

The Loyal

Per Hydén

The brass bell let off a quiet chime as the door swung open to *Indigo Robotics - Mechanics & Boutique*. It was a windy day in late October of 2046 in a downtown Zagreb alley. Maple leaves blew down the cobbled streets as hurrying for shelter.

"Father, welcome. What can I do for you?"

"Coffee! A large one."

"Excuse me, Father, but this is not a café, as you can see. Please, take a seat to catch your breath. Are you alright?"

The tall shopkeeper pointed to an armchair by the large window. The priest did not hesitate to take up on the offer and sat down with a sigh.

"In a matter of fact, I'm not alright. I was in quite a hurry to get here in one piece. Those imbeciles at the coffee shop up the street refused to serve me. It got rather heated. Everyone hates the Eastern Trinity Church these days, you know. May these times of war be over soon!"

"Indeed. Well, at Indigo, everyone is welcome. Please take a look around if you wish. Automated mechanics for your every need."

"Where are we on that coffee?"

"With all respect, I'm a salesman as much as the next, but..."

"60 Euros! I'll give you 60 Euros if you get me one; I don't care where you get it from."

The priest bowed his head, as in deep contemplation, and a silver crucifix hung heavy towards the mahogany floor. A brief silence conquered the room, and sunlight's reflections went and gone as people passed the boutique. The mechanic stood as still as his robots, watching the old man.

"My apologies sir, I've had a bad morning. I try to spread the gospel and bring hope in dark times, and my fellow countrymen are harassing me."

The mechanic brushed his hands on his leather apron and nodded in acceptance.

"Don't worry father, I'll get your coffee. My butler just brewed a pot, and it's on the house. I warn you though, I take it rather strongly."

"The darker, the better. Thank you, good sir, may a bright future shine on you."

The shopkeeper turned and called for his butler, a Neptune 29. The robot rolled out of the store's back, wearing a blue robe and white gloves, but its hat was missing. The butler took the order and went on his way to serve his master, who had sat down in the chair next

to his unusual customer. In less than a minute, the butler appeared with two steel mugs on a tray. Its amber-colored eyes observed the two men taking the beverages. It waited a few seconds, as in salute, before it returned out back. The two men looked out the sunny window.

"Do you miss them as much as I?" The priest said as he glanced towards the sky.

"The airships? Yes, of course."

"Their beauty lifts my memory, and even more knowing they are locked in the hangars with their majestic solar sails and silent turbines. The overtaking turned the heavens into hell before the siege, and we got the clear skies. Did you serve?"

"Yes, in the factories. I told them I could work with the engineers, but they wouldn't listen. They put me, the founder of Indigo robotics, at the assembly line. Fortunately, I got relieved of age and could turn back to the family business."

The mechanic gave up joyless laughter and drank his coffee slowly, his face scarred with age and work. With ash-grey hair, relaxed jaw, and light blue eyes, he appeared a gentle father figure albeit with hidden momentum, as the old stag of the forest, calm but ready to defend his herd any second. The priest studied the mechanic and looked down into his mug.

"I guessed we should be about the same age, born around 1970?"

"71, you also too old to serve, I suppose?"

"No army service for me. The hospital needed clergy to tend the dying, no relief there."

"What is your name, father?"

"Zorić, and who am I sharing this excellent coffee with?"

"I'm Filip Kolar."

"I like the bell. The tone is rather deep, considering its size. I'm glad it is not only the church that still enjoys the manual clang."

"Call me nostalgic, but with everything automated, the spirit of things go missing. Although that is my secret, I am still a mechanic selling robots."

The men laughed and finished their beverages, putting the empty mugs on the black granite windowsill. They rose from their relaxed positions, and Father Zorić started to examine the merchandise on display. He walked from one robot to the other, letting his fingers stroke a chin, a shoulder, a chest.

"These are good quality robots. You only sell Hawks and Neptunes?"

"Yes, I will repair any robot you put in front of me, but when you buy from Indigo, you buy the best."

"It would be nice to have a Neptune at the church. We are stuck with an OC22 which can't tell the difference between a frying pan and a dust bin. I prefer to cook my food nowadays if you know what I mean."

"I can fix it for you; the OC:s have a straightforward circuit structure and easily updated processor. Or you invest in this brand new Yellow Hawk for a total of 9 000 euros, with a down payment, we can arrange for multiple installments."

"Is that so."

Father Zorić read the neatly curved letters on the features-placard of the handsome Hawk. It was larger than most household butlers and looked reliable.

"How come you can operate here, Mr. Kolar? Isn't every possible resource needed to withstand the siege?"

"The government knows the economy cannot stop, and while the larger manufacturers provide for the army, it opens up the market for us."

"Are you operating this establishment by yourself?"

"My granddaughter is the head mechanic; she is doing all the programming and fine-wiring, leaving the hammering to me. She received a scholarship to go to Sofia, but then the overtaking happened. She could have been a top engineer, but..."

Mr. Kolar stopped mid-sentence as something drew his attention outside.

"I think they might be for you," he said while pointing to the window.

Three soldiers stood in the alley questioning the owner of an opposite shop.

"Ah, not the police. Never can I rest; this is how the Great state of Croatia shows gratitude to the clergy. I guess this means another rendezvous at the confinement, answering the same questions over again. Thank you, Mr. Kolar, for the coffee and hospitality. I will have to postpone our discussion of the future home of this fine butler."

Father Zorić straightened his collar and inhaled deeply. As if preparing for pain.

"Come quickly, behind the counter."

The priest looked with big eyes on the mechanic. He then took a few swift looks around the shop, and instead of accepting the MR. Kolar's offer of hiding space he ran on stiff legs out back to the workshop. Mr. Kolar didn't have time to stop him. The soldiers were coming into Indigo.

Father Zorić was standing in a spotless working office with a full robotics assembly line and software center. At the far end, a woman was sitting at a desk. She held a pen to her tablet, concentrating, and didn't notice she had a visitor. As Father Zorić heard voices from the shop, he let out a sigh and quietly hid behind a faulty butler. He reached into his cloak and brought forth a wooden-covered flask. The wrinkles of his face grew tense as he swallowed the liquor and listened to the voices.

"Greetings, are you the owner of this establishment?"

"Welcome to my humble boutique; I'm shopkeeper and mechanic Filip Kolar. What can I do for you, Miss?"

The soldiers stood in their long black coats and white berets. The officer had multiple stars on her shoulders and gazed around the shop as she continued.

"We have received a disturbance. Apparently, a priest with connection to the East is making inquiries and acting rather suspiciously. Did he come in here?"

"No, I'm afraid I haven't seen him. It's been a quiet morning with only a grumpy old customer handing in her cat for maintenance."

The officer scrutinized Mr. Kolar and held her stare in his eyes.

"Very well, if he does come in here, you call us right away. It's a matter of national security, as you understand."

"Yes, of course, I'm at your service."

"Excellent, goodbye."

Mr. Kolar watched the soldiers exit his shop and exhaled deeply. A single drop of sweat stood still at his temple, not yet deciding whether to dare leap the cheek. He walked into the workshop, realizing everything was calm. His granddaughter was working as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on.

"You can come out now, father; you have some explaining to do."

Noises of discomfort appeared as the priest tried to emerge from his hiding spot with at least a hint of grace. He followed Mr. Kolar back into Indigo.

"Thank you, Mister. I am in your debt, and please, hear me out."

The two men stood on opposite sides of the counter, an old teak thing but with a digital display beautifully integrated at the top. The dynamic had shifted between them.

"You are putting my family and me at great risk here, father; I believed I was the good Samaritan not in collusion with the East."

"I beg of you to trust me. What that woman said is untrue, I have no connections to the East, and the so-called inquiries I was making were of service. We at the Eastern Trinity Church help this community, everyone. We provide shelter, food, prayer, and a path to salvation. Not that I would ask the soldiers to understand, they are at war and in the mindset of duality; friend or foe."

Father Zorić reached for his handkerchief and continued.

"Our church has no connections to the East anymore. Our origin and history began in what is now the land of the enemy, but our master is no other than God himself. I'm sorry I have put you at risk, although I did not ask for you to hide me."

The mechanic stood in silence, watching the priest wiping his hands with the white cloth.

"It's the war, you know, it does crazy things to us. Everyone is looking out for themselves. I am too. We are struggling. People don't prioritize robotics, and we barely manage to stay open."

Mr. Kolar walked back to the pair of armchairs and sat down.

"The bustling outside may fool you. It looks quite ordinary. People are rushing here and there for business or leisure. But inside, people are not the same. They are afraid. Constantly ready for the alarms or yet another lockdown. That is why anyone, and I mean anyone, would give up a fellow countryman if they thought he was a spy from the East."

Father Zorić made his way to the chairs and knelt beside Mr. Kolar. Gently he put his hand on the mechanic's shoulder.

"Not everyone, my brother, not you. You were willing to trust me. There is hope in these times; there always has been hope. It is natural to look out for ourselves; it's evolutionary. I sometimes wonder how things are in the East. Are people afraid? Are they suffering as we are?"

The priest let go and rose to sit down in the empty chair. The wind made itself known by the whistling sound of pushing through the narrow alley.

"The last message we received from our church in Bukarest, six months ago, they were all doing well. In full-blown war, the Jerevan Republic managed to care for its citizens. Not like us. You remember the panic and chaos."

"But we managed to fight them off, and the siege will not succeed. New lines are drawn on the map, and Zagreb will be a city on the border between East and West. The Jerevans will need to negotiate. Their plan was a swift overtaking, like in Asia and Africa. They cannot win in Europe or America."

"You are right. There is strength in this country. You know it, and I know it. However, I cannot help myself by wondering about our ways. Do the Eastern aristocrats have a point? In the East, there is no famine, no bankruptcy, no..."

"Freedom"

"What is freedom?" The priest continued. "To be left alone or to be cared for? You have heard the reports of their ideology. They provide for everyone."

"And the cost is the abolishment of democracy."

"Yes, but when the bells sound in Jerevan, it is for praising the Lord, not mourning the poor dying of starvation or addiction, as in Zagreb. Mr. Kolar, my brother, I see death and despair as the cost of our freedom and democracy."

"If the bells are allowed to sound in the East?"

"Yes, you are right. Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating for the enemy, just trying to add some humility to the conflicting dichotomy."

Darkness suddenly embraced the city of Zagreb. The two men worryingly looked up towards the sky but relaxed simultaneously as they realized a large dense cloud blocked out the sun.

"Can God speak through dreams, Father?"

"Well, certainly, a vision of prophecy can take many forms. The scriptures tell us the accounts of Moses, Isaiah, Mary, and Simeon, to only name a few, who received different kinds of prophetic revelations. The difficulty is to know what is prophecy and what is shiftY subconscious fantasies. Why do you ask?"

Mr.Kolar scratched his chin and breathed through his nose while frowning, as if smelling the scent of burning sage and preparing for a fearful encounter.

"A few months back, I had this dream where the horizon of the calm White Sea appeared under a purple sun. Being a scarred rugged Spartan, I was carrying a baby in my arms. Behind me, my countrymen pulled at my heels, and I felt the smell of burnt flesh. I couldn't turn my head, and I was forced to continue forward, for a New Earth was coming. All were happening to the thundering tunes of *The Rise of an Empire*."

"The fight song of the Aegean separatists?"

"Correct. I never cared for their cause, resisting the bio-engineering and the mandatory wrist code. However, it was tragic, with all those children ending up dead. The song has stuck with me."

"Are you dreaming of leaving? Of creating something new?"

Mr. Kolar gave the nod in response while the silence was broken by their watches' buzz, signaling the upcoming curfew.

"I understand you, my friend. I have also dreamt of leaving this place. I see no future for my church here, to be honest. Nevertheless, I'm afraid it's going to remain a dream for us. One has to manage, and I have to remind myself to live in the world, not of the world." Well, I better go. I don't want to get caught past curfew. I will probably have a few visitors to deal with at home as well."

"Wait! Father, if you are true to your word and want to leave the coalition, come back on Wednesday with the things you need."

"I don't understand."

"We have a ship and a way to disconnect the watches enabling us to get across the front. We are leaving for the East and a better future. We surely could need a man of God on our journey. Can I trust you?"

The priest stroke his arm nervously and corrected his collar while he stood up.

"Brother, are you sure of this? It sounds dangerous; what about your family, your granddaughter?"

"They are coming, of course. There is no future in the Union for us."

"It is risky, and I'm old. I've had too many adventures in my life as it is. However, I will consider your offer. You can trust me. Thank you, brother, for your hospitality. May God bless you."

The men bid farewell, and the priest exited Indigo accompanied by the sound of the brass bell. Mr. Kolar turned his back to the front of his shop and began picking around, preparing for closing for the night.

A few minutes later, the brass bell chimed again. Mr. Kolar turned to welcome a customer but instead faced four soldiers. The three he recognized from before and panic shot from his eyes as he realized the fourth was the priest. Mr. Kolar shouted to his granddaughter to run and commanded his butler to lock the door to the workshop before the soldiers wrestled him to the floor.