

The Domino Effect by Václav Vokolek

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The Departure

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They were sitting by the hot concrete slabs where an infinite number of military trucks and tanks had once stood. Not far from the former airfield. On the edge of the concrete expanse was a military base with a field kitchen, and men and woman in uniforms were eating lunch out of aluminium mess tins. The smell of spiced food, especially cabbage, drifted close to the ground.

“Guys,” shouted a woman whose looks were starting to fade, crammed into the tight uniform of a wholly unfamiliar army. On her belt she had a perfectly polished buckle with an imperial eagle on it. “Why don’t you join us?”

“Thanks, Renata,” hollered Rex. “Not today.”

“She’s still got it,” said Lalin von Leppowitz thoughtfully. They knew he knew a thing or two about it. “A nursery-school teacher and just look at her...” Renata turned round, bent down slightly and gave herself a smack on the bottom. “She could even make it in Aleppo!”

It was high praise and coming from Lalin they weren’t just empty words. He had come back from Aleppo a week ago and told them about it all enthusiastically. He was about to go on, but Knap interrupted him:

“It’s my first time here.” It was obvious to everyone he was lying. “What’s on offer?”

“Loads, absolutely loads,” spoke up Rex. “It’s cool here, seriously cool. In an area of nearly two hundred hectares anyone can try driving military equipment, say a magnificent Hummer, and you can also try out adrenaline sports like paintball, airsoft or laser shot.” As if he was reading it from a flyer. “You’ll also find forty-two off-road tracks with facilities, and there are three large asphalt areas and two halls on the site. Adrenaline, Knap. Superb.”

“Who comes here?”

“Mostly young people,” replied the young skinhead from the Cozy Bear working group. He was known to be an excellent hacker working with an international group of trolls. “That’s gratifying. The younger generation! Amazing! Guys sit in a tank or an armoured BVP and get that amazing feeling that they can do anything. Nothing but megafeelings! As for the girls – and they’re no dogs – what attracts them is playing at the driver of a VT55 recovery tank. Fantasy stuff! They drive around in an elaborate

tank training area, playfully navigate lots of hills and mud, but more than anything they're bewitched by the size of those machines. After all, girls love big things." He guffawed, revealing the gap teeth of a rodent. "What attracts people most are several areas for paintball and airsoft. There's also a fantastic laser and shotgun firing range. Here they test their limits but also how to improve themselves. They'll be ready when something goes down. Trolls work quietly, holed up somewhere, invisible, but they like to come here and let off a bit of steam." A strapping bearded man in faded fatigues sauntered over to the group around the fold-out table. He was known by the code name The Butcher. He overheard the last sentences and continued:

"After a while, driving a tank is a routine pussy move even for amateurs, but controlling an armoured transporter, that's a blast. That isn't for chicken-shits. There's just you and the terrain. You have to get the better of it! Win." He turned to Knap, who he didn't know and regarded as some kind of old bigwig. "First you go with an instructor, and then you get to be the master of the vehicle. The master! That's exactly it. That's the only way that beast will obey you. When you get the better of it, then you really know you who are!"

Knap listened intently, watching every muscle, every movement in the speaker's face. It reminded him of the old days, which some people might think were lost, but they'd be wrong!

"The most interesting thing here are the AVSE Security System training courses," pontificated Lalin. The Butcher obediently fell silent – no doubt he knew why. "They're run for people who've decided to fight against all of the assholes. They give you proof of strength against weakness. Your strength, buddy. Those courses make you aware of your strength, your non-existential strength resulting from your concentrated consciousness. As soon as you become aware of your strength, you serve the king!"

"What kind of courses are they?" said Knap, playing dumb. This was grist to the mill for Lalin. There was no stopping him.

"It's about learning the modern martial art Wing Chun and also about Skirmen fighting with steel weapons. It's amazing, Knap. Awesome!" Lalin threw his arms out enthusiastically, almost as if he wanted to hug everybody. It was a carefully practised gesture used to begin a fight by a master of Escrima. A smile was required as well. Or rather a baring of the teeth. "Security System is a brilliant thing. It's been developed not only for old hands, but also for people without previous combat experience. They've designed it so that someone who's never trained gains maximum defensive capability in the shortest possible time. That's the most important thing in today's world. To know how to attack immediately and eliminate every asshole."

“Guys, they should teach that in elementary schools, the rug rats would be totally into it,” said Rex, getting worked up. He was known to have come from a family of teachers. His father, a PE teacher, had also been a fervent activist in the Union for Cooperation with the Army. Knowing everything about subordinates was a duty for Knap, but also a pleasure. Indeed, the fact that he knew more about a lot of them than others did, even they themselves, had raised Knap to professional heights many only dreamed of.

“Originally the teaching system was based on the EWTO model under the name Wing Tsun,” went on Lalin ardently, “and the Leung Ting system was used as well, but over time the direction of the teaching shifted more towards a European conception, the Heinrich Pfaff style. Basically Germanic blood prevailed,” proudly declared the one who called himself Lalin von Leppowitz. He knew what he was talking about: he had twice taken part in a regular seminar with Lee Yen Tima and a master of Escrima in the Philippines and Indonesia. He loved a fight. A fight for the king, against the assholes, against traitors and enemies, it didn’t matter what kind. He could defend himself against anyone, even against the odds, but against himself? Knap doubted that, even though he appreciated Lalin’s fighting spirit.

“It’s great here,” The Butcher chipped in again. The beard which came halfway down his chest rippled like a waterfall. The lower part of his moustache was yellow from nicotine. “A great bunch of people, that’s the main thing. We all understand each other here, we’re just waiting for a command. The lads are a bit impatient, I have to rein them in. For the moment they have to scrap among themselves, but when the time comes it’ll be amazing. You know when it’s coming, don’t you, Knap?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Knap. He could have said anything, but there was no telling who was here to report his every answer.

The Butcher lit a slim cigar. He wanted to go on with his sober reflections, but Knap got up from the creaky folding chair and said:

“It’s nice here, but I must be on my way, Rex. Are you coming with us?”

Rex got up, though he didn’t much want to. He would definitely come back here again, mostly because of Renata. He liked her more and more. But you didn’t get the chance to go with a big shot like this every day.

“I’m coming. You bet!”

The Butcher just gave a nod as if to say he understood why Knap wasn’t taking him along, and took a mighty puff on his cigar:

“Stop by again some time. We’re here every weekend.”

“Definitely. Now we have to go and see old Bryx, he’s in a bad way,” explained Knap.

“Say hello from me,” said Lalin von Leppowitz, livening up. “I had a look at his old files a while ago, he was a dude! The way he brought down the Russian professor endeared him to me.” “Will do,” responded Knap.

“That Lalin gets things done,” said Rex, as they were getting into the car. “He’s worked his way up. Apparently he did a hell of a job in Aleppo.”

“He’ll go far,” agreed Knap. “Soon the Czech basin will be too small for him.”

“Or someone will shoot him down, right in the back.” “That’s also a possibility,” laughed Knap.

He just couldn’t get a handle on this guy! Rex decided to start the car instead.

“What did happen with that professor? I keep coming up against it and yet it’s such an old case.”

“No case is so old that it should be forgotten,” pontificated Knap again. “Bryx began to take an interest in Professor Sobolev in the early 70s. It was a time when great careers were being made, even in this country. A golden age for young people. Bryx had already completed his training in Moscow and the young lieutenant needed a proper case. In those days we hit hard, even among our own ranks. The Russian army was here and through it cooperation developed with Moscow. We had joint tasks, just like we do now. Břěťa wanted to distinguish himself. Show what he could do. Back then we had a fresh trail. Somebody was attempting to infiltrate the Russian infantry, there was talk of borrowed enemy literature. That was serious. Bryx seized on that.”

“Was something like that even possible?” Rex interrupted. “How could they get to the soldiers? I heard they weren’t allowed among our people.” “Anything is possible.”

The black Audi Q5 drove through the back roads of the district, between low buildings lining the road, between fields with solar panels. The local residents drinking bottled beer in front of small Vietnamese shops watched the car with hostility, their expressions full of hatred:

“More of those fuckers. Where are they hurrying off to?”

“Fuck, man, where do you think...”

Their words didn’t penetrate the air-conditioned space, so the discussion could continue uninterrupted.

“Back then Bryx chanced upon Sobolev. Who was he? Although he was around eighty years old, he was still teaching Russian at some college. Apparently he was good at it. He was born in Russia, in Ryazan, I remember that to this day. Bryx found out that his granddad had been over here in the 1880s. It wasn’t clear why. He settled in Těčnu and was kept under surveillance by several central offices. In the end it was the Russian side that helped him, or more precisely Bryx’s Moscow friend Igor Bezmelnikov, with whom he now co-owns the company RESO. He ferreted out somewhere that Ivan Vasilyevich Sobolev was a major figure in Russian anarchism.

When he fled to Bohemia, a warrant was issued for his arrest in several countries. The Tsarist police offered considerable sums of money for his capture. That was a surprising discovery. Austria didn't turn him in, but they had him under full control. Bryx got his hands on his grandson. Could the old man have had the courage to disrupt the state of readiness for World War III with some stupid books?"

"And what about the KGB?" asked Rex.

"They asked us – through unofficial channels, of course – for a swift investigation. Bryx leapt at the chance. During a secret house search, the professor having been sent for a complex medical examination, we discovered an extensive anarchist library. Shelves crammed with hundreds of books. It was a superb haul. The problem was that they were out of date. Most of them had been published in the late nineteenth century. One outstanding find was a chest full of counterfeit Russian passports. Unfortunately, they had long since expired as well.

It was clear from the documents that the father of the Russian professor was a real piece of work too. Before the revolution he had become a member of the influential Anarchist Black Cross. Bryx found out that as a young man his subject had set off for Russia, got involved with the Whites, and later emigrated with his family – that is, his wife and son. Where else but Bohemia? Here he lived to see the liberation by the army he had fled from. Social history in a nutshell, eh?"

In Rex's head it had all got thoroughly mixed up. He knew that once his boss got talking, there was no end to it.

"So Bryx got to work on the grandson of the famous anarchist. He watched every step he took, even bugged his flat, but nothing. The old man lived a perfectly boring life – the only thing that might be considered eccentric was his consumption of pralines. It wasn't possible to find anything on him. Obviously, that was highly suspicious. Every now and again he was questioned and he simply couldn't understand why. One day he admitted that he had given a book by Bakunin to some soldier who was waiting in a jeep for an officer's mistress. I remember to this day that it was called God and the State. Bryx needed the name of the soldier – that was important for Russian intelligence as well – and to could uncover the entire network. But the professor couldn't remember it. Bryx was furious. He detained Sobolev for forty-eight hours, didn't give him medicine or anything to drink. Every so often he would summon him. He yelled at him, but the old guy would no longer say a word. So another forty-eight hours and the professor started talking. He reeled off names and addresses. He was getting everything mixed up, skipping about in time across entire decades. Perhaps he was delirious, perhaps he was making it up to get them off his back. And then he stopped talking for good. That was a real bummer. All the materials were taken over by the KGB. Nobody ever found out what happened after that. Bryx got promoted and was decorated by the Russians."

“Bryx was a total dude, he had drive,” added Rex, taking the corner sharply on the dusty road. “I remember him as an entrepreneur. The boys told me that right at the start of the 90s he founded ten companies with operatives from Russia and Cuba. He did well for himself. He was only interested in money. Apparently he didn’t like to think back on our work. Why?”

“You have no idea what an insult it was. After a lifetime’s work, he had to sit at home by the phone, wasn’t allowed to go to work. Right at the start of January 1990, a few days after that velvet farce, he was removed from the post of chief in accordance with the implementation of the government’s security policy and shortly afterwards released from service for family reasons. How many of us had to read that!

That’s how they shot us down!”

“A shitty deal, eh?” said Rex.

“And now he’s lost two sons. That dynasty fucking meant something! Břét’a’s father had gone into the ministry of the interior after forty-eight, like both his sons, Hendrix and Hunter. It’s a loss for all of us and it broke Bryx.”

They finally arrived in front of a luxurious villa with a garden. Everything here testified to money and taste. They rang the bell. First a large Alsatian came running. It bared its teeth and barked. Then Bryx appeared. The dog obediently came to heel and fell silent.

He must have been a fine figure of a man, thought Rex. A bull’s neck, barrel chest and below it a bulging belly. Probably beer. Back bent by age. Veined hands covered in grey hair. Washed-out fatigues and a baggy red T-shirt. His face hewn by a broad carpenter’s chisel, no delicate wood-carving. Between the deep grooves a mouth, thin lips, corners turned down. All that remained of the eyes were narrow slits lost among fans of wrinkles. He looked and didn’t look at them. It was more that he aimed at them.

“What are you doing here, guys?”

“We just happened to be passing, so we stopped by,” explained Knap. It made not the slightest impression on Bryx.

“Come on then,” he said in a weary voice. He obviously wasn’t very pleased about their visit.

They sat down at a small table in front of a stylish sauna. Bryx went into the sauna and returned with a bottle of vodka.

“The real deal,” he said. That meant it was good. They toasted each other.

“We’re sorry about what happened to your boy,” began Knap. “We’ll find out who killed Hunter, that’s a promise. We’ll get him. He doesn’t stand a chance.” But he

wasn't really so sure. There wasn't a single lead, but it wasn't just an unfortunate coincidence – that was only in the files...

"That won't help him," said Bryx, waving his hand dismissively. All his disgust with fate was concentrated in the gesture.

"That psycho who hurt Hendrix will get the maximum sentence," Rex chimed in. "I spoke to the judge and he agrees. A guy called Šec. Just imagine, the lads found out that you'd once messed with his dad. That's really something, isn't it? Like some kind of fantasy scenario." Bryx raised his eyebrows ever so slightly. He perked up.

"So it was revenge? Now that I would understand, guys."

"Probably not," Knap contradicted him. "After questioning it was clear that punk didn't know anything about that. He had no idea. He didn't even know what Hendrix was called, he didn't know who his dad was. A horrible coincidence, Bryx, nothing more. His pad was messed up, blood everywhere and a broken picture..."

"Shut up," Bryx interrupted him. "Let's drop it. It's over. Just business." He turned to Knap again. "I've been feeling lousy lately. What do you suppose that means? I feel dizzy and I'm really weak. This can't be the end, can it?"

His former subordinate was shocked. He had never seen Bryx like this! "It'll be all right, Colonel. You've been through a lot." Bryx took a breath and it was obvious that even that caused him pain. "Another time then, guys, once things are better." They got up. It hadn't exactly gone as planned.

"So, power to the people," he said unexpectedly at the gate. "And do your best."

Knap was touched by the old sign-off. Bryx had long been a role model to him. Should he pity him now? No, not that!

"Power to the people," he declared loudly and in defiance of everything.

"Bye," Rex said through gritted teeth.

The black Audi Q5 moved off and immediately picked up speed.

Bryx wanted to lock up, but he felt a terrible pain in his chest. He stretched out his hand, wanting to touch his heart. It wasn't there. In its place the rib cage opened up and in the middle gaped an enormous hole. He fell into it. He had the feeling that he was touching soot-blackened rock with just his fingertips. Was he falling through some kind of tunnel then? Where did it lead to? Where from? This horrible space was inside of him, he knew it quite well. Fuck, did he have to go there?

"You have to," he heard a booming voice say.

His fall accelerated, but the falling body didn't get any further away from the voice. The voice surrounded everything, absorbed everything: it was so close that Bryx could make out every smack of the lips, every gnashing of teeth, every intake of breath. Was the stone chasm the voice's space?

At some point he caught sight of him with his inner eye. It was the Monster. Its appearance had a hundred dimensions, it extended in many dimensions. The

Monster's appearance was thus constantly changing; it had thousands of eyes, faces, mouths. What had for a second been a mouth transformed into a hideous anus; a bleary eye appeared in a distended navel, a set of slavering jaws became a furry tail. The moment of epiphany was swallowed by darkness and the sensation of the ever-accelerating fall.

"Everyone must return," boomed the voice, "but you especially. I took special care with you. I shaped your forefather out of clay, dried rushes and ass's dung. A ridiculous puppet into whom I breathed the fire of life – Lilith laughed when she saw him. She recognized that she had finally been given a toy she would not easily grow tired of."

That which had once been Colonel Bryx understood nothing. All reason had abandoned him in the very first seconds of the fall.

"But you bored me from the first moment. You existed and I could not regret your creation. After all, even I merely exist. Nothing more, Bryx. So we have a lot in common, more than you and I think. Your distant ancestors proudly believed that they were the sons of Asmodeus, but you? You are just a miserable bastard without a true father. It isn't important who planted the seed in your mother somewhere among the fields, the only thing that is important is that you are an insignificant particle of a great plan. Your will didn't play the slightest role in it."

To the dying, or already dead, man, however, it wasn't clear where and in what form he was. He was oblivious to the voice, understood nothing of it, but remembered every word.

"Your existence is falling away, you are disappearing, your name will be forgotten, it will vanish like the morning mist, perhaps like a dying breath. There will be nothing left of you. Nothing will be left of your victims. Nothing. I know you don't understand what I am telling you, but it must be said. For a thousandth of an eon we had to meet, just for these few words. In a moment you will know the reason for all of this."

Laughter resounded through the darkness. It roared. It penetrated into all substances. It became the substance.

He finally landed. Apparently at the bottom. In the middle of a garden flooded with bright light. Tall trees with broad leaves cast a pleasant shade on the ground, there were lots of fragrant flowers everywhere, birds were singing sweetly and drinking dew from snow-white perianths. Four springs flowed out of a rock amid intoxicatingly fragrant violets. It was here that Bryx's body, or whatever it was, had crashed. He didn't feel the fall. He was oblivious to it. But he did see a gorgeous naked woman leaning over him. He couldn't have known that she was called Lilith. It wasn't a code name or a nickname or even a name, but a concept.

She was magnificent, beyond all imagining. Membranous wings on her back with all colours playing over them, her hands laden with rings, bird's talons in place of

feet. Pointed breasts with the tips painted bright red. Long hair the colour of soot and blue lips. Bryx had always been oblivious to beauty, hated it, scorned it, but now everything was beyond his judgement. He only saw! It was a curious state.

But the part of him which had ended up at the bottom was pitiful. A pile of mud, ass's dung, half-rotten rushes, bits of wire that had once held everything together, and two small pieces of coloured glass. Those were your eyes, Colonel Bryx...

Lilith bent over the broken toy and her eyes filled with tears. This wasn't supposed to happen! Was she going to be alone again?

"Father," she sobbed.

He stooped down to her from the infinite heights. He couldn't do otherwise. He kneaded the mud sprinkled with Lilith's tears together with the ass's dung, added rushes, reinforced the pieces of wire. He stuck the two small pieces of glass in the places where the eyes could be. He put a small paper hat on his head.

"Beautiful," said Lilith with delight. "What will his name be?"

"Bryx," came the reply, once again from the infinite heights. "Bryx..."