

Fox Eyes by Petra Hůlová

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Zuzka

Bobulin drove us from the circus to the Institute for Paranormal Research. It wasn't far.

Along the way, as Bobulin explained what the institute did, our grandpa translated into Czech for me and my brother. It was like a science show on the radio. Bobulin said the institute conducted research on telepathy, psychokinesis, telekinesis, and clairvoyance for the purposes of mind control and transmitting information long-distance.

"Together the whole thing is called psychotronics, and the Soviet government spends as much on psychotronics each year as they do on space research," our grandpa whispered to us.

Unlike the circus, the institute was in a large inconspicuous building on a small inconspicuous side street. There was no sign over the entrance either, since, as Bobulin emphasized, "The institute exists and operates in total secrecy."

Bobulin parked the car directly in front of the building and we entered through an ordinary-looking weathered door. On the inside, though, it didn't look ordinary at all. The first person we saw was pushing some sort of wheeled contraption—an experimental time accelerator, Bobulin said. Then two people went rushing past, wrapped in plastic head to toe—conducting experiments in respiration, we were told. We also saw, through the open door of one room, a group of people holding hands. Grandpa told us they were attempting to connect to a psychotronic on the second floor, who was sending energy down to them.

At the end of the ground-floor corridor was an office with Bobulin's name on the door. At the touch of Bobulin's finger to the nameplate, the lock clicked open, and we stepped into a room containing several tanks of colorful bubbling water, a few devices that looked like radios from old movies about the future, measuring instruments, screens, and an assortment of curved mirrors. Grandpa ran his hands over the contraptions as Bobulin explained what each one of them did, but just nodded his head without translating. I guess it was too hard even for him.

"He probably feels stupid speaking Czech in front of Bobulin," I said to my brother. Eda was examining a crystal ball mounted on a soft velvet cushion.

"I bet that's for telling the future," I said.

"I wonder what Bobulin's going to do with Grandpa," Eda replied. He frowned. "Especially since he doesn't have any special powers except for us."

We found ourselves standing in front of a large metal armchair upholstered in leather. It looked like a cross between an electric chair and a chair you see in a dentist's office. Bobulin offered our grandpa a seat, then sat down on a chair facing him and launched back into his explanation, handing Grandpa what looked like two cherry pits, only bigger and made out of rubber. Just when it finally seemed like something was going to happen, there was a knock at the door. Bobulin got up and went to see who it was. After a few agitated words between him and the visitor, he disappeared down the hallway without a word.

My brother and I went racing over to my grandpa and Eda gave him a slap in the thigh.

"Ouch!" Grandpa yelled. "Not so hard. I'm already banged up from the two of you as it is. I'll bet you're just dying of curiosity, aren't you? Well, wait till you see this," he said.

I thought he was going to tell us about one of the big contraptions, but instead he just opened his hand, displaying the two rubber stones.

"These are Bobulin's invention and the Soviet secret services are testing them out now," he said. "They can decode any language on the basis of electromagnetic waves and translate it into the language of whoever has these in their ears. Even the smallest African languages, spoken by only a few dozen people," Grandpa said, kneading the pits in his hand.

"Would the two of you like to try?"

Before I could even say a word, my brother scooped the stones out of my grandpa's hand. It didn't even cross his mind to ask if I wanted to go first, not that that was a surprise.

"Put them in your ears."

Eda pressed one pit into each ear and made what he thought was a scholarly face. Then Grandpa started talking in Russian. He went on and on and on, and while I couldn't understand a word, my brother's face broke into a wide smile.

"Can you understand him?"

Eda nodded. He closed his eyes and went on grinning like a fool.

"It's totally awesome," he said a moment later, very loudly, the way people do when they're listening to music with headphones on.

Once my brother finally let me take a turn, I could understand why he didn't want to take the pits out of his ears. It was like magic. The moment I put them in, the Russian words coming out of my grandpa's mouth were instantly turned into Czech.

“When we get back to Prague, I’m going to take you out for the best banana ice cream you ever tasted,” the pits translated. “I’ll also give you and your brother that tour of the airport I promised, and your grandma and I will take you on a trip out into nature.”

Just then, Bobulin finally reappeared.

“Keep them in!” I heard my brother shout as I lifted my hands to take out the pits and give them back to Grandpa.

“My colleagues in the lab next door were using telekinesis to rescue a submarine that got stuck on coral reefs in the Sea of Japan and asked me for help. I’m sorry I kept you waiting so long,” said Bobulin.

With the pits in my ears, I could understand every word.

Bobulin sat down again facing Grandpa, who had remained in his special chair the whole time.

“I expect telekinesis is child’s play for you, though, Comrade Fox, isn’t it?” said Bobulin. “Moving objects with your mind, the way I saw you do in the circus, was sheer genius,” he went on as our grandpa blushed. He began to fasten the straps attaching Grandpa to the chair.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Eda cried.

I waved to Eda, pointing to the pits in my ears, trying to let him know there was no need for panic. Bobulin was explaining how the experiment would work. The scary-looking straps, it turned out, were body function sensors. Bobulin brushed some kind of gel onto our grandpa’s forehead, covered his head with a helmet, and stuck something in his mouth that looked like a thermometer.

“All set,” Bobulin announced. He then gave Grandpa a series of simple tasks. They were all things Eda and I could do no problem. Slide an object from one side of the room to another, turn individual lights on and off, bounce a ball up and down, and so on. Throughout the experiment, Bobulin took detailed notes, keeping an eye on the device that monitored Grandpa’s heart rate and blood pressure through the straps and tracked the activity in his brain through the helmet. The reason I know all this is because Bobulin explained to Grandpa everything he was doing, down to the smallest detail. Every so often, he would nod thoughtfully, loosen one of the straps, then tighten it back up again.

“That should be enough for now,” Bobulin said after half an hour or so. He undid the straps, took the helmet off Grandpa’s head, and handed him a paper napkin. “You can wipe your forehead with this. Then we’ll go next door.” Bobulin gestured to him to stand up, and Grandpa rose from his seat in a huff.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “I don’t have time for any more experiments. You promised me the whole thing would take no more than an hour. Is there anything else you

need from me, we'll arrange to meet some other time. As you of all people should know," Grandpa added, "I'm in a hurry today."

Bobulin shook his head. "Unfortunately, this can't wait. My colleagues next door are waiting on you. They need you to help them free that submarine. It's a matter of Soviet security. If the Japanese discover the sub, it will cause a scandal, since it was doing reconnaissance and didn't have permission to enter Japanese waters," Bobulin said in a cold tone of voice as he switched off the machines.

"I'll just bring over the telewave booster and we can get started," he said, then disappeared. No sooner had he closed the door behind him, though, than he opened it up again and poked his head back in the room. "Disobeying an order from the Soviet government is out of the question. Your personal business will have to wait," said Bobulin. He shrugged and was gone.

"C'mon, kids. We're getting out of here," Grandpa whispered as Bobulin closed the door behind him a second time.

"I don't give a damn what the Soviet government says. They're the ones who sent the tanks into Czechoslovakia. Not to mention, we don't have time."

Grandpa peeked out the door.

"The coast is clear. It's now or never," he whispered.

We dashed out the door and raced down the hall. I kept expecting somebody to stop us, but luck was on our side. We made it out of the institute without anyone noticing. Bobulin was clearly counting on Grandpa being obedient.

We took a left turn and ran down the short street to the main road, where Grandpa started waving like mad, trying to flag down a taxi. Again, we got lucky and one of the drivers stopped right away. Grandpa told him we needed to get to the Kremlin and instructed him to let us out in front of the same tower where we were the last time. He paid the driver and off we went. Judging from the sun, which was low over the horizon, it was late afternoon.

"See you again in a couple of hours," my brother said as we neared the waiting room we had left a few hours earlier.

Eda

There was a different receptionist in the waiting room than before, but luckily he already knew who Grandpa was. The moment he laid eyes on him, he reached up to the shelf behind him for our gift basket and rummaged around inside, lifting out and examining each item, one by one.

“He must be checking to make sure there isn’t a bomb in there,” Zuzka said. Personally, I thought they had already had plenty of time to search the basket beforehand.

So my sister and I wandered around the waiting room awhile, then sat down in the chairs. Across from us, a large portrait of the Soviet Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev hung on the wall in a gilded frame.

“It really is creepy the way his eyebrows are grown together,” said Zuzka, pointing at the portrait. “I saw an old photo of him in a magazine back home where he was kissing one of our presidents at the airport. It was pretty gross.”

I knew the photo. It showed Brezhnev exchanging a kiss with Gustáv Husák, the Communist Party leader of Czechoslovakia. Instead of saying hello and shaking hands when they met, Communist politicians kissed, our mom had told us. When she was little, Husák had been president. He sent people to jail for refusing to sign a statement that they agreed with the Soviet occupation of our country. Even normal people had to sign or they got fired from their jobs or sent to prison by Husák. If our mission here was a success, none of that would happen. No one would go to prison and no one would have to lie that they agreed with the awful occupation just so they wouldn’t get fired.

“What’s Grandpa talking about with the receptionist?” I asked Zuzka. She wouldn’t lend me the pits even for a second. In fact, she hadn’t taken them out of her ears from the moment I gave them to her.

“They’re just talking about the stuff in the basket,” she said. “Every now and then the translation drops out, though. I guess they haven’t worked out all the bugs.”

We spent a little longer sitting in the chairs until our grandpa called us over to him. He announced he had something important to tell us. As a sign that we were ready to listen, my sister laid her hand on Grandpa’s knee. He did the same, giving her a loving pat.

“I don’t think I’ve thanked you two enough for what you’ve done for me,” he said. “I wouldn’t be here without you.”

He glanced around the room. The receptionist watched with a perplexed look on his face as Grandpa spoke to the empty chairs.

“Changing the past is an experiment that no one has ever tried before us.”

My sister turned to me. “Maybe somebody has and we just don’t know.”

Our grandpa pulled up short a moment, as if he had heard Zuzka. Then he went on:

“Czechoslovakia today is an example to the whole world that socialism and freedom can exist at the same time. That fields, forests, factories, apartments, and schools can belong to everyone, not just to companies and rich people, the way it is in your country under capitalism. People can be free, with no one living in poverty the way they do now in your country under capitalism,” Grandpa said.

The receptionist leaned out from his booth and shouted something in an agitated voice, but Grandpa ignored him. "Czechoslovakia today shows the whole world that people can express their opinions freely and at the same time not have to worry about having work the way people do in your times."

The receptionist started yelling again, but Grandpa continued:

"The Russians, as you know, are not interested in seeing our way succeed, which is why they sent their army to invade Czechoslovakia. They kidnapped our comrades from Prague and brought them here to Moscow to force them to agree to the occupation of our country. We are here to prevent that, but from this point on, I'm sorry to say, it depends wholly on you."

Grandpa paused and lowered his eyes.

"What?" my sister shrieked. "He's just going to leave us on our own? There's no way we can do it without him. You know that, right, Eda? We don't have a clue how to do it!"

"If you don't prevent it, another twenty years of Russian occupation will destroy the lives of thousands of people in our country," Grandpa said.

The receptionist stared with ever greater bewilderment as Grandpa continued talking to the row of empty chairs. Then he walked back to his booth, picked up the phone, and dialed a number.

"This damned receptionist won't let me in, and I can't convince him otherwise. He's telling me to leave the gift here and they'll make sure it's delivered."

Grandpa paused again and lowered his eyes.

"They can't do this to us!" my sister cried. She tore the paper and pencil out of Grandpa's hands and scribbled, "I'm not going anywhere without you."

"What would we do there without you?" I added, and my sister handed the piece of paper back to Grandpa.

Just then, the door flew open. Three men in uniform burst into the room and seized hold of Grandpa. Zuzka and I started screaming.

"Promise me you'll do whatever you can to convince our comrades not to sign the agreement," Grandpa managed to tell us before the men in uniform twisted his arms behind his back. He shouted at them in Russian as they wrestled him to the floor.

"Let him go!" my sister screamed.

Meanwhile the receptionist just looked on anxiously from the safety of his booth.

"He called them!" my sister said angrily, pointing to the receptionist.

I jumped one of the men from behind while Zuzka sank her teeth into the hand of one of the other two holding on to Grandpa. But then she got slugged in the head by the third man, who was trying to punch Grandpa, and the man whose back I was on spun around, slamming me into the wall. I fell to the ground flat on my back.

Grandpa kicked and thrashed as hard as he could, but he didn't stand a chance. He was too outnumbered.

"Once it gets dark and you're no longer invisible, introduce yourself to the Czech comrades as young people from the future and tell them the truth: If they sign, the Czech nation will undergo another twenty years of Russian occupation and humiliation!"

Grandpa cried as one of the men tried to strap a muzzle on his face. For a moment, he even managed to struggle to his feet, but the men kicked him back to the floor and dragged him to the door by his hair.

Grandpa turned to us one last time: "Tell Dubček if he signs, he'll find death waiting for him on his return to Czechoslovakia. Threaten them any way you can! A national disaster is in the making here, and it's up to you to prevent it at all costs. Don't worry about me. I'll figure something out. They probably confused me with somebody else."

At that point, the three men finally managed to secure the muzzle to Grandpa's face and we couldn't hear a word he said, no matter how loud he cried. The receptionist obediently went to open the door and the men dragged Grandpa struggling out of the waiting room onto the street. The only words we understood from Grandpa's muzzled shouts and cries was *the key*. Then the door slammed and he was gone. We heard screaming from outside, followed by the sound of a car starting up.

I was paralyzed with shock, but Zuzka dashed out to the street. The receptionist went outside to watch as the men in uniform loaded Grandpa into the car, and I was left in the waiting room alone. *The key*, I thought, wondering what Grandpa could have meant. *Oh, right, the key!* it suddenly dawned on me. *Of course!* We needed the key to get out, since, logically, the waiting room had to have two doors: the one that we came in and the the one that the receptionist used to let visitors into the Kremlin. I headed straight for the reception booth and commenced searching for the key.

The first place I looked was the shelves on the back wall. One shelf was covered with sheets of paper and rubber stamps, along with some pencils and paper clips. The other shelf had more papers on it, as well as a piece of smoked fish wrapped in newspaper and a bottle of vodka. Not a key in sight. I opened the desk drawer. A spoon, scissors, an old newspaper. I slipped my hand under the newspaper and felt something hard. A key! An actual key! Then I pulled it out to take a look and my knees buckled and my head spun. Hanging off the keychain was a small, fuzzy orange fox.

I ran outside to tell Zuzka. She was sitting on the sidewalk in front of the door with her head between her knees. Off to the side, the receptionist was having a smoke and chatting with someone.

"Hurry, come on! We've got to get going before the receptionist comes back," I said. But Zuzka was too devastated even to lift her head.

“Grandpa believes in us. Didn’t you hear what he said? We can do this! We need to do it for him!”

Meanwhile the receptionist had ended his conversation, stubbed out his cigarette, and was ambling back to the waiting room door.

I grabbed Zuzka by the elbow. “We can’t let the receptionist beat us there. This is our chance, don’t you get it? I found the key in his desk drawer. There’s a fox on the keychain!”

That got Zuzka’s attention. She leaped to her feet.

“Give it here!” She snatched the key with the fox from my hand and bolted into the waiting room. It slid into the lock like a knife into butter. Zuzka gave the key a turn, the door swung open, and we stepped through to the other side.