

NOSF magazine
presents Croatian
Science Fiction
Author
Aleksandar Žiljak

Sex And Deep-Sea Anglerfish

By: Aleksandar Žiljak

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"What was I thinking, marrying a biomecha designer?"

"And what was I thinking, marrying an ichthyologist?"

"May I remind you", Yagoda replies in her sweetest voice, "that without this ichthyologist here, you would be dead now."

"And may I remind you, my dear", Peter answers, irritated, "that without this biomecha designer here, you would be dead, too."

Arguments exhausted, Yagoda and Peter sink back into silence. Recently, this is becoming a frequent end of their quarrels: a stalemate with both of them being right. Is there some hidden message here, Yagoda wonders as she works her tail fin vigorously, pushing them through the completely black water. Time to look for some chow, she decides after ten minutes of stubborn silence, it's been two days since she last ate. They'll both be in a better mood with her stomach full ... Suddenly, Yagoda freezes in tense anticipation, stopping dead in the dark surrounding them.

"You feel it?", Peter asks in low voice.

"Shut up!", Yagoda snaps at him. Unnecessarily: no-one can hear them, all their arguments and discussions and quarrels are strictly between them, thought but never voiced. And then, the pressure of the water hits them, sending unmistakable stream of alarms tuning all Yagoda's nerves to the maximum, ready for that one critical fin stroke that means difference between life and death.

Something big passes them. Close, too close for comfort. Huge: five, maybe six meters long. Probably a local equivalent of some deep-sea shark, Yagoda decides, although she cannot see it. Swift, deliberate, searching, ready to pounce, ready to snap its jaws at the slightest hint of something edible. But, this time something big swims away into the darkness, missing them.

"Maybe we're too small", Peter whispers as if anybody can hear him.

"Just you hope", Yagoda knows better. No meal is too small this deep. They were lucky, that's all, the only explanation.

"What was that, anyway?", Peter whispers.

"I don't want to know."

People say the seventh year is the most critical one. Their marriage was falling apart at the tender age of three.

Why? Even now, when it became completely senseless, Yagoda still tries to find an answer. If Yagoda didn't get pregnant, would Peter really marry her? On recollection, their relationship didn't look like something permanent. A good-time summer, hot bodies in hot sheets in steamy nights. But then September came and September menstruation didn't. When she confronted him with a positive test, Peter felt obliged. Some old chivalrous impulse, quite rare today, that surprised even Yagoda. Now, surrounded by darkness, she thinks she finally understands. Peter is quite older than she is: perhaps a child was a reason for him to settle down at last, one final opportunity to start a family. And as her pregnancy went on, he really begun looking forward to that boy.

And then Yagoda miscarriaged, spontaneously. Their joy was flowing out in blood, in an ambulance that wailed all the way to hospital.

Peter was a biomechanoid designer. And a biomecha designer can either work in industry, or set off on his own, freelancing across the Galaxy, from job to job, fulfilling commissions and designing biomechanoids to suit whatever task somebody requires on some distant planet. Usually small series, but there's an occasional major job, quantities running into thousands or tens of thousands. It pays well if you're good and if you're lucky. Peter was somewhere in the middle: not good enough to be on top, not having luck that bad to go bankrupt.

Yagoda was an ichthyologist, fresh after graduation and apprenticeship. The best she could hope for was to land a routine job at some mariculture station or oceanographic institute. There were offers, some quite good. But, after the loss of their child, Peter didn't want to stay on one place. And he didn't really care if Yagoda would come with him or not. He never said that, never blamed her or anything, but a woman can feel it and Yagoda felt it. At that time, Yagoda cared if Peter didn't. So she came along.

And while Hans Rudi was not a small and crowded ship, you cannot exactly slam the doors behind you and vent your frustrations in a pub across the street. So, the frustrations piled one atop another. Words, spoken and otherwise. Fights. About small things, discarded socks or empty sweetener container or toothpaste left opened. And bigger things. Costs of running the ship. Bills for purchasing DNAs. A cancelled job that almost ruined them. Frustrations growing into resentment, resentment growing into anger, anger into hatred.

And then, in the course of one of their shouting matches in the ship's kitchenette, when Yagoda found herself holding a frying pan to throw it at Peter, she realized it was time to sit down and talk. Peter agreed, finding himself holding a plate to throw it at Yagoda. So they sat down and talked. And talked. And talked some more, saying things neither really wanted to say. They were deep in the Mlokosziewicz space, running along one of the probability trajectories to Wistary, when they decided divorce was the best way out of the mess they were in.

Exactly three minutes and thirty-six seconds later, for reasons unknown, their Mlokosziewicz drive croaked.

Was there some hidden message there, too, Yagoda asks herself as she dangles her luminescent lure above her wide agape mouth, filled with needle-like teeth, ready to snatch anything foolish enough to come close to investigate the attractive glow.

They jumped out into normal space, Hans Rudi spinning wildly, totally out of control. Without force compensators to maintain the internal up and down, Yagoda and Peter would have been turned into bloody blotches long before reaching the cockpit and strapping themselves into seats. The ship slowed down to subrelativistics, still spinning, speeding towards a star system. Typically, Peter wanted to find out where the hell they were. Also typically, Yagoda was more concerned about the fusion reactor cooling system being way overloaded.

That would have turned into another shouting match, but the quarrel was made academic by the main power section being automatically jettisoned, only to vanish in the blaze of thermonuclear explosion several second later. What remained of Hans Rudi was switching to auxiliary power, speeding, still hopelessly out of control, past the outer planets and towards a tiny blue dot.

Tiny blue dot turned out to be a planet, eighty percent of its surface covered by ocean. Truth is, Yagoda and Peter had eighty percent probability of hitting the water. But, there was still that twenty percent probability of hitting the hard rock.

That was the first time their luck held. The splash was big. The hull got breached on several places, water rushing in. They started to sink, fast and deep. Yagoda and Peter barely reached the design lab and sealed its doors behind them. Scratch that one about luck: they were imprisoned in the lab, in the sinking ship, with lights showing intent to go out at the slightest provocation, and computer screens alternating between snow and unreadable streams of data, none of them good news.

The ship shuddered as it hit the bottom, the already overstressed structure screeching and moaning like a banshee, the hull settling down with a loud thump. Yagoda and Peter knew options were very few. Mostly on how to die.

They did die. In a usual sense of the word, at least.

Light in the lab held. So did the rest of the environment, at least for the time being. But there was no food and tap water tasted too much like sea. And system failures were inevitable, they both knew that. Peter re-booted the computers, lab's LAN was up and running, but outside connections were gone.

"Can we open the view hatch?", Yagoda asked, already running all the possibilities through her head. Peter punched few keys on his console and the outer shutters slid open. Pitch black greeted Yagoda through the thick glass, as black as the Młokosiewicz space itself.

Yagoda cursed through her teeth. They hit the daylight half of the planet. Black outside meant only one thing: they were too deep for sunlight to reach them.

"We're not going to make it, you know", Peter said resignedly. "It'll take them at least a week to figure we missed our ETA. Even then, where can they start looking? And everything is screwed up, we cannot ..."

"Shut up!" Lately, Peter was prone to resignation, and that usually infuriated Yagoda. "I'm thinking!"

"Well honey, you're not going to win any beauty prize!" The thing in the pressurized container resembled a grotesquely inflated bag, 70 centimetres long, with big tailfin and luminescent lure above big mouth filled with sharp teeth.

"You're not looking any better, dear", Yagoda replied, wiping sweat from her forehead. The environment was failing, little by little. But it gave them precious two days to finish two biomechanoids. The ugly big black fish was hers. Peter's was mere twelve centimetres long, pale and twisted-looking, attached to the big black fish's belly, their tissues and blood systems already fused. "But they'll do just fine."

"I don't like it, you know. Connected like this. Maybe I should have ..." Yagoda drew him a specification modelled after *Ceratias holboeli*, a deep-sea anglerfish they had among their DNAs. Every biomecha design starts with some existing species, and perhaps it was Yagoda's ichthyology background that made them buy so many fish samples. And deep-sea fishes are handy when it comes to designing biomecha deep-sea probes.

"I'm telling you, that's how these fish couple! Once male meets female, or vice versa, he attaches to her permanently. Sometimes even several boys on a single girl. And they stay that way for life, male or males completely fusing with female, fed through her blood system. From that point on, the males are just sperm sacs."

"Well, thanks a lot!"

"Look, if we ever get separated out there, there's no way we gonna find each other again, get that? Why do you think the male attaches in the first place? Because it's probably the only time in his life he's going to come across a female. Are implantations done?"

Programming semi-consciousness and implanting it into a biomecha is a standard procedure, necessary for making a basically wild creature actually do some useful job. But the standard equipment they had in the lab was sufficient to scan and transfer the entire brainwave pattern of a person, too. That was something everybody knew was possible, but seldom anybody did. Peter mentioned only one or two cases he ever heard of. Well, Yagoda mused, time to join that exclusive club, her brain pattern recorded into the big fish and Peter's into the little one. And there were two more things Peter added at her request: internal communication system and their DNAs stored. Just in case somebody does look for them and does find the wreck. Bioluminescent lure should be enough to signal some Morse codes.

"They're done", Peter answered.

"OK. Then there's only one more thing to do ..." Yagoda took a deep breath and hit the button. The lab doors opened. Chilling water burst in, flooding the lab quickly, rising to their chests, turning them painfully numb. On one thing Yagoda and Peter agreed: it's best to do it fast. Once the water filled the lab, the biomecha container was to open automatically, releasing them into the black.

Last thing Yagoda saw before lights went out and she and Peter sank into darkness was herself, her ugly fish self, gazing back at them with cold, indifferent eyes as they gasped for their last breaths, frantically reaching for something, anything, before finally finding each other's hands and squeezing tight, finding some comfort in each other.

"Two days ago, we were talking divorce", Peter muttered as the container opened.

"Two days ago we weren't thousand meters deep", Yagoda replied, lighting her lure and swimming below two floating bodies holding hands. She tried not to look at them as she swam through the doors and into the corridor, looking for the nearest hull breach.

"Well, now we're together till death does us part."

Something big passes them. Yagoda and Peter float speechlessly, tied forever, fused into one, waiting for something big to swim away. And then something big turns and Yagoda knows it's after them this time. No time to think how and why, she darts aside and huge jaws miss them by a fraction of an inch. But, something big is hungry and attacks once again.

Yagoda tries out-swimming it, she should be more manoeuvrable, but something big is fast, very fast, and Yagoda feels the big mouth opening behind her, sharp teeth ready to cut her in two. She does a sudden left turn and something big misses again, jaws snapping into empty. Yagoda keeps swimming, something big does take more time to turn and if she could put some distance between them, maybe she'll reach the safety of the wreck. They kept close to the wreck all this time. With purpose, staying close to the wreck is SOP in case of crashes. And the wreck provides shelter, if only she could reach it.

Luck is again with Yagoda and Peter: something big decides to quit the chase. Every predator knows instinctively when it's over, when the food obtained will not cover the energy wasted. Yagoda slows down and waits, ready to start again. Several minutes pass in tense silence. But, something big swam away, looking for meal somewhere else.

"This was close", Peter sighs with relief as Yagoda calms down.

"Shhhh", Yagoda says, becoming still, very still.

"What now?"

"Shut up!" Yagoda feels some small ripples close before her and decides to take a chance. The chase was costly and she needs food. They both do. So she lights the lure and starts waving it. Blue light floods into blackness. A small crustacean-like critter swims to it, attracted, multitude of hairy legs working in unison, long antennae flicking around, hoping for some tasty plankton snack and not noticing the big mouth waiting. And then, in an eye-blink, it's over. Jaws open and shut, and crustacean is no more. Hungry, Yagoda swallows it with relish.

If you don't eat, you're eaten. If you're not eaten, you eat. An incessant cycle of the sea. And Yagoda and Peter surviving in it, by wits and luck - with more luck than wits - but surviving, together, tied into one.

"Mmmm, crunchy!", they both agree.

Aleksandar Žiljak

A Biographical Sketch



Aleksandar Žiljak was born in Zagreb, Croatia, in 1963. He graduated on Electrotechnical Faculty in Zagreb in 1987, and got his Master of Computer Sciences degree in 1990.

He is a freelance illustrating artist, working mostly for children's magazines, newspapers, school text-books, and also producing book-cover art. He specializes in wildlife illustration, but also does Science Fiction, mystery and similar subjects. He is a member of Croatian Freelance Artists Association.

He also publishes SF/F/H stories, starting with short horror stories in 1991. Since then he has published mostly in *Futura* magazine and annual *SFera* story collections. In mid-nineties, he also wrote two screenplays. Some of his stories were collected in

2003 in the book "Slijepe ptice" (*Blind Birds*). In the same year, he published a popular science book "Cryptozoology: The World of Mysterious Animals", using a pseudonym Karl S. McEwan.

Together with Tomislav Šakić, he edited "Ad Astra", an anthology of Croatian Science Fiction stories, published in 2006. So far, he has published some of his stories and texts in Germany (Internova, Nova), Denmark (Phantazm webzine), Serbia (Politikin zabavnik youth magazine, Ars-Anima webzine), Argentina (Axxon webzine), Greece (9, weekly comics and SF supplement of the Eleftherotypia newspapers) and Italy (Futuro Europa).

Aleksandar Žiljak won 3 **SFERA Awards** for best SF stories (in 1996, 1998 and 2000), two for best SF art (in 1993 and 1995), and one - with Tomislav Šakić - for editing the "Ad Astra" anthology (2006).

Currently, he and Tomislav Šakić are editors of *Ubiq*, Croatian literary magazine for Science Fiction.