Tadej Golob: Oh, Triglav, My Home

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Introduction

‘And where is Brajc?... And Tina?’

Taras glanced around the office. From Osterc, sitting at his computer, to Brajc’s desk right next to him, to Tina’s on the far side of the room. His question was pre-emptive. He was also late. Once he managed to switch on his computer, the on-screen clock said half past eight. Well, eight thirty-four to be precise. He had overslept. For the first time in a long while Alenka was no longer at his side and it was light outside. In fact, he recalled that it was getting light when Alenka got up, and then something new: he turned around in bed and, it seems, fell back to sleep. When he next checked his phone on the nightstand, it was already eight. And nothing hurt until he got out of bed and felt his legs. He had forgotten the sensation lactic acid leaves in the muscles.

‘Brajc called that he won’t be in. That all this over the weekend was too much.’

To be honest, he had not expected to find Brajc at his desk this Monday. But what he also hadn’t expected of Brajc is that he would make it to the top. To the summit of Triglav, Slovenia’s highest peak. Only a year ago he could not have imagined Brajc reaching even the top of Šmarna Gora, the relatively low hill on the outskirts of Ljubljana. Or on the top of any other hill that could not be reached by car.

‘Apparently he can hardly stand up.’

Taras nodded. The strain on his legs as they descended from Kredarica into the Krma Valley had taken its toll on him too. Any long descents did, even before, when age didn’t come into it.

‘Tina is with Ahlin. Apparently he wants to speak to you urgently as well.’

‘What, now, straight away?’

Osterc nodded, then stared in disbelief after Taras when he turned round and disappeared into the corridor. A couple of minutes later he was back with two plastic cups. Coffee for himself and tea for Osterc.

'If it were really urgent, he would have called me,' Taras responded to Osterc's baffled look.

'Allegedly he did, but you were unreachable.'

Taras sighed and produced his phone from his pocket.

Switched off, of course.

'Since Saturday. I switched it off during all that stuff up there, didn't want to end up as a lightning conductor. And I forgot about it afterwards.'

Five missed calls. Two from Alenka who had then called him on Brajc's phone, just as he and Milan stepped into the dining room at the Kredarica Hut, a minute before the storm picked up again. He had spoken to her on Brajc's phone and forgotten all about his own.

'If it was something urgent, Ahlin would already be here.'

Plastic cup in hand, he settled himself in his chair. At that very moment someone knocked twice on the door and entered without waiting. Ahlin. Behind him, a younger man and Tina. He looked at Taras and then towards Osterc.

'He told me you were looking for me. And that you called, but I had forgotten I had switched my phone off on Saturday and not turned it on since. What's up?'

He glanced at the man standing next to Ahlin. He looked around thirty, perhaps a year or two older. Tina's age. A short, trimmed beard and long brown hair tied in a ponytail at the top of his head. He noticed Taras's gaze but did not respond.

'I'd like to hear your version of events on Triglav over the weekend.'

Taras shrugged his shoulders and gave him a querying look.

'A large group of hikers found themselves in trouble due to the storm. One of them died from lightning, the others miraculously survived. Are you interested as a colleague?'

Once again he looked towards the man standing next to Ahlin and at Tina who had not sat at her desk but remained standing, waiting behind Ahlin and the stranger.

'Did you see the dead man?' Ahlin ignored Taras' question.

Taras shrugged once again.

‘Briefly, from afar… Why? He was hit by lightning. What’s that got to do with us?’

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About fifty metres altitude below the summit of Mali Triglav, he and Milan had come across a group of mountaineers, three girls and a young man, frightened, numbed, moving like pale shadows from peg to peg, swaying along the steel rope, more dead than alive. It was hard to pick out who to help first. They decided to assist the youngest woman who was being supported by the man. They put a belt around her waist, attaching it to the steel rope. She claimed she had been struck by lightning but they had neither the time nor the space to examine her. Kredarica below them was once again covered in an ever denser and darker mist.

‘Are you the last ones?’ Milan asked the girls. The young man, also injured, with blood running from his nose and ears, was absent and silent. ‘Is there anyone else up on the mountain?’

It was hard to determine the colour of his hair, the rain had mottled it into something of a wet rag. Clearly he too had been struck by lightning. A mesh of burned threads hung from both his hands with which he was trying to help the young girl, moving her feet onto the metal pegs along the protected route. Taras gave him a friendly nod, the first climber he actually greeted since leaving their car on the meadow down in the valley. The young man did not respond in any way, word or gesture.

‘There is someone lying over there,’ the girl then said, being helped by Milan as Taras supported the young man.

She pointed towards the summit.

‘Lying?’

‘All burned.’

They directed the group towards the valley and then climbed up the secured route towards the first peak, towards Mali Triglav. Milan in front, Taras behind him. Soon after, Taras noticed over Milan’s shoulder something darker than the rockface lying on the ground, a fluorescent stripe across the anorak covering him. Milan leaned down and tried to find a pulse in the vein on his neck. There was a

simultaneous flash and thunder, hitting so close that Taras thought it had struck them. They were thrown to the ground. Once he was up on his feet again, surprised he could get up, and Milan had also picked himself up, they turned around without saying a word and almost ran down the mountain. Only once they reached Kredarica, escorting the group that they found on their descent barely a metre lower than where they had left them, did Taras ask, 'Was he dead?'

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But all that had happened at the weekend, on Saturday. What does the Ljubljana Police Directorate have to do with people struck dead by lightning on Mount Triglav?

Ahlin turned towards the man on his left.

'Sergej Bohte, the criminal investigator from the General Police Directorate in charge of this case.'

Case?

'Yesterday we had a call from Jesenice where the Mountain Rescue Service had taken the body on Sunday. They had examined it and sent the report to Pathology in Ljubljana where they will conduct an autopsy today.'

He had a pleasant, deep voice devoid of any accent or emotion. One of those voices that never needed adjusting to the situation he happened to be in. Clear and distinct. A voice for press conferences, for the radio.

'Why not at the hospital in Jesenice? Don't they know how to fill out the death registration form there?'

If Osterc, standing to the right of Taras, had been the kind of person who knows how to smile at scathing remarks, he would have grinned. Instead he managed a barely audible gust of air through his nostrils.

Anyone can fill out this form. Sixteen points with a few sub-sections: Surname and First Name of the deceased; gender (circle): 1. – male, 2. – female; Surname prior to marriage (for individuals who were married); marital status (circle): 1. – single, 2. – married, 3. – widowed, 4. – divorced…

'The man, whose identity we are still trying to establish, was indeed struck by lightning. It could also have almost certainly killed him…' the young man Sergej Bohte continued even though Taras was expectantly looking at Ahlin, '…had he not

been dead before it struck. Professor Dr Cvilak to whom I spoke half an hour ago, sent me this by email.'

He held out his hand, offering Taras a folded sheet of paper. Taras unfolded it and looked at the photograph. He had to look twice to decide what it depicted. A part of a human body, most probably skin, with a small black stain.

'Nine millimetres straight to the middle of the forehead,' Ahlin interrupted. 'That *is* something to do with us.'

Chapter 1.

A week earlier

'Will you manage?'

Brajc was resting with his hands against his thighs but what in fact surprised Taras was that he was not out of breath, merely breathing more heavily, and when he raised his head, his glance was not one of someone about to have a heart attack but the eyes of a normally tired person. The eyes of the average Slovene with twenty minutes to go to the summit of Mount Kum.

'Will have to manage,' Brajc gasped, straightening his back. 'How much further did you say it was to the top?'

'Just a short stretch. We're practically there.'

He had just uttered the sentence that Alenka, when she still used to walk with him in the mountains, hated most. Which she also mentioned to Brajc when he told her that he and Taras had arranged a trip up Kum, the highest peak in the Sava Hills.

'Then you are sure to get the legendary sentence.'

Brajc didn't understand what Alenka was saying.

'We're practically there!' she snorted. 'I heard it for the first time when we went up… What's the mountain above Log under Mangart?'

'Lots of things,' Taras tried to be of assistance.

'The one… Directly above it?'

‘Briceljk?’

‘Further left. Extreme left…’

‘Plešivec.’

‘Right, so we’re climbing up this Plešivec, and at some point I ask him: How much further to the top? We're practically there, he said. And how long did this practically there last? Two hours!'

Of which they had spent one hour resting in the grass in a meadow under the mountain's northwest face. And in order not to have anything similar happen here in the forest with Brajc, under the summit of Kum which was only half an hour away, perhaps a couple of minutes longer, Taras set off in front.

‘And are you certain there is an inn at the top?’ he heard Brajc ask behind him.

‘A mountain hut... Yes.’

An hour later, as they were placing their order in the hut at the summit – Taras a bean and sauerkraut soup, Brajc a sausage with sautéed potatoes – Brajc, to break the silence as they waited and Taras felt no need for bridging anything, groaned, ‘Didn’t do that well today. Somewhere half-way, above that stream, I started pissing blood.’

‘It’s alright,’ Taras mumbled, which Brajc would usually understand as: In fact, you’re doing better every time. Walking and these things I mean. Did you ever expect to be climbing hills?

This time Brajc was silent, and had it not been for the barely noticeable nod, Taras might have thought he hadn’t heard him. He was staring somewhere into the distance.

‘Hey…’ he said eventually. ‘What’s that across there? Are they in Austria, Italy? The Dolomites or what?’ he asked, pointing towards the northwest and the two-thousand-metre peaks of the Julian Alps shimmering on the horizon.

Taras glanced at him in the same manner he had looked at his daughters once, years ago, when, standing on the walls at Ljubljana Castle, after their tenth visit, he asked them what they should by then have known: ‘What’s that triangular shape, the highest one in front of us?’

‘Triglav,’ Anja tried.

He looked at Mojca.

‘Jalovec?’

He had been pointing to Grintovec! Is that so difficult to remember?

‘It’s Triglav,’ he now told Brajc. ‘The highest one among the peaks you are looking at is Triglav, then there are other mountains around it.’

‘Right…’ Brajc nodded and might have added something else but was interrupted by Taras’s phone ringing.

Taras took the call, listened for a few seconds.

‘Yes, alright,’ he said and hung up.

‘It was Ahlin,’ he explained to Brajc.

They finished their food in silence and almost without talking descended the mountain to Taras’s or rather Alenka’s Renault, parked in the valley below.

‘Would you like to go up Triglav?’ Taras asked Brajc as they were driving towards Litija.

Brajc did not reply and, had Taras not asked loudly and clearly, more so than usual because Alenka had not long ago told him he mutters and is hard to understand, he might have asked him again. Instead, he too fell silent and fiddled with the radio to find Radio Three Slovenia. He thought that he might, at least this way, get Brajc talking, protesting about having to listen to this Classical stuff with all those instruments, but he didn’t. Brajc stayed silent all the way to Ljubljana. Only once they were on the ring road, did he turn towards Taras.

‘Did you mean it? About Triglav?’

Taras shrugged. He didn’t even know himself. He didn’t know what to expect. The old Brajc would have laughed out loud and checked Taras’s forehead to see whether he was delirious, but the Brajc with whom he had, during his recovery, climbed Šmarna Gora a few times, and Polhograjska Grmada, and Tosc, and Lovrenc above Polhov Gradec, and Vremščica, and now Kum… He didn’t know. He was just asking.

‘You were one of those who made time for me, who strolled around with me when I needed to do that to get myself better.’

‘Strolled around?’ Brajc asked offended. ‘That was strolling around for you?’

It hadn't been for him. To Brajc it was… Training. Yes, the most appropriate word to describe how Brajc saw it was training. Similar to sportsmen and women, Tadej Pogačar, Primož Roglič, Luka Dondič, Janja Garnbret, for example. At least in essence. Taras pretended not to have heard Brajc's interjection.

'If I can repay you by taking you up Triglav, I will gladly do so. I haven't been there for a very long time.'

This wasn't entirely true. The winter before his accident, three years ago, he had sat in his car at eleven one Saturday and driven to Mojstrana and into the Krma Valley.

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'Isn't it too late?' Alenka had asked.

'I have a headlamp,' he had said.

He had reached the summit with the last rays of the sun, the way he wanted to. Alone. As he climbed up the pegs and ropes sticking out of the snow, he met a few people coming down, people who were the reason he had left Ljubljana so late. He did not want to be in a crowd. He did not want anyone tripping over and falling onto him.

In the darkness created when the sun disappeared behind the Dolomites, he descended, stopped at Kredarica for a sausage and a piece of bread. The hut was crowded and he barely managed to find a place to sit down. He put down his backpack next to the chair and placed his sunglasses on top. He would not need them now.

'Have you come up from the valley? Now?' a young man on the chair next to him asked.

'From the summit,' Taras said and pointed somewhere towards the ceiling of the dining room.

'Alone? At night? Then you must be an experienced climber, or what?'

Taras nodded. At least someone had noticed he was not part of the crowd of mountaineers who had gathered at the hut. People who did not even know how to fix their own crampon straps. They talked for about five minutes and Taras told the man he had also been to a few other places, among them the Himalaya, and that his

altitude record was some five kilometres higher than the summit of Triglav. Then he excused himself and went to the bar to order his meal.

When he came back, his new acquaintance was no longer at the table. He ate his food, picked up his backpack. The sunglasses were gone. He opened the backpack to check whether he had forgotten that he had put them away, but still could not find them.

Idiot! He looked around the dining room. Of course, the man wasn't there. Nor at the bar. Not in the toilets. He went up the stairs to the dorms, looking into each room. Nothing. He had vanished. He thought of speaking to the hut manager and… Ah, he waved his hand dismissively. What could he do? Demand everyone stood in line and had their backpacks checked, or what? He picked up his own, went out of the hut into the snow, and found his crampons. At least they were still where he had left them.

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'You know what,' he now said to Brajc. 'Let's go to my place. We can talk it over.'

Alenka was at home. She gave Brajc a quizzical look as he followed Taras into the living room. Taras rarely invited anyone home. Ever since they have had a home, basically never. If he had to meet up with someone, he would arrange it somewhere else.

'He'd like to climb Triglav, and we need to discuss it,' he explained.

'Brajc? Up Triglav?' Alenka couldn't hide her surprise.

Brajc shrugged his shoulders. To him too the sentence *Brajc would like to climb Triglav*, sounded strange, unbelievable. Taras poured out wine he found in the fridge for the three of them and went to take a quick shower.

'I am still not used to the fact that he can now drink,' said Brajc and raised his glass.

'So, Triglav, huh…' Alenka said. It sounded like a question.

'If Taras will assess that I can. While I can still follow his pace.'

Alenka nodded, even though she was convinced that, judging by the pace Taras had set during their walks together, Brajc was long unable to follow his tempo. Their difference was also twenty or so kilos.

'When I got Covid and I was put on a ventilator…' he said hesitantly.

‘The one given to you by Taras,’ Alenka said.

‘Yes, it was that which got me thinking. He was on a ventilator without even knowing it, and I almost died. Does Taras still not remember anything about his coma?’

‘No.’

‘I can remember mine. It was as if I was drowning. Hours on end. Days. I don’t want to experience that ever again.

Alenka smiled.

‘Taras is fine?’ Brajc asked. ‘I mean, like he was before?’

She sighed.

‘Physically more or less like he was, though he would say he isn’t, but to me it seems he is. But in his head…’ she sighed again. ‘When Anja and Mojca were born, he stopped his alpine climbing. At least that is what he says, although we need to admit that it all coincided with the period when some of his friends had fatal accidents, and he too came close a couple of times. I was happy that our girls would at least know their father, even if he suffered having made this decision. He used to be a happy person.’

‘Oh, come on! Taras?’ Brajc was surprised.

‘Yes, Taras,’ Alenka nodded. ‘When we started going out together we laughed all the time, and I remember I once had to remind him to allow others to also speak. And although he never said so, I did have the feeling that he had made a plan for himself, that he would end this forced abstinence once the girls were old enough to not miss him.’

‘And when would that be?’

She shrugged.

‘I was afraid it would come earlier. When they would start going to school, or secondary school. Now they are at university. Mojca is writing her dissertation. Anja is two years behind her. According to Taras’s way of counting, quite old enough.’

‘And he still feels like it, after all these years?’ Brajc asked. ‘Despite this…’ he wanted to say accident but bit his tongue in time. ‘Despite what Krep did to him?’

Alenka smiled.

‘There were moments after I took him from the hospital and it seemed for the first time that he would not have any consequences, when I was almost happy that things had happened as they did. I should have known that he would not be satisfied with being able to climb Šmarna Gora and Kum, for example, but... I found a list of climbing friends on his desk, those of them who are still alive, and their phone numbers. All the names were crossed out, because they probably no longer go climbing. And because cycling was part of his rehab, and he had taken to it, you know what he’s like, I bought him a road cycling guide that was published when he was in his coma. It contains sixty-six routes around Slovenia. We rode most of the ones completed until now together, but recently I have been unable to keep up. I no longer can. He hasn’t said anything but I think he has set himself a goal of cycling all the routes before the end of the year and is now already on number fifty. What will he do when he finishes all of them? And finds someone who wants to go big wall climbing with him?’

Brajc smiled.

‘It won’t be me. Don’t worry.’

Then he remembered Triglav and his smile froze. Alenka fell silent because Taras had returned from taking a shower. He sat on the sofa, raised his glass, and looked at Brajc.

‘So, how did you imagine this?’

‘I didn’t,’ Brajc uttered with embarrassment. ‘Tell me, in principle, is Triglav anything like the other mountains I have climbed with you? There is a path leading to the summit, or something else?’

Taras smiled.

‘There is a path to Kredarica, then four hundred metres in altitude to the summit when things get a little steeper. Do you know how to climb a ladder?’

‘Of course,’ Brajc uttered hesitantly. He did not seem very convinced.

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‘Where are you off to?’ Osterc asked in disbelief when Brajc explained that he had been up Kum with Taras and that he saw Triglav in the distance, and that…’

‘Up Triglav.’

‘Up Triglav?’ Tina spoke from her desk. ‘What for? You?’

‘Why not?’ Brajc snapped. ‘Why not me? Have either of you two ever been on Triglav?’

Tina and Osterc looked at each other and slowly shook their heads.

‘Then you’re not true Slovenes!’ Brajc concluded. ‘A true Slovene should go up Triglav at least once in their life.’

‘Well, that means I never will be a true Slovene,’ Tina muttered into her chin and didn’t see how Osterc flinched. Brajc didn’t miss this. ‘And where is Taras?’

‘With Ahlin. Once we had had our food up on Kum, he called him and told him to come to his office first thing on Monday morning.’

‘He called him on a Sunday?’ Tina asked. ‘Did anything important happen over the weekend? Anything for us?’

Brajc shrugged. If anything had happened, he would have known by now. He usually did.

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Taras knocked twice and entered without waiting for a response. He didn’t really expect one. Ahlin normally either didn’t say anything or uttered his ‘come in’ so quietly that you could not hear him through the closed door.

He should probably have said, ‘So, what’s going on?’ or used a formal address, ‘You wished to speak to me…’ But why? Ahlin had told him he wanted to see him, and he had come… Ahlin will tell him what he wants. He crossed the room and sat on the empty chair in front of Ahlin’s desk.

Ahlin nodded and glanced at the clock on the wall. Taras was under the impression that this time he was even on time, or almost. Five minutes up or down.

‘Can we speak openly?’ Ahlin asked and continued without waiting for Taras to respond beyond the surprised look on his face. ‘On Friday I asked Blatnik to bring the charges against Jure Krep…’

Ahlin paused, as if this time he really wanted to hear Taras’s response, but all Taras did was nod.

‘I thought you would ask when we would pick him up,’ he tried again. Taras waited and when Ahlin didn’t continue, he eventually spoke.

‘So, it won’t be us, will it?’

‘I spoke with Brajc and Osterc,’ Ahlin ignored his questions. ‘In fact they came to me.’

Another pause, as if he was announcing an unpleasant theme. Taras waited patiently.

‘They came to see me because they think you need protection…’

‘Protection? From whom?’

Ahlin smiled. Finally, a reaction.

‘From yourself. They don’t believe that Krep will live to see… his next birthday. At least not the way he is now.’

Taras smiled.

‘Fifty-five. In about a month’s time.’

‘You know when his birthday is?’ Ahlin gave Taras a piercing look.

‘Don’t forget it was me who got him to court. The first time. Surely I can remember when he was born.

Ahlin continued to stare at him with undiminished attention.

‘I thought you had lost Krep from your memory?’

Taras shrugged.

‘Whatever,’ Ahlin continued when he got no answer. ‘They’re convinced you will settle the score yourself. And if they think that, others could come to the same conclusion. I don’t want to give his lawyers any pretext. I don’t want the case to be dismissed over some stupidity.’

‘Alright, if that’s how things are. What about Klara Zupet? When is she being brought to court?’ Taras asked, without giving the impression that the news about Krep touched him in any way.

‘There will be no prosecution. We will leave her alone. I decided this after talking to Tina. What do you think would happen with the case put forward by the crime investigator when Klara Zupet shows the court the footage of her in the company of this criminal investigator in which she is not wearing a single item of clothing?’

‘Has anyone seen this footage? Does it even exist?’

Ahlin shook his head.

‘Klara Zupet mentioned it. Allegedly she has it and allegedly she would be prepared to show it in court if needed.’

‘Any normal person would think that the criminal investigator involved is very much a man of principle. That he reported her despite, as you say, meeting with her in the nude. But anyway, what does this have to do with the case, with anything?’

Ahlin shook his head again.

‘Cases have collapse for far less serious issues. This case is also going to the General Police Directorate and let the GPD decide what to do with it. I will make sure we have so much other work that we won’t even have time to think about Krep or this Zupet woman.’

‘Specifically?’ Taras asked with a barely noticeable smile.

‘I am sure things will come up,’ Ahlin shrugged his shoulders. ‘They always do. And another thing that might interest you,’ he added quickly before Taras had a chance to get up. ‘As you know, the new government has already dismissed Munih. You know my opinion of him and it is no different to yours, so we won’t shed any tears over him, will we?’

Taras nodded. He would not have put it in precisely those words, but that’s also fine, he certainly will not feel sad about the man leaving.

‘It turns out that Munih was not as incapable as he was crooked,’ Ahlin continued. ‘He must have realised in time where things were going, or how the election would turn out, so he employed a profusion of his own or rather his party’s cadre in the Slovenian Police. It is hard to get rid of them because they are all protected by their contracts. So the new Director General came up with an idea that you won’t like either.’

He fell silent for a moment but, with no forthcoming response, continued.

‘Because all of them are political personnel that never did police work in their lives, she came up with an original idea. The annual marksmanship test will this year not be a mere formality as it was until now. The lowest score of thirty will be raised to sixty and will be strictly adhered to. Anyone with a point less than that is out.’

At the last shooting test Taras had scored thirty points and would not have even scored these had it not been for Baloh who took pity on him and shot twice at the target.

‘But there is still a while to go. The testing needs to be completed by the end of the year,’ Ahlin concluded reassuringly. ‘Brajc is apparently doing really well, so I suggest you go to the shooting range with him a few times.’

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Out in the corridor, Taras checked the time on his phone. On normal mornings, when not called to the Director’s office, he or Osterc would be paying for their morning coffees at Piskr. Brajc would offer more rarely, mostly when Tina waved her wallet around to try and pay. He would give Osterc an accusing glance and growl, ‘Look, so now Tina will get…?’

Taras peered down the corridor towards the door to their office, waved his hand dismissively and turned out into the street. Even if his colleagues would not be at the coffee place, he needed to stretch his legs a little.

It had been two years since his accident and he was still happy that he could walk as he had before it. That he no longer limped, not even when he got up after sitting down for a long time. He smiled at the thought that he sees the cause of the injuries as an accident.

Leaves were already turning autumnal, especially on the gingko tree outside Piskr, which was almost completely yellow. The hot summer was coming to an end. He could not see his colleagues through the window but still went inside and asked Silva the waitress. ‘Have my guys been here yet?’

She shook her head. ‘Coffee?’

‘Perhaps later.’

He stepped into the office as the clock on the wall was showing half past eight. Three pairs of eyes stared at him. Taras ignored them. He sat at his desk and switched on the computer.

‘Well, what did Ahlin have to say?’ Brajc asked.

Taras did not answer. He stared at the screen in front of him, clicked the mouse twice. Brajc gave first Osterc and then Tina a worried look.

‘So, what did he say?’ Tina also tried.

‘Ahlin says,’ he slowly replied as he was checking something on his screen. ‘That you are worried about Krep. Or rather,’ he continued without taking his eyes off the screen, ‘that is what Brajc and Osterc are worried about. You, on the other

hand are concerned that the porn film that I allegedly filmed with Klara Zupet might get a public airing.'

There was silence. Tina, Brajc and Osterc looked at each other, and once it was clear that Taras had no intention of continuing, turned to their own desks. Tina flicking through the guidelines on applications for being allocated a company flat which someone had left on her desk, even though she owned a flat of her own. Osterc rummaging through the drawers of his desk, Brajc browsing through the newspaper. Then Taras suddenly peered from behind his screen and turned to Brajc.

'Saturday. We can try on Saturday, if we set off early enough.'

'Sorry…'

Brajc was confused. He looked at Taras and then towards Osterc and Tina. They both shrugged. Why him? He had gone to see Ahlin with Osterc, but neither he nor Osterc had anything to do with that alleged video or photos that purported to show Klara and Taras.

'Up Triglav,' Taras explained. 'You wanted to climb it, didn't you?'

'Oh, yes…' Brajc was relieved. 'I thought… well, it's not important…' He looked at Osterc and continued without taking his eyes off him. 'What if we take Osterc along with us?'

Osterc flinched, looked at Brajc and then apprehensively towards Taras. Taras smiled.

'I didn't know he wished to go.'

'Neither did I,' Osterc stuttered.

He seemed so confused that Tina felt sorry for him. Expectantly she looked at Taras who continued to smile.

'So is all the team for it?'

'No, no…' Brajc said quickly, as if Taras's decision depended on it. 'Tina won't come. She doesn't like...'

'Who says that?' Tina interrupted him. 'If Zoran is going, I will go too.'

Taras was silent. It was as if the conversation had come to an end, even though the other three were still expectantly looking at him.

'So, what then?' Brajc couldn't take it anymore. 'Are all four of us going or what?'

‘Early,’ Taras nodded. ‘There will be storms in the afternoon. I would not like to come across them out on the ridge.’

He stood up and went to the door, pulled his wallet from his pocket.

‘Have you had coffee yet?’

Of course they hadn’t, and as he stepped out into the corridor to get two coffees for him and Tina, a cappuccino for Brajc and a green tea for Osterc, Taras caught Brajc saying to Osterc. ‘The guy is about to take you up Triglav and you don’t even buy him a coffee?’

Had he waited a little longer, he would have heard the continuation.

‘And how come you’re tagging along?’ Brajc found a new victim. ‘I thought you said you didn’t care about all this Slovene stuff, that everyone ought to go up at least once and things like that?’

Tina nodded. In fact, she was not even sure why she thought she would go along with them. With Brajc continuing to stare at her, she said, ‘I wanted to see what the fuss was about.’

Chapter 2.

Taras parked outside the police department at five minutes to five in the morning. He did not expect any of his three colleagues to be there yet. But they were. All three of them.

‘Damn it, Taras, it’s still dark,’ Brajc said instead of a greeting. He smiled. He expected as much. All his climbing career he had had to put up with similar observations from his colleagues. He hated getting up early, just as much as they did, but more than that he hated being stuck on some shelf in the rockface, waiting for morning to climb the hundred or so metres left to the top because they had run out of light the previous day, which they would not have, if they had got up a little earlier.

‘Seriously, Taras,’ Brajc persisted as they got into the car, turned onto the main road past Tivoli towards the motorway. ‘We all bought ourselves headlamps as you told us to, but will we walk in the dark?’

‘By the time we get to Krma Valley, it will be daytime,’ Taras patiently replied. ‘Did you check the weather forecast?’

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