of hooves.

“Just imagine, that you’re riding your first Harley Davidson,” Toni tried to cheer himself up. He did not want to be Frankopan’s messenger, on some miserable delivery run. It would have been much simpler, if he stayed at home and caught a match at Maksimir. Instead, he might never see Jelena again, or his class, or his teammates... He was overcome by dark thoughts and decided: enough with the emotional stuff. He would deliver the letter, get back to the Vemoplov, return to 1999 and would never have to see this

stupid century again. He did not even care about the future any more. All he wanted to do was go back to his neighbourhood.

“Dinko, how much farther to Bosiljevo?” he asked impatiently.

“About half an hour. I see some houses in the distance. It looks like farms.”

“And not a moment too early. Another hour, in these woods and I would have forgotten what civilization looks like,” Toni complained.

“Stop whining. We’ve been lucky the entire way. We didn’t cross paths with any Turks or any wolves!”

“There are wolves around here!” Toni looked at the woods on either side of the road.

“Oh yeah. Wolves and bears, this is wild country,” Dinko was about to launch into one of his explanations, but then he noticed something moving on the road ahead. Maybe it was a real life example. Some bear, woken from its hibernation, roaming the forest, looking for a snack.

“Buddy, if that’s a grizzly, we are done for,” Toni had noticed the same ominous shape.

“Grizzly, please! If it’s a bear at all, it will be a Euroasian Brown Bear and it won’t attack us. They mostly eat plants, beetles and mice. If we spook it, he might take a swing at us.”

Dinko convinced himself that they were safe, but strained his eyes to identify the approaching figure. A wagon came into focus. Pulled by bulls and carrying a pair of men dressed in peasant’s clothing.

“These guys don’t look so dangerous. I should ask them where we are,” Toni was happy to see other human beings, after such a prolonged time in the forest. The fact that they were not a bear also put him at ease. The boys learned that these serfs worked on Frankopan’s land in Bosiljevo and that the castle was not far off. They hustled their horses in the direction of the hill. As the twilight sky faded to black, lights appeared not far ahead. Hidden in the thick forest, a four-sided fortress peeked above the tree tops.

“Another fort? Do any of these guys have proper homes, or do all Zrinski and Frankopan families prefer living in dungeons?” Toni shook his head.

“You just wait and see. This castle could be in a fairy tale.”

And that was no lie. The boys saw numerous little towers that sprouted out from behind the broad walls. The lengths of which, watchmen paced, carrying bright torches. A horn blared from one of the sentries. The boys had not made it within a hundred meters of the castle, when they were spotted. Three pike-men surrounded them and without much discussion, escorted them to the main gate. As they waited, in front of tall iron doors, Toni noticed a coat of arms engraved on top of the archway. It belonged to the Frankopan family and featured two opposing lions with a round loaf of bread in the centre.

“Another coat of arms! This one looks like the Ferrari symbol: the lion raised on its back legs,” Toni reminisced about his favourite car brand.

“How can you compare a coat of arms from the 15th century to a Ferrari badge from the 20th century! More importantly, these are two lions and the Ferrari logo is a horse,” Dinko corrected Toni.

Even though night had fallen, the inner courtyard was alive with activity. All sorts of people were coming and going: servants, cooks, chambermaids, stablemen, monks and a few people whom the boys could not identify. The pike-man escorted them to a courtier of Ana Katarina Zrinski, who then ushered them through a brilliantly lit hall and up a marble staircase.

“What a light show!” Toni was impressed by the many oil lamps. He did not expect such luxury. There was soft carpet underfoot, satin drapes on the windows and paintings and tapestries hanging from the walls.

“Everyone of these statues is a valuable piece of art. Same goes for the paintings, which have been passed down for generations,” even Dinko was surprised by the castle’s radiance.

When they arrived at a door, where two guards had been posted, the courtier spoke for the first time:

“Wait here until the duchess is ready to see you.”

The courtier left and the two waited in anticipation. After a seemingly endless wait, the same courtier emerged from the room and escorted the boys in. They saw a tall woman sitting with perfect posture. Her face was youthful and framed by flowing black hair. With pride and elegance, she stood up and approached the two. Dinko reacted quickly.

“We have been sent by His Excellency, Fran Krsto, to deliver Your Grace a letter.”

“It is good that you have arrived, before I had retired for the night. I know that these are urgent times for my brother.”

The duchess broke open the seal and began reading the letter, but motioned for them to remain. This made them relaxed and gave them the opportunity to appreciate Katarina's dignified form. She wore a dark, wine-coloured, velvet garment. Its bodice fit snugly around her waist, while the voluminous skirt reached down to the floor. Her décolletage was adorned with baroque pearls. She finished reading the letter and her face had turned somber.

"Tonight I must write a reply to my husband. You will spend the night at Bosiljevo and head for Ozalj at first light."

They promptly withdrew from the duchess' quarters. In the hallway, they were met by a servant who showed them to the dinner hall.

"She's a beautiful woman. I wouldn't guess her to be over thirty-five, never mind that she had a married daughter," Toni was sincerely taken aback by Ana Katarina's beauty

"Well she was already a wife at sixteen and right now she's probably about forty-five. If you think she's good looking, just imagine her daughter Jelena."

"Forget Jelena. I'm sure there are some unwed women still available," Toni was interested in meeting some more of the women, of the Zrinski family tree.

"Let me see, there's Judita and also Zora Veronika. My mistake. Sorry bud, but it doesn't look good. Judita is probably close to seventy years old and lives in a convent near Zagreb. Zora is fifteen, which means that her dad has already betroth her to an aristocrat," Dinko answered apologetically.

“Of course,” Toni agreed. “How would I, a mere carrier pigeon, ever interest a young duchess? Now if I were the son of the Doge?”

“Then your odds would improve. That’s how thing worked, back in those days. Your privileges were allocated to you at birth.”

“It’s a good thing that I was not born back in those days!” Toni had the final word on the issue of class distinctions.

They entered the dinner hall and were seated. There was an abundant spread of food on the table. A servant offered them venison with truffles, pheasant served with potato dumplings, as well as a number of common dishes, like roasted veal. They ogled the food and tried to decide what to eat first, but then ended up sampling every single dish. The wine, in their silver cups, was as equally abundant and never ran low. By the time that the desert arrived, they were so full that they were having trouble just breathing.

“This is how the prince of Monaco must feel,” groaned Toni, satisfied.

“You got to agree. These feudal times aren’t so bad, as long as you’re born at the right address. I’d hate to imagine what it be like, if we were the sons of some serf working under Franjo Tahy,” Dinko shuttered at the thought.

“You mean the guy that Matija Gubec lead a rebellion against. All I know was, that I’d never want to be one of those peasants. You’re better off being a swamp monster.”

After supper, the page escorted the two exhausted travelers to their sleeping quarters. The extravagance of their room was consistent with the rest of the castle. Persian

rugs covered the marble floors and each of the two massive beds was blanketed by rose embroidered linens.

“Staying at a deluxe suite. It’s the only way to travel,” Toni was pleased. “I’ll just jump in the shower, before I plop down on the silk sheets.”

“You do that and tell me if the water pressure is good. Maybe you could unwind in the jacuzzi, before calling it a night?” Dinko chuckled and pointed. “See over there, next to the window. That’s the bathroom.”

Toni walked over to a wooden stand on which there was a bowl, with a pitcher in it. He used a candelabra, to shine more light on the setup, but still could not see how it was a bathroom. Meanwhile Dinko was rolling on his bed laughing.

“Ha, ha, ha... That’s a wash bowl and faucets don’t exist. You’re supposed to call the chambermaid to pour the pitcher for you. Ha, ha...”

“Yeah okay, I see what you mean and you can quit laughing already. I can see that there’s no bathroom, but were do we go to the toilet?”

“That, I don’t know. Could you throw another log into the fire, so that we don’t freeze during the night,” - Dinko calmed down and got ready for bed.

Toni walked over to the green fireplace and looked at the dancing flames. Thoughts of home came to him again. He remembered his warm room and dear mother and felt sad once more. Despite his earlier optimism, he had a hard time seeing a way out of this time labyrinth. Who knew what dangers tomorrow might bring? Once more, they would be on a dangerous road, without an escort.

Dinko was drained of all his strength. His body wanted sleep but his mind was restless. He was in the middle of his favourite historic time period, the time of the Zrinski-Frankopan conspiracy, but he was not satisfied. Earlier that evening, when they met the duchess, he knew that he could not let history unfold as it was meant to. How could he stand by as Katarina lost her husband, her brother and was stripped of all her land and status? Events had to take a different course. The rebel army, lead by Zrinski, would defeat the Austrian and then regroup to clear out the Venetians and Turks. Croatia would be restored to its former kingdom and the crown would be as glorious as it once was, when it was donned by the ancient kings Tomislav and Zvonimir. The wheel of time will spin in a different direction. A hundred years of subjugation would be erased and Croatians would never have to fight useless wars under foreign flags...

“Dreams, they’re just dreams,” Dinko shook off the fantasies.

These visions of a prosperous Croatia, still filled him with joy. Did he really have to stand on the sidelines? Maybe there was some way to warn Petar Zrinski, of the outside betrayal that would leave him at the mercy of Emperor Leopold? Dinko did not see a clear answer but hoped a new day would bring a new perspective. As he slipped into dreamland, his thoughts were with the conspirators.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, the boys were woken up by a loud knocking on their chamber door. They sat up, one after the other, rudely reminded that they were not in familiar surroundings. The Vremeplov had not transported them back to their homes during the night. They were still messengers for Petar Zrinski. Toni got out of bed quickly, full of vigour.

“Good morning, carrier pigeon! Let’s get a move on. We’ll deliver that letter and leave this entire mess behind us.”

“To battle! To battle! For your nation!” Dinko hummed the old patriotic song, as he dressed. He had no intention of leaving anything behind. He decided to stick it out until the end, even if it meant losing his head.

They exited into the hallway and looked out onto the inner courtyard. It was bustling with activity; a countless number of servants tended to Ana Katarina and her guests. A stableman lead horses into the square, holding on to their bridles as he walked. The horses were neatly groomed and had polished saddles. Courtiers emerged from a squat building, without any windows, carrying muskets and leather pouches. Following closely behind, were five other courtiers with a pack of dogs. Seeing the dogs, Dinko figured out what was going on.

“The gentry are going on a hunt. I’d love to join them, but

without the dogs and servants. There is no point in hunting, if the pray is brought right to you.”

“Oh, check out that young chick! That might be...”

“Zora Veronika, Katarina’s daughter. She’s around our age,” Dinko confirmed Toni’s thoughts. “That guy in the fancy suit, next to her, must be her brother. It looks like they’re arguing with their mom. Must be something to do with the hunt.”

An older gentleman spoke with Ana Katarina, in Italian and she nodded in response.

“That could be their mentor. It looks like he wants them to stay home and crack open some books but they’d rather join the hunting party,” Dinko was guessing at what role the grey-haired monk played.

“What can that old timer possible teach them? Unless they want to go into priesthood or become a nun, they’re better of going on the hunt,” Toni rationalized.

“It’s not like that. He doesn’t jut teach them religion. He teaches them all subjects. In the 17th century, there were no formal schools in Croatia.”

“So the Zrinski kids don’t attend a real classroom and don’t have a different teacher for each subject. That must sucks! Having to spend every day looking at the same old man,” Toni sympathized with Zora and her brother.

“Hey look, they got muskets. Looks like they’re going after all.”

Dinko watched Zora skilfully unbuckle her golden belt, loop on the leather pouch, buckle the belt back up and secure the short musket between the belt and her hip.

“What’s she doing with a gun? Women were capable of hunting wild game?” The picture of a duchess’ daughter holding a firearm did not make sense to Toni.

“The hunt was a beloved leisure activity for all the nobles and the women didn’t want to be left out. Notice how they all know how to handle their weapons.”

A horn sounded and the servants rushed to open the gate. The colourful hunting party streamed out beyond the walls and disappeared down the hill. As the boys walked down to the courtyard they were stopped by Ana Katarina’s courtier, the same one they met the night before. He handed them a sealed letter and returned to his duties. They continued to the stables to look for their horses. Not being able to find them at first, they wandered through the tall vaults of the castle grounds. In one vault a surprise awaited them. Parked one next to the other, stood three ornate carriages. The closest one was upholstered in red velvet, could seat four and had golden tassels lining the folding roof.

“This one reminds me of a Ferrari cabriolet,” said Toni in delight.

“That would make this one a Mercedes sedan,” commented Dinko, walking over to the next carriage, which had eight, black, leather seats and hardtop roof.

“I don’t see a Mercedes badge, but there is a Frankopan coat of arms on the door. Looks like we’re in Frankopan’s garage.”

“That’s exactly what this room is. Look, he even has one for trips into the city,” Dinko looked at the plain blue carriage at the end. They climbed into all of the carriages,

tested out the seats and admired the craftsmanship. They even opened and closed the folding roof. Then they remembered that they had a job to do and a little saddened, left the Frankopan's garage.

The stableman was bringing in their horses from a secondary stable and on seeing them, apologized profusely. He believed them to be nobility and that he had kept them waiting. The boys played it down, not wanting to attract any extra attention. They saddled up and trotted through the still-open gates.

"Oh, how I'd like to take the red one out, for a drive. I'd load up all the guys in the back and take the driver seat," Toni imagined the fun he would have with a carriage.

Dinko was not paying too much attention. In his mind, he was busy hammering out a plan to save the conspirators. He would unseal the letter, figure out what it says. Then he would replace it with a new one that convinced Petar Zrinski to abandon the conspiracy. How would he forge Ana Katarina's handwriting and signature? What if it's discovered that he tampered with the letters? Would anyone appreciate his good intentions? Question and more questions. All without an answer... Suddenly he is pulled from his planning by Toni's carefree voice.

"What kind of game is in season right now?"

"I'm not sure, maybe deer, or wild boar," Dinko went quiet again, not wanting to engage in a conversation.

"Hey, buddy, what's up? You didn't fall in love with that Zora chick, did you?" Toni tried to strike up a conversation.

“What are you talking about, falling in love! I just remembered a really sad event that happened to the Zrinski family recently.”

“Go on, spill it! I’m here to listen, even though all of them are starting to get on my nerves. Spoiled rich people! At least when I get back, I won’t have to think about them.”

“But this was a real family tragedy. It resonated through all of Croatia and even Europe,” Dinko recalled the history lesson.

“Go on, get to the story? Don’t worry, I don’t cry at sad movies.”

“It happened five years ago, so around 1664. The Viceroy of Croatia was Nikola Zrinski, Petar’s brother. He organized a lavish boar hunt and invited all the nobility. After a successful day in the forest, they gathered for supper at the Viceroy’s estate, in Čakovec. Word came that there was a large male boar still in the forest that had been left wounded. Viceroy Nikola decided to head back and put the animal out of its misery. There were no witnesses, but when Nikola’s body was found, it appeared that the boar had killed him,” Dinko paused noticeably upset.

“A set up!” Toni accused in a hard voice.

“That’s right. It’s hard to believe that such a great warrior, who heroically defended Croatia and Hungary from the Turks, would be killed by a boar. An injured boar! It’s not like it was his first time out hunting. Also, the wounds on his body looked very suspicious,” Dinko explained.

“Who would’ve wanted to kill him? Who had something to gain?” Toni was interested in the unsolved case.

“Most likely the Austrians, that is, Emperor Leopold I and the Habsburgs. Their problem was that Nikola was very popular throughout Christian Europe. The other rulers showed him gratitude and honoured him because it was Nikola who prevented the Turkish treat from reaching their borders.”

“Damned Austians!” barked Toni

“Just think, that not even seven years after his brother was assassinated, Petar will be beheaded alongside his brother-in-law. I have to stop it, one way or another.”

In his frustration, Dinko broke open the seal, on the letter and quickly read its content, all the while trying not to fall out of his saddle. Katarina had outlined the ongoing plans for the conspiracy. There were new talks with the French King Louis XIV. She also urged Petar to go to Vienna and continue dealing with the Habsburgs, to quell any suspicions.

“She’s oblivious to the facts. Spies have already discovered the plot and Vienna is just waiting for a chance to take them out,” Dinko shook his head at Katarina’s letter.

“Why weren’t they more careful? They should have known that agents infiltrated their ranks,” Toni was an espionage enthusiast.

“They were completely manipulated! They had guarantees from France and Poland, that they would be supported. Most of the Croatian nobility was on their side, so they had a right to feel confident and they would have succeeded, if the allies actually came through.”

“Hey buddy, opening that letter was probably not such

a good idea. They might accuse you of being an Austrian spy,” Toni was concerned for his friend.

“I’m going to write a new letter,” Dinko answered coolly.

“What are you thinking? When they blow your cover, they’ll torture you and demand the name of your handler and then what?” Toni was opposed to Dinko’s plan.

“Quit with the FBI talk. How would they ever find out? It will be fine. Zrinski will realize that his allies have betrayed him and call off the whole thing,” Dinko was confident that his plan would work.

This made Toni concerned, because he knew that Dinko would try doing things his own way. What a numbskull,



thinking he can change the course of history. Toni wanted to get Dinko onto the Vremeplov and get out of there before his friend went completely insane, trying to solve a historic conundrum.

Dinko had in the meantime, dismounted his horse and unrolled a fresh piece of paper. They were almost within view of Ozalj and it was time to act. If everything went according to plan, he would ride into Ozalj not only a messenger, but also a saviour. He might even get a medal for his brave and noble deed. Toni had a less positive outlook.

“Your nonsense is going to get you in front of a military tribunal and then executed! I don’t want any part in it. I’m going back to the Vremeplov.”

“I didn’t mean to drag you into this. It’s my decision and I’ll deal with the consequences by myself,” Dinko insisted.

“Yeah, so I’m a coward and you want to protect me. You’ll do your heroic deeds alone,” now Toni was offended.

“You don’t understand. I’m doing this because of an ideal.”

“Are you saying that I would never do something like that? Whose idea was it to climb down Đula’s chasm, yours or mine? Were you there to help Davor and Ivan, when those punks came over from Remiza to beat them up? How about that time when the Bad Blue Boys attacked us for no reason? They had knives and I stood up to them with my bare fists. And you’re going to talk to me about bravery!” Toni was spitting mad.

“Fighting isn’t a sign of bravery,” Dinko answered calmly. He was never interested in these so-called fights and never got into them.

“That’s why you always bolt when things get rough,” Toni insulted him.

“It’s because I don’t feel like dealing with delinquents. It’s a waste of life. Why are we even arguing? You have your idea of bravery and I got mine. I’m going to help save the conspirators.”

“That’s not bravery, that’s stupidity. Maybe if you had proven yourself in a brawl, I’d back you up. If your brother asked me to save the Frankopans, I’d do it in a second. Too bad you’re not more like Vlado. You’re the complete opposite. At the first sign of trouble you run away. Not him, he knows how to fight!” Toni stuck to his beliefs.

“Don’t bring my brother into this. He fought for a good cause. He defended Croatia. You can’t compare that to getting into fistfights with the neighbourhood hooligans,” Dinko got riled up at the mention of his brother’s name.

“Come off it, you’re not doing him any justice! He was a scrapper before he went off and joined the Tigers. If anyone so much as bumped into him, he’d knock ‘em out. You’re just a scrawny book nerd,” Toni stopped choosing his word. He climbed on his horse and started circling around Dinko.

Dinko had sat on the grass and focused on the job at hand. He got the hand of the odd calligraphy fairly quickly. He planned on telling the Viceroy that the duchess was tired and dictated the letter to her courtier. The Viceroy might buy it. When he reached the end of his letter, he signed it “Faithfully yours, Ana Katarina Zrinski”. He reapplied the old seal and looked up at Toni.

“I’m off now. Go back to grandma and make up a story for why I’m not there.”

Tony patted him on his shoulder and wanted to make peace. He was remorseful for what he had said about Dinko. They shook hands, like grown men and understood the seriousness of their undertakings. Toni spoke first.

“Good luck and I hope things work out for you. I’m not sure what lays ahead for me. For all I know the Vremeplov might be gone. If I end up stuck in the 17th century ...”

“We’ll make it out of this, COME ON, BRAVE HART” Dinko supported his friend in the way he usually had. They both smiled and were happy that their friendship trumped petty arguments.

“Just so you know, I’m not going to let you be a carrier pigeon forever. The moment that I find the Vremeplov, I’m coming back to get you. I’ll even kidnap Zrinski, if that’s what it takes.”

Drinko smiled and waved off Toni’s comment.

“If everything goes according to plan, I won’t need to come back.”

“There’s really no hope for you, is there? STUPID GUY, GOOD BYE, GOOD LUCK” Toni rushed saying the last few words. He turned his horse and headed for Ogulin. He hated goodbyes and deep down hoped that they would meet again.

“Watch out for guys with guns. Don’t ride at night and in fog! You might get lost!” Dinko yelled after his friend, who was vanishing in the distance.

CHAPTER 4

Toni rode due South. He navigated using the sun and the rivers. As the river Kupa approached the city of Karlovac, he left its banks and followed the river Dobra downstream. He knew that it would bring him to Đula's chasm and the Vremeplov. At about the half way mark, he saw Novigrad, the fortified town of the Frankopan dukes. There were many soldiers gathered. Young serfs were being armed and readied for the uprising. It seemed like the safest place to spend the night; the manor was well guarded and he being the messenger of Petar Zrinski would be well received.

Morning found him waking up in a small, wooden stable. It was the first time that he slept on hay. As he beat the dust off of his coat, he smirked to himself. What would his city friends think, if they met him now. He smelled like cows. Worse still, was the goofy outfit that he wore... Toni decided that if, by some stroke of luck, he managed to find his way back home, he would not tell anyone about his crazy journey through time. It would forever remain between him and Dinko. His heart tightened at the thought of his friend. There was a silent void, now that his quixotic friend was gone. A strong link had formed between them and it reminded Toni of the Dire Straits song, Brothers in Arms. It talked about indivisible friendships between brothers in arms. He felt that he would be willing to sacrifice, even his own life for Dinko.

This crazy adventure had brought him closer to another friend, as well. He loved his horse. The mighty and noble animal was steadily pacing toward Ogulin and was close to his heart. He enjoyed feeding him hay and oats whenever they paused along their journey. “Harley” would neigh happily whenever Toni caressed his red chestnut neck. The nickname came from the motorcycle that he wanted to buy: a 120 horsepower HARLEY DAVIDSON. Something he could only dream of owning, until after his eighteenth birthday. Jokingly he would tell his horse: “Harley, you’re my only horsepower. Only but not lonely!” He wondered if a motorcycle could replace this dear animal. How could he ever part ways with Harley? This idea alone bothered him. Was he becoming attached to this time period?

“Come on Toni, don’t be so sentimental. You can go to any riding school and find another horse,” a little voice inside his head spoke, “and why do you even need a horse, you should be looking for a girlfriend.”

It was a sign and now he was confident that Jelena would be his. Harley picked up the pace as if he sensed Toni’s eagerness to get back to Zagreb. Mount Klek appeared on the horizon, which meant that Ogulin was close.

“Hurrah! We’ve made it, we’re safe!” Toni yelled with joy.

“Harley, thank you for the ride. Just a little farther and we’ll have to say our goodbyes,” He patted his trusty steed on the head and continued with his babbling. “You’re the only descent thing in this entire miserable century... Don’t be mad, but I have to return to my time.”

Some fifteen minutes later, Ogulin fortress came into view. Toni dismounted cautiously and unbuckled Harley’s

saddle and bridle. He continued on foot, so that it would be harder for the guards to spot him. Bobbing and weaving his way through the bush, he approached the fortress. Suddenly, something snapped behind him. Toni turned around terrified. He did not want any close encounters with other people. Pressing up against a large oak tree, he thought fondly of the darkness in the cave. Then he saw Harley. His loyal steed had followed him into the forest. The animal had instinctively stopped on the opposite side of the oak tree. Toni stepped out of hiding and in front of the horse.

“Well, you found me! What am I going to do with you now? Should I take you back to Zagreb and keep you in my garage? No, the city is not for you, you like fields and forests... Okay Harley, it’s time to go, don’t cause problems for me.”

The horse neighed, happy to see Toni again.

“Scram, you’re free! It’s not easy, but we must go our separate ways.”

Toni turned and continued through the dense branches. He never looked back at his horse. The sorrow pressed heavy on his chest.

“Any minute now and you’ll be at the Vremeplov. Dinko’s waiting for you to rescue him. Forget about the horse!” Toni fought back the surging emotions. He was urged on forward by the sound of rushing water, which meant that Đula’s chasm was close.

The brush cleared and he entered the canyon. After walking alongside the base of the cliffs, he was finally in front of the entrance to the cave. Stepping away from the edge

of the river and into the darkness, he had nothing to guide him except what he could gather from the murky depths of the past. His fingertips dragged across the wet rock and he searched his memory. It was of no use; he could not remember which way he and Dinko had walked. Even if he could remember, it would have been useless in the pitch black. So he walked toward the only sound that he heard, that of a distant waterfall. Slowly the cave began to narrow. His eyes began to adjust to the darkness and as they did, he saw a tunnel. He had made it. Now he had to decide whether to go into this tunnel, or continue along the cave. Deep from within the tunnel, he heard footsteps. He stopped and listened. Were they just hallucinations?

Then he remembered Dinko's grandma used to say that fear tricks the eyes. Maybe the same was true with ears. It is probably just his imagination. He embarked through the tunnel, hunching over as he progressed. He hoped that Casper, the friendly ghost, would show up. It is the cartoon character that he would sometimes call upon, in times of trouble.

"Casper, appear and get me out of this labyrinth and take me to the Vremeplov," he mumbled the desperate prayer from his childhood.

Instead of Casper showing up, the tunnel started to widen and Toni could stand upright and walk comfortably. He remained cautious as he stepped on the sharp and slippery protrusions. A dim light appeared and it seemed that Toni had made it out of the tunnel. Finally out of the wet, he thought as he entered the wide cavern and stood on the shore of the underground lake. Gray stalactites hung from the ceiling. He was enchanted by them and the occasional

droplets that would fall from the tips landing in the lake.

Then, near a particularly large stalactite, suspended upside down, he saw a bat. An ugly cocoon of wrapped wings - pure evil! He let out a shriek and ran as far away from that part of the cavern as he could. Someone had told him once, that bats get tangled up in people's hair, because of their boney wings and claws. Once they are stuck, they are impossible to remove. It was a horrible thought. He did not want to have to cut his hair because of bat. Coming back to Zagreb without his hair, was not something he needed. Girls in school always said that he looked like Antonio Banderas and mostly because of the hair. He kept running without paying attention, slipped and fell. Crawling around in the dim light he felt some sharp objects beneath his palms. They were bones and again he let out a shriek. He was looking right into the eyes of a human skull. His last cry echoed throughout the cavern. On hearing it, Toni was embarrassed. Frightened by a pile of bones! At least no one was around to hear him scream like a little girl.

"Stop right there!" a voice boomed behind him. Looks like he was not alone. Frozen with fear, he did not even turn to see who was with him, in this ghastly place. If Mulder from the X-Files was here, he would have believed that it was extraterrestrials. Maybe the Vremeplov brought back someone from the future. While his thoughts raced trough his mind and his imagination ran wild, the voice sounded again. "Throw down your weapon!"

Toni, submissively, took out the musket from his belt. A heavy person, took three steps and gathers up the weapon of the floor. Next to Toni was a young man with ragged hair. He was a head taller than Toni and had a grim look.

He looked dangerous, with a long knife at his waist and short musket in his hand.

“What’s your name?” he demanded.

“Toni Majetić,” Toni gave his name without any contemplation.

“With whose army?” the questioning continued.

“No one’s, I’m a messengers for Viceroy Petar Zrinski.”

As the words left his mouth, he regretted revealing the name of his boss. There was no telling whose side this creepy guy was on.

“What kind of cowards does Zrinski have serving him!” the young man derided him. Toni was offended but kept quiet. He felt like knocking this guy out, but restrained himself. After all, that guy was armed to the tooth. He was several years older and had wide shoulders. His clothes did not have any military insignia. Maybe, this guy was a bandit.

“What’s in the bag?” asked the stranger, confirming Toni’s suspicion, that has dealing with an out-law.

“Just some food.”

The thug’s demeanour eased and he grabbed Toni’s bag and slashes it open with his knife. He took out the bread and dried meat, that Ana Katarina’s servant had packed for them in Bosiljevo.

“Stay where you are!” the young man ordered and started to devour the food.

Maybe he was a serf, Toni reconsidered. After he had his fill of food, the young man returned Toni’s musket and

asked to be followed. Toni obeyed and followed him to a bend in the cavern. The nook was lit by a small fire. There were sacks against the wall and some rags that looked like they were being used as beds. The young man reached into one of the sacks and pulled out a gold coin.

“This is payment for what I ate.”

Toni looked at him, confused. What was going on? First the guy snatches his bag and now he wanted to pay him. Nothing made sense anymore. Not wanting a confrontation, Toni accepted.

“My name is Stanko!” the young man extended his hand. His handshake was firm and Toni felt that the man’s suspicions and animosity had subsided. So he addressed Stanko.

“And whose army are you in?”

“Hajduk’s!” Stanko responded with pride. “we fight against anyone who oppresses the people. We have no quarrel with the Viceroy’s forces. Since you serve Zrinski, I’ve nothing against you.”

“How did you get all those bags of gold?” Toni wanted to know.

“Three days ago we took it from some Turks on Kapela.”

“You fought against actual Turks?”

“What’s so surprising about that?”

“Well you’re still young.” Now Toni felt ashamed that he had never been in any battles.

“I’ve lived in the hills, with my father and some other fighters, since I was twelve. They took me on my first skirmish about a year ago. That time we captured and entire

Venetian sailing vessel. We made off with mountains of ducats and guns. There were fine rugs and silk fabrics... We hauled it all back to our tents on Velebit,” he paused to think. “I have to return to the camp soon.”

“Where is your camp?”

“If I tell you, you’d have to remain with us. Nobody knows about our secret hiding places. They are high up in the mountain, overlooking the sea...” Stanko’s voice became pensive.

“No, no, no, don’t tell me about your Hajduk camp! I don’t want to know. I’m not even from this time period. Enjoy your tip back to Velebit and I’m going to go back to my friends in Zagreb,” Toni blurted it all out without stopping to breathe. He did not want to be recruited into a gang of raiders and he was suspicious of the Hajduks. Why did a bunch of guys, living in a mountain, need mountains of gold coins? It was an odd world, he concluded.

“What time period are you from?” questioned Stanko.

“I’m from the 20th century. Actually, when I wandered into this cave with my friend Dinko, it was 1999. We entered into the Vremeplov and found ourselves in the middle of the 17th century, messengers for Petar Zrinski. Later we split up. Dinko had some crazy idea about saving Zrinski and Frankopan from getting beheaded. Now I have to go and save him, because the conspirators will die anyway.”

“Hold on, stop! How do you know that the rebellion won’t succeed? We were going to contribute this gold to the effort, so the Viceroy could hire more men and drive the Austrians out of the Military Frontier.”

“I know, because I’m from the future. They’ll be publicly executed in Viennese Newtown in 1671 and all their property will be confiscated. There is no saving the nobles, but I have to try and save Dinko,” Toni remembered his mission, while Stanko could not make sense of anything,

“You are an odd man! You blather on about future times... Are you some sort of fortune-teller? You claim to know what will happen next year.”

“You think that I’m odd? How bout you guys, who actually believe that fortune-tellers and witches are real. You’re not odd? I’m telling you, I’m from the future and I know exactly what happens in 1671,” Toni defended himself, against these comical charges.

“It doesn’t matter, where you’re from. We have both been separated: you from your friend and me from my band.”

“Yeah and both of us want to go back to where we belong.”

“Except, your friend is alive and mine have all been killed,” Stanko said mournfully.

“I don’t understand. You just told me that they were up in Velebit.” He stopped himself half way through the sentence. Not wanting to comment on their living in tents, like primitive natives, or going on raiding parties, like pirates.

“The rest of the Hajduks are on Velebit, but I’m all that’s left of our band. It was the ten of us, lead by my father. We knew that the Turks were returning from collecting the harac and would be laden with gold coins. They were not prepared for our attack and we decimated them, sustaining only a single injury. The plan was to give all of the gold to

Viceroy Petar, so we hurried for Ozalj. It was a three day ride from Mala Kapela in Lika, where we had attacked the Turks. Sadly we walked right into an ambush, just outside of Ogulin. It seems some of the Turks that got away, regrouped with another troop and had been secretly following us all along,” Stanko paused and looked away.

“Did they kill your dad? How did you manage to get away?” Toni rushed in with the questions.

“When I saw my dad fall from his horse, I ran to his side. Blood was flowing from his chest, but he managed to say: ‘Run son, take the gold to the Viceroy.’ He died in my hands.”

Toni looked at him with awe. Stanko was a real hero. He managed to fulfil his father’s dieing wish and managed to get out alive with bags of gold. It upset Toni, that he was not such a hero.

“I can help you find the Viceroy. My friend Dinko should be there as well. We’ll go on this quest together,” Toni said quickly, excited that he might have company once again. Stanko remained silent. Clearly he was hurt by the death of his father and friends.

“Come on bud, don’t despair. The dead can’t be brought back to life. We’ll hop into the Vremeplov together. You can go find Zrinski and I’ll find Dinko.”

“What Vremeplov are you talking about?” Stanko shook from his gloomy thoughts.

“It’s an aeroplane that looks like a spacecraft, actually smaller, more like a helicopter, but it’s got an awesome operating capability, it can travel through time.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. Helicopter, aeroplane, spacecraft...”

“Oh, that’s right, you’ve never seen a aeroplane, never mind a spacecraft,” Toni smacked his forehead. “Those are machines that man has created to fly through the air. Ha, ha, ha, you’ve never even seen cars, motorcycles or trains...”

“Birds fly, nothing else. It seems to me that you are in league with the devil. I heard of the old woman they burned for flying on her broom. She sold her soul to the devil to be able to fly, maybe you did...”

“Could you be any more primitive! Talking about devils is nonsense. In the three hundred years following your 17th century, man has invented many things. People can fly, they just need some sort of aerial transportation. Do you know that men have been on the Moon?”

“Either you’re lying, or you’re crazy,” was Stanko’s only reply. He no longer believed anything that Toni said.

“I don’t need to keep convincing you. Come with me to the Vremeplov and I can actually show you the technological wonders of our time. We just have to find it. It’s green and it was on the water edge. Did you see anything like that?” Toni tried being practical, because he knew Stanko would not believe him, until he had seen the evidence with his own eyes. Involving Stanko in the search seemed like the best idea since Toni himself was not able to explain the Vremeplov convincingly. This misunderstanding made him grateful that they had not travelled forward into the future. The third century people would have thought that a Neanderthal landed amongst them. Toni decided that everyone is best suited for their own era.

“I don’t believe you. You say that this machine, in the cave, flies. How did it get through the narrow entrance?”

“Well fine, I don’t believe everything you say about your feats. Maybe you’re just a highwayman that grew up in the woods, who robs innocent people,” countered Toni.

“I am Hajduk Stanko, not a highwayman and I didn’t grow up in the woods. I spent twelve years living in Senj, with my mother and brothers. Only then did I go off to battle,” angered, Stanko’s face had turned red.

“All right, all right. Take it easy, buddy. You make it sound like you’re some sort of Robin Hood. Steal from the rich and give to the poor. Wouldn’t you like to keep some of that Turkish wealth for yourself?”

“We don’t just plunder from the Turks. Our most bitter enemies are the Venetians. They betrayed us once long ago and now the Adriatic is not a safe place for them. They never know when we’ll ambush them and sink their merchant ships.”

“How do you capture a large merchant ships?” Toni was sceptical.

“We use fast row boats and we wait for them in one of the bays beneath Velebit. It works best when the bura is strong and all of their sailors are struggling with the rigging. We swiftly board the ship and kill them all. The gold we transfer to our vessels and the ship we sink.”

Toni’s mouth was agape with disbelief.

“I can’t believe that you’d be so cruel! What did the Venetians do, for you to hate them so much?”

“That is a long story. Would you kill someone who killed your father? If you are a real man, then you would! Just before the end of the last century, my grand-grandfather died in the battle for Klis fortress. It was a mighty Southern stronghold, near Split, but it fell to the Turks. It fell because the Venetians betrayed us, leaving us at the mercy of the Janissaries. Since then, we do not have a home of our own. Everyone who lived in the area had to retreat North,” Stanko finished his story.

“So that’s why you guys live close to Senj and I guess they call you Uskoci because you jump onto people’s boats,” Toni tried to make some connections, with what he learned in history class. If he remembered correctly, Uskoci translated into “those who jump in”.

“We are not grasshoppers. It is not as if we actually jump from ship to ship. That name was given to us, by those who fear us, because they have no idea where we will strike. We battle on land and at sea and even deep within Turkish territory. To our enemies, it appears that we jump from place to place, that we are everywhere.”

“Why don’t the two of us jump into the Vremeplov!”

Toni was delighted with Stanko’s military credentials. He wanted to introduce him to his friends back home. That way they could hear about his adventures and see a real fighter.

“Alright, but where is it?” Stanko agreed to the suggestion.

“Like I said before, we have to find it. You haven’t seen it, but maybe you’ve heard its motor. Its a deep humming sound.”



“There was a hum. It came from the other side, towards the waterfall.”

Stanko signalled the way and the two rushed into the darkness. As they moved toward the cascade, the dim light took on a light shade of green. Then, cutting through all of the cacophony, there come a faint hum. Toni trembled with excitement: the U.O. had not left him, after all! Pretty soon, he would climb into it and return to his own time.

What if the Vremeplov can travel faster than the speed of light and he ends up in some distant galaxy, thousands of light years away from the Milky Way? Suddenly his mind flashed to the Star Trek series and he envisioned a distant galaxy, which contains a planet called Vulcan, that was inhabited by intelligent life. There was a time, when he dreamt of meeting such beings. Travelling across all the known dimensions and exploring the vast frontiers of space, with the civility of Mr. Spock, at the helm of his own shuttle...

And now? He was perfectly content to let Mr. Spock continue the exploration of space without him. The important thing was to remain calm. He had to manipulate the Vremeplov levers, just right, to be sure that it returned to this galaxy, to this blue and green world, to this The Old Continent, to the country in the shape of a horse shoe, to the city on the river Sava, beneath the mountain Sljeme... Oh, God, he so wished to be back in Zagreb!

To his discontent, he was shivering beneath some other mountain, wading through the underground waters of some other river. His companion was arguably from the same galaxy, but from a distant, distant time.

The whooshing of the waterfall and the rhythmic humming intensified. They rounded a tall boulder and were awash in dazzling, green light. It came from the flattened sphere which glowed green all over, except for a small orange opening.

“May the devil take my soul, if that thing is capable of flight!” Stanko was stunned by the Vremeplov, seeing that Toni had been telling the truth.

“Leave the devil out of it. This machine has flown here from a far away future. We can enter it through the opening at the top.”

As Toni explained, Stanko hoisted himself up onto the roof, with the skills of a squirrel. He examined the strange creature, wanting to make sense of the unnatural events that Toni had described. Looking through the hatch, he saw the orange cockpit with its two sets of controls. Stanko was mesmerized by the glowing number displays and how they flickered, ever so slightly. He was impatiently, ready to sail through time.

“If our quests are aligned, let us set off.” He said to Toni, who had joined him on top of the Vremeplov.

“Okay, but you’ll have to help me pilot the ship. Sit at those controls and when I give you the signal, pull down the lever,” Toni directed him into the control area.

“Ready?”

“Yes,” Stanko squeezed the handle, waiting for the command.

“Let’s go.”

Toni pushed his lever forward. The humming started oscillating faster and the dials came to life. At first the needles jumped quickly, but steadied as the date displayed 13.4.1670.

“Pull it now!” Toni commanded as the main screen displayed a fortress that he had never seen before. It was not Ozalj, not Bosiljevo... His thoughts were interrupted when an auxiliary screen lit up. It showed a regional map and there was a blip near the top. On the adjacent dial the word

ČAKOVEC was displayed. Toni wondered if this was one of Petar Zrinski's many manors. Having seen the same castle on his main screen, Stanko chimed in.

"This was the castle of the deceased Viceroy Nikola Zrinski, before he was killed by a boar."

"Look, the city gates are opening. Looks like cavalrymen, with a large contingent of soldiers. That must be Petar Zrinski. Who else would have so much security," added Toni

"He is not alone. The nobleman riding next to him is Fran Krsto Frankopan," responded Stanko, staring closely at the mute picture.

Toni was not the least bit interested in seeing Petar and Fran. His eyes scanned across the mass of other people riding along with them, hoping to spot Dinko. It was to no avail and disappointed he reached for the lever.

"We'll follow them further."

The blip tracked upwards and the location dial indicated Viennese Newtown, while that time display jumped to the fifth month of the same year. Another fortress popped up on the main screen, but the image shifted to the interior view, inside the dungeon. Sitting behind iron bars, Viceroy Zrinski was scribbling away at something with a quill. Meanwhile in the cell next door, the young Duke Frankopan slouched desponded, withering away.

"They have been captured!" Stanko cried out mournfully. "It was surely through deception. Heroes like these could not be taken alive on the battlefield," his Hajduk spirit stirred up at the sight of this downfall.

"You're right and if Dinko was here he could tell you all

the details. It looks like his rescue mission failed. I wonder where he is?”

Toni impatiently pulled the lever to the year 1671. The map stayed on Austria and the dial showed that they were still in Viennese Newtown. A mass of people was assembled around a wooden platform. Zrinski and Frankopan were lead on stage, by guards and their shackles were removed. The crowd jeered. Static distorted the picture and the screen went black. Those were the final scenes of the rebellion. Once again, the blood of Croatian magnates would be spilt. The Vremeprov came to a halt and Toni composed himself enough to speak.

“What’s going to happen to those loyal to the Viceroy?” he was thinking about Dinko. How did he fare through all this turmoil? What if he too was executed? Was anyone from the Viceroy’s family spared: Ana Katarina, Jelena, Zora, Ivan...

Only the Vremeplov could give him an answer. He pulled the handle again. The map moved South and centred on the city of Graz. An abbey appeared on the screen, apparently a convent given that only nuns could be seen. A set of doors opened, revealing a humble room and two women. Ana Katarina was laying on a bed and at her side, wearing a shabby black dress, Zora Veronika wept. Her mother was at death’s door and with pale lips exhaled her final words.

“Zora, I will soon die, but have courage. Do not pity us, for our deaths are necessary. It is God’s will,” she gasped, but gathered her strength. “Always remember the verse from your uncle Fran Krsto: HE WHO DIES JUSTLY, SHALL LIVE FOREVER!”

Ana Katarina closed her eyes and Zora began to sob deeply. The monitor went dark once more.

“Damned Austrians, they could have spared the women. Wasn’t it enough to kill all the men in the family,” Toni was disgusted with the misery which he saw. He remembered the opulence in which Katarina once lived. All that wealth would be divided up and taken away, while the family awaited death in dark abbeys and prisons.

Wishing to leave Austria behind, Toni pulled the lever again. He hoped that the dial would flash Ozalj or Bosiljevo and get him closer to Dinko. It did not. Instead it moved North from Graz and came to rest at Vienna. The screen showed the walled city, besieged by Turkish forces and the dial registered 1683 as the year.

“That’s what they deserve! This will be their punishment. The Turks at the gate of their capital. If they had not killed Zrinski, this would have never happened,” Stanko was happy to see that the Habsburg’s fortunes had shifted. They were on the receiving end of an attack, at the heart of their empire.

“The Vremeplov skipped ahead ten years, to bring us here. There must be someone from the Zrinski family nearby,” Toni tried to find a reason for the erratic movements of the U.O.

Before he could come up with a theory, he was distracted by the main screen. It had switched once again to the interior of a dungeon. This time, they were in Schloßberg castle and the prisoner was Petar’s only son, Ivan Zrinski. He was no longer the young boy that Toni remembered, who had begged his mother to let him join the hunt.

“It doesn’t look like he’ll last much longer,” Toni observed bitterly and pulled the lever in frustration. The Vremeplov moved in a Southeasterly heading. A wide open plain filled the screen.

“Slavonia!” exclaimed Toni “We’re finally back in Croatia. Dinko could not be far away.”

The dials spun wildly and locked onto the year 1691. The picture adjusted and showed the final stages of a battle. Riding at the head of a cavalry column was a young lieutenant colonel. His standard-bearer carried a flag depicting the Zrinski coat of arms. Turkish forces were on the retreat, trampling over their dead and wounded, fleeing from Adam Zrinski, the son of the great Nikola Zrinski.

“Full advance! Finish them off!” Stanko cheered on the rider. “What I would not give to fight by your side, to drive out the Turks.”

Stanko longed to return to battle. At the other side of the Vremeplov, Toni was busy examining the riders of the Viceroy’s cavalry, looking for a familiar face.

“Dinko, Dinko, I knew you were alive, you old bastard! Hey, that’s enough battling for you! I’m coming to pick you up,” Toni hammered on the screen so that Dinko would hear.

That did not deter the young warrior, who cut down the Turks with furious sabre slashes and a wild expression on his face. He was not the same skinny kid, with whom he had parted ways in Ozalj. The man on the horse was tall and broad shouldered. It is only the eyes, of this thirty-year-old, that revealed him to be Dinko. Large and blue,

they were as brilliant as always, but the wrinkles now made them serious.

He resembled his older brother Vlado. At last, he could finally match his brother's military record. There is something about the Bagićs, they fight just because of an ideal. Toni considered the two brothers. On the screen, the raging warrior kept advancing. Toni could no longer recognize the peace-loving Dinko, who would flee at the first sign of conflict.

"A real Mad Max, except this one battles the Turks. That's good enough buddy, there's been enough fighting!" yelled Toni, as he saw some commotion on the screen.

A crowd had formed around the horse of Adam Zrinski. There was no rider in the saddle. The fellow riders jumped from their horses and ran towards the horse. Laying face down in the mud, was the limp body of the young lieutenant colonel. Blood stained his blue uniform.

"He got a bullet in the back," came a voice from the other side of the Vremeplov, where Stanko had carefully followed the action.

"Dear God, they've killed another Zrinski!" Toni cried out in anguish.

"There is a traitor amongst the group. Some damned Swab, managed to infiltrate the cavalry!"

Stanko drew his sword from his belt and swung it at the display screen. He was too late. The picture had disappeared and the screen had gone black. All the dials stopped in place and every number display switched off. The Vremeplov stood still, as if paying respect to the fallen soldier.

“The last Zrinski is dead! Adam, the finale.” Some wicked hand had dealt its final blow and a tear let slip from Toni’s eye. He could not bear witnessing this cruel injustice, against the Zrinski family.

Stanko was weaving about his sabre and pistol, vowing to avenge the noble family, but stopped when he caught Toni’s empty stare. The pain had muted them both.

CHAPTER 5

Outlined by the orange lights of the Vremeplov, a new person had appeared in the cockpit. It was Dinko, the fourteen-year-old version, still wearing the outfit of Petar Zrinski's messenger. The moment Stanko noticed the intruder; he reached for his belt and pulled out his musket.

"Toni, watch out!" Stanko called out, concerned for the safety of his new friend.

Spontaneously, Dinko had also pulled out his own weapon and cocked the hammer back. He stared at Stanko waiting for him to make the next move.

"What are you guys doing?" panicked, Toni stepped in between them. "Stanko put down your gun! We're not in danger. It's Dinko and he's come back to us."

He looked at Dinko next. He was surprised by his fast reactions and the mastery with which he operated his weapon. Maybe, this is a doppelganger, thought Toni. The air was tense, but then a smile stretched across Dinko's face.

"Is this any sort of welcome for a warrior?"

"Is it really you, Dinko?" Toni was still in disbelief.

"Yes, I've returned, but not that same..." Dinko was looking for the right words.

“What are you talking about, not the same? Only you could have that tragic mug,” Dinko finally lowers his weapon and they embrace. They patted each other on the shoulders, happy to be reunited. It seemed as if they were separated for far too long. Dinko was the first to put a stop to this display of affection.

“I see that you’ve managed without me. Who is this fellow warrior?” pointing at Stanko.

“He is a Hajduk called Stanko and he lives near Senj. We crossed paths in the cave below Ogulin and decided to continue on our quests together. I was searching for you and he was looking for Zrinski. He wanted to contribute gold in support of the rebellion. The Vremeplov showed us how the whole sad story unfolded. We also saw how bravely you fought...”

“Drop it!” Dinko cut him off and waved his hand dismissively. There was a tone of dissatisfaction in his voice. Stanko stood by the side, feeling like the odd man out.

“Boys, you have reunited and I must return to my own time.”

“Stay a bit. I wanted to ask you about your battles with the Turks and the Venetians,” Dinko tried to keep Stanko from leaving.

“Toni can tell you everything. He has already heard it all. I must fulfil my father’s dying wish and then return to my people on Velebit,” there was sadness in Stanko’s voice. Knowing that he could not dissuade him, Toni put out his hand in farewell.

“I am sad that you must go, without having seen our time.

Here is something that will remind you of your friends from the future,” Toni took off his SWATCH wristwatch and handed it to Stanko. “This device will always display the correct time and there is an arrow that will always point North. It’s called a compass and it will keep you on course.”

“I know what a compass is. I’ve seen them on the Venetian ships. Their compass was much larger,” Stanko did not believe that such a small device could contain a compass.

“The watch will tell time for about a year, then its batteries will run out, but the compass will point Northward forever,” explained Toni.

“So to travel South, I just walk in the opposite direction on the arrow? I do not need to follow the sun any longer?” Stanko was amazed.

“Go ahead friend, head for home. Have faith that the watch will guide you accurately. Let it bring you good luck.”

“Thank you. I should also leave you with a keepsake.”

“You’ve already given me the gold coin. It will remind me of you and it is worth more, knowing that you fought for it,” Toni was getting upset by the prolonged goodbye. Stanko did not enjoy farewells either, so he climbed out of the Vremeplov and jumped off.

“Goodbye, my friend and don’t be so cruel in battle,” Toni yelled after Stanko. Dinko watched him leave then he turned to Toni.

“There’s no such thing as being too cruel to those dogs.”

“Hey, you still got to tell me everything that happened to you.”

“There is nothing to tell. War is bloody and cruel,” Dinko was dead serious.

“I saw you riding in Adam Zrinski’s army. Did you kill any Turks?” Toni persisted with the questioning.

“It was nasty and I’d rather forget it,” shot back Dinko.

“Did you get Vietnam Syndrome or something? You’re acting strange,” Toni recalled the movies he saw about the Vietnam war and what he heard about the traumatized Croatian War veterans. He was aware that some returning soldiers were unable to resume leading normal lives. It seemed that Dinko was having a hard time adjusting. He just stared into empty space.

“Okay, be that way! I won’t ask you about it anymore. Clearly it was not a good time for you. Let’s get back home already!” Toni came to terms with not knowing about Dinko’s experience.

“Well, you know how to operate the Veremeplov. Start it up and dear God, don’t stop it until we reach the year 1999,” replied Dinko.

“Why?” Toni was confused. “It can’t be possible that you don’t want to experience any more 20th century history?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t want to see anymore death, self sacrifice and betrayal. I already know what crushing misery awaits us after the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. There will be a new country, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Then we’ll spend fifty years subjugated in a second Yugoslavia... Trust me, I want to go back to our time. It is the happiest in our entire history!”

“I already knew that. It was you that wanted to go into the past.”

“I thought that I could change something. Unfortunately, all those sacrifices needed to be made, so that we could live in a free country today. I just want to forget this entire nightmare.”

“No problem, we’re off. Zagreb’s calling...” Toni started to sing, happy to finally be on his way back home. The dials and numbers were spinning fast and the Vremeplov worked flawlessly.

* * *

On Monday they boys were back in school. The first three periods flew by. As the lunch bell rang, rap music blared from the cafeteria speakers. Toni elbowed his way through a crowd to purchase a sandwich and a soft drink, while Dinko waited for him in front of the entrance. In the mean time, Jelena had joined Dinko and was keeping him company. Having ordered his meal, Toni turned back and froze when he saw her. When did she show up? After he bought his sandwiches, he would have to go over and speak to them. What would he say and not make a fool of himself? His heart was beating madly, but still he went over to them.

“Hey, I was just telling Jelena about our long weekend in Ogulin,” Dinko winked to encourage his friend.

“Yeah, it was awesome,” Toni managed to string together a few words.

“I’ve never been to Klek, but I did see it when I went skiing on Bjelolasica,” Jelena started chatting it up.

“Until now, I’ve only skied in Slovenia. I’m interested in trying out some of our resorts,” Toni replied, still somewhat stiff.

“You and Dinko could come by the Olympic Centre this season. My ballet group will be going there for seven days, during the holidays,” now she was directing her comments directly at Toni. Just then, he saw the guys from class discussing something loudly, so he made an excuse and left the conversation.

“I’m going to see what the guys are saying about Sunday’s match. I’m completely out of the loop on what went down in Zagreb, this weekend.” He left without a goodbye. He was not prepared for a lengthy conversation and Jelena’s company.

As lunch finished, Dinko caught up with Toni on the stairs.

“Do you think you’ll get Jelena behaving like that? I’m trying to help you out here. I set you up and all you do is look for an excuse to get away!”

“Well, what am I supposed to talk to her about anyway?”

“Come on bud, you’re acting like a little kid. Can’t you tell that she’s interested?”

“Yeah? What makes you think so?”

“Well after you left so quickly, she asked me if you were mad at her. If she didn’t care, she wouldn’t have asked,” Dinko explained.

“You think I have a chance?” ask Toni, all of a sudden cheerful.

“With what you’re pulling now, there’s no chance. If you tried a little... Who knows, she might even fall in love with you.”

After returning from school, Toni mulled over what Dinko had said. In his mind, he had a hundred different plans. He could ask her to go catch a movie, or do some skating, or to join him for a hike up Sljeme... The moment any new idea came to his mind, he would find a flaw with it and dismiss it. He was left with only one plan that he had the courage to act upon. Thus he fired up his computer and began writing an email. He decided to remain anonymous and after some deliberation sent the message.

Did you think that you’d lost your admirer? I didn’t get a chance to write, but I’ve been thinking about you constantly. If you had come with me, you would have had a great time. When are we going to finally meet up?

Now he had to suggest something concrete, like asking her to go rollerblading in Jarun. If she accepted, everything would be simpler. While rollerblading he could hold her hand and in the evening, when they are both tired, they could sit on the rocks and watch the lake. Toni daydreamed. He would hug her close and bring his lips close to hers. She is the romantic type and might succumb to his gentle advances. He would whisper in her ear: “The stars are scattered in the night and we’re here alone, beneath an endless sky...” That would be a good lead in to the really important question: would she go out with him? After that kind of intro and some passionate kissing, she could not possibly say no. He got so carried away with his fantasy, that it almost seemed as if she was already there, warm and gentle, in his embrace. In reality, he was sitting in front of a

computer screen, looking at some awkwardly phrased sentences, addressed to Jelena.

How long would he be such a wimp? He questioned himself, as he shut down his computer, angry that nothing had changed. Lucky, he would have one more chance of wooing her at their annual School Memorial Day.

* * *

After a seemingly endless length of time, the fateful Saturday was at hand. It was known that all the students would be called out during the celebration. A program was arranged to best commemorate the occasion. After eight o'clock, when all the formalities had concluded, the school gymnasium would be turned into a nightclub. The party would then last until midnight, giving him enough time to talk to Jelena and get everything out in the open.

To build up the necessary courage and self confidence he needed to prepare. It would require an entire week. He spent the first three days making his plan of attack and then he went into action. Browsing the various shop, he was interested in getting a fresh new look. His typical blue jeans and sports t-shirts would not do. For this occasion, he would dress in all black and try pulling off a more mature look. He found a pair of designer jeans and a retro dress shirt that was made out shinny material with leather accents. The outfit looked good and he was happy at how it showed off his body. He looked at his reflection with self-satisfaction as he fastened the large belt buckle. Though he had been at the barber that morning, he added more brilliantine to his locks. Given some adjusting, his hair was just the right amount of shinny. He could film a commer-

cial, looking like he did. Confident enough that he could even make it as a runway model, Toni exited the door and headed for the party of his life.

The school shone with a refreshed brilliance. Decorations and lights covered the old Kaptol secondary school. In the school gymnasium, risers had been erected for the stage and specialized lighting had been installed. The program was particularly interesting, as one of the performances was a dance group which included Jelena. She was actually the main figure of the piece, as it was on her ballet foundations that the entire choreography was based. As he watched her perform, Toni was hypnotized. She looked amazing in her leotard and in his pleasant distraction he did not notice that Dinko had appear at his side.

“Hey buddy! You’ve fixed yourself up real nice. After she gets off stage you should meet her and congratulate her. The performance is excellent and you wouldn’t be lying if you complimented her.”

“Not right away. I have it all planed out. I’m going to ask her to go up to the café for a drink,” replied Toni and continued looking at Jelena. Not wanting to get in his way, Dinko walked over to some other boys from the class.

The lights turned off and the DJ took over the microphone. He introduced himself and pumped up the crowd, to get the party started. Toni figured that enough time had passed for Jelena to have finished changing and decided to wait for her in front of the change room. He hurried into the hallway, but it was empty. All the girls had already cleared out. Heading over to the café, he searched the seats but could not find her anywhere. All that was left to do was to return to the gymnasium.

Inside, the flashing strobes and neon lights made it difficult to distinguish the people in the crowd. He walked the dance floor aimlessly with a disinterested look on his face. Various girls from class greeted him and asked him to dance. He was indifferent to their advances, as panic was starting to set in. What if she went home already and ruined all his plans? She disappeared like Cinderella, Toni thought to himself, coming to accept that tonight was a failure. Suddenly, he noticed her standing in a dark corner of the room. She was standing with two older boys who had already finished elementary school. Her happy smile suggested that she was enjoying their company.

Toni had been beaten to the mark. This scenario, involving other contenders, was not planned for. What would he do now? Sitting down in the stands, he contemplated his next move. He was angry that these high school guys, who were no doubt cooler than him, were here looking to pick up grade seven and eight girls. The idea that they might take Jelena away from him tonight, never crossed his mind. He gazed jealously as the two whispered things to her. Pretending that the music was too loud, they were getting close, dangerously close. She continued smiling and seemed to be having a good time.

The DJ announced the first slow song. One of the guys left and the other, the one with the long hair, took her by the waist. They danced to the slow rhythm of "I am crazy baby, crazy baby, because of you and I love you..." With the chorus echoing around him, the sight was too much for him to bear. Toni felt foolish and left his vantage point, trying to get as far away as possible from the pair.

"Hej, Toni! Come on over!" he heard a voice. It was his

football teammate, standing with some older guys, all ex-students of the school. If you cannot beat them join them, Toni conceded. Pero introduced him as the next great hope for Croatia Juniors and a guy that could always be counted on when things got ugly.

“Tell them about how we took care of those Bad Blue Boys in Svetnice,” Pero respected Toni for his talents on both the pitch and the street.

“It’s no big deal. We took care of them and that’s it,” Toni felt uncomfortable talking about such things. Dinko had changed his outlook on violent conflict. The Vremeplov showed him that fights only make sense, if they are done for some greater ideal.

“Give the man a beer!” one of the guys called out.

Almost instantly there was a can of Karlovačko in his hand. He did not reject it. Taking big gulps, he hoped it would calm his racing mind. The group continued to laugh loudly at stories of their past outings. They talked about getting “plastered” and “destroyed after chugging that mix” of beer and Stock brandy and how it was a “sick combination”. Pero mentioned how a friend of his had rolled a “mega joint” with “hash” and something else, because it got him completely “blitzed”. Toni could not contribute to the conversation, not having had experience with “hash, weed, coke, ecstasy...” or any of the drugs. Completely bored, he started on his second beer and felt a little buzzed. Jelena’s whereabouts were the only thing on his mind. What did he care if she was dancing with that poser from 4B! Toni tried to convince himself that it did not bother him and downed the rest of his beer.

“Hey, there big shot!” Dinko came around. “What are you doing here, with these guys? Drinking, how nice! I thought that athletes weren’t supposed to drink?”

“It’s just one beer,” Toni defended himself.

“Who are you trying to fool. I can see that it has already hit you. There are high school guys hitting on Jelena and you’re here drinking with the riffraff. Good call,” Dinko was disappointed.

“I don’t care about her? If she wants to hang out with those older guys she’s free to do so. I am good in sport and I accept when I’ve been beaten.” It seemed like a foregone conclusion.

“What defeat, you didn’t even try anything. In any case it seems like a done deal for tonight. You’re better off, if she doesn’t see you like this.”

“Why, what am I lacking?” Toni waved his hands around and stumbled a little.

“It’s not the lacking that’s the problem. You have too much ... alcohol in your system. Come on, let’s go home,” Dinko tried to convince him.

“What am I going to do at home, the party’s just getting started. And another thing, I’m much cooler than that guy she danced with,” Toni continued the rant.

“No one said that you weren’t. Let’s get home and you can talk to her about everything tomorrow.”

“Okay, but don’t tell her about any of this!” Toni yelled, but followed Dino out of the gymnasium.

Being protective of his friend, he guided Toni away from

the bad crowd. He helped him from stumbling over and tried to cheer and sober him up on their way home. By the time they got to their neighbourhood, Toni was feeling better. As he laid down to sleep, he remembered Dinko's final advice: "Tomorrow is a new day.."

* * *

On Sunday morning, he felt completely drained. That party was the first time that he had gotten drunk. He spent the day laying around, going from his bed to the couch, while trying to sort out his thoughts and feelings. It seemed stupid to have spend the entire night hanging out with those losers, just because they offered him a brief escape and beer. He was comforted in realizing that just because Jelena danced with another guy, it does not mean that they hit it off. After dinner, Dinko called and confirmed that they had not. Dinko had gone skating with Jelena and she said that she was not at all interested in the guy. After getting off the phone, Toni started doing keep-ups around his room. He did his signature foot, to head, to chest keep-ups. Overjoyed, he decided to forget about being tactical and to go for broke. He was grateful for having a friend like Dinko, knowing that such a friend is hard to find. Deciding to take his friend's advice, Toni turned on the computer and started writing:

Hi beautiful!

The moment of truth is here. Your secret admirer sits in the same class as you and watches you from the last row, near the windows. (You can probably guess that it's not the blond, nice-guy Dinko). So it has to be me, Toni



Majetić and it was me that sent you all those messages over the last six months.

I hope you're not mad and I'm sorry if I accidentally offended you. Let me know what you think about all this.

My email address is toni_majetic@gmail.com.

He sent the message and closed his eyes, uncertain of what would happen. Too anxious to stay at home, he headed for the local gym. An hour of footy always put his

mind at ease. After coming home, he headed straight for the shower. It was ten in the evening and he had gathered up enough courage to check his email. There was one new email.

Hey handsome!

I never expected that someone who, at first glance, seems so full of himself could have such a gentle side. I'm not mad at all and I was not the least bit insulted. It was nice to find out that someone thought such nice things about me.

Your internet-friend,

Jelena

P.S. You could have introduced yourself a lot earlier!

This reply scared Toni a little. He spent the next hour re-reading the message over a hundred times. Is it possible that she was happy that he liked her? After enjoying this comfortable notion, he realized that he did not want Jelena to just remain an “internet-friend” as she had put it in the closing of her message. So he sent her a follow up email.

Hi Jelena!

Thank you for your answer. It made me really happy, but I don't want to continue just emailing back and forth like this. We should take our friendship outside and off of the internet. So if you're down for it, meet me at the Matoš statue, after school.

Your not-just-internet-friend,

Toni Majetić

A confirmation arrived half an hour later.

* * *

At 7:15 PM, right after the last class had finished, Toni ditched the guys and disappeared in the small streets of the Upper Town. He took the long way round to get to the statue of A.G. Matoš, the metal man seated on a bench. Standing there, he tried to remember the writer's famous sonnet. How perfect would it be, if he addressed her with its lines: "I dreamt of you last night..." On the other hand, she might take it the wrong way. Toni reconsidered and then she appeared. From behind a tree, wearing her pink coat and free flowing hair, she walked over. She was sweet and beautiful and smiled with her eyes...

"Hi, Toni!" Jelena spoke first.

"Hey, how's it going? I could barely wait to see you. I couldn't focus on anything I did in school today."

"You didn't think that I would come?" she stopped him with the question.

"No way, I just couldn't wait for it all to pass, so that we could finally be alone." Toni was not nervous anymore.

Spontaneously he takes her hand and they start walking along the walls of the Upper Town. She did not withdraw, rather squeezed back. Something strong surged between them.

"So, where are you taking me? You know that I got to be home by ten," Jelena warned him.

"Don't worry, you'll be back in time. We're going to visit the cathedral, before it closes. I want to tell you an un-

usual story about courage, love, faith...” Toni drifted off in thought.

Jelena remained quiet and followed along. They paused in front of the giant doors of the Zagreb cathedral. On entering, they were met with the smell of Frankincense and burning candles. The church was empty. A gentle light drew them toward the altar as they walked between marble tiles, inlaid with golden inscriptions. They were in the shadowy realm of ancient bishops, archbishops, viceroys, noblemen...

“Hey, Jelena, don’t freak out. I didn’t bring you to a grave site because I’m into necrophila. We’re here because I want to tell you a story about something I experienced. It involves two heroes whose bones have been laid here.”

They stood in front of a prominent tomb. Below two black busts, there were lines of verse carved into the stone.

HE WHO DIES JUSTLY
SHALL LIVE FOREVER

Separately, a large tablet identified the graves.

Croatian Martyrs
Duke Petar Šubić Zrinski
Croatian Viceroy and Poet
Born 1621. in Vrbovec
Duke Fran Krsto Frankopan
Captain of Ogulin and Poet
Born 1643. in Bosiljevo
On the 30th of April 1671. in Viennese Newtown
They fell beneath the executioner’s sword
For the freedom of Croatia

“Do you see how the date of their death is the same. They were killed on the same day in Viennese Newtown, charged with treason, but I’ll tell you that story another time. I wanted to tell you about Petar’s wife, whom he loved dearly, Ana Katarina. While imprisoned in the Austrian dungeon, his thoughts were always of her and their children. Every day he would write her beautiful letters and gentle verse. The last letter, sent prior to his execution, began with the words: ‘My dear love...’” Toni paused, as an image of the proud duchess formed in front of his eyes. - After his death, she died of a broken heart.

“Oh, that’s really sad, only a woman would be so loyal,” Jelena was saddened by Ana Katarina’s fate.

“But back then men were different. They accomplished heroic feats, were merciless in battle, but remained tender hearted towards their loves... Love was a sacred thing. You know, sometimes I wonder if it was in those times that the phrase ‘till death do us part’ was invented,” Toni shared as he reflected on the subject.

“Sometimes I wonder about stuff like that too,” Jelena admitted shyly.

Toni looked at her with tenderness, took her hand and lead her out of the cathedral.

“I recently had a chance to be one of those men. Dinko and I jumped to the 17th century and we saw all those heroes, knights, conspirators and nobility in real life.”

“You what?” she looked at him bewildered, not knowing what to make of his comment.

“It’s true Jelena and the experience has changed me com-

pletely,” he brought his hand to her face and brushed aside a stray hair.

He pulled her in closer, bringing her lips to his and gave her a warm, long kiss. Was he dreaming? No, Jelena was really there, beautiful and smiling in his embrace. She looked up at the night sky. The towers of the cathedral spiralled towards the bright stars.

“Tell me more about what happened, Toni!” she said full of trust.

In that moment, Toni knew that he could share everything with her. He could tell her all about the Vremeplov and not worry about her laughing or thinking that he was lying, boasting or exaggerating.

Together they set off on a Vremeplov adventure, carried by the wings of love.

About the author

Ana Bačić was brought up in a family of intellectuals in Duga Resa. At an early age, her grandmother instilled in her a love for books. First, with tales of folk legends and then with readings from Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić and Jagoda Truhelka. By 1996, Ana had received a degree in Croatian Studies from the Faculty of Arts and Letters at the University of Zagreb. With her departure to Canada, she left behind a job as a high school teacher and position at the Alfa publishing company.

These days, she works at a Mississauga secondary school, but can also be found teaching the accredited Croatian language course, on Saturdays. She is a mother to Niko (8) and Luka (6). Currently, she is completing her postgraduate studies at York University, in Toronto.

Ana is active in the Croatian academic community and a member of The Croatian Academy of America, Toronto chapter. She has participated in numerous symposiums on Croatian culture, language and literature, throughout Canada. Her works have been published in: *Bridge*, *Večernji List*, *Arena*, *Glas Koncila*, *Matica* and *Zajedničar*; and she has been a correspondent for the *Croatian Chronicle* since its inception. She is a Board member of the Canadian-Croatian Chamber of Commerce and associated with its Committee on Education, Culture and Heritage. Ana also plays an active role in her parish, “Our Lady Queen of Peace” in Norval, Canada.

Above all, she loves spending time with her two children. Some of her favourite leisure activities include: running, yoga and aromatherapy.

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