

The mishaps started all at once. Even before District Secretary Marian Jaworski had composed himself from the scandal awaiting him at the Konstanty Ciolkowski Space Center, Victor Dobrowolski was already snug in his spacesuit. In a matter of hours, he was seated, raring to go, in the pilot's chair of a classified military spacecraft that the Bureau of Engineers had been developing in secrecy since the mid-1970s. Netze-2015 – so went its code name. It was a hideous piece of work known to site personnel as “Slipper” due to its oddly boot-like shape. A shape that, for the moment, was invisible, for Netze was sheathed inside its service structure, mated to a Siren-5B rocket. This formidable body of staggering height was braced by four solid-propellant rockets in radial formation that would propel the ship into the orbit of the Onarna Space Station. From there, a third-stage Siren rocket would set Netze on a Mars-bound course, at which point the spacecraft would manoeuvre on its own fuel. Equipped with sealed hatches designed to carry military surveillance devices, Netze could, in a pinch, double as a rescue vessel so that Dobrowolski could escort Novotko and her crew to low orbit, where they could dock to the International Space Station Europa. Netze's initial acceleration was so great that its effects on the pilot inside would exceed the typical discomforts of liftoff. Success was hardly guaranteed. This is why Dobrowolski, a world-class cosmonaut of the democratic world, second only to Nowicki, had been chosen for mission command.

He was sitting in the Slipper's cabin, listening to the countdown, when he heard a bang. A distorted sound penetrated the cabin, drowning out Flight Control's numerical chant. Victor, alarmed, turned his head inside the helmet of his spacesuit. It sounded like someone was banging right on the vessel's casing. But that was impossible. At least theoretically impossible, for the banging resounded still and was growing louder. And there – yes – some other sound, could it be a woman's voice?

‘Control?’ he spoke tentatively into his headset.

‘Vic?’ came the muffled voice of Maciek Strzępa, communications officer and Vic's old friend. ‘Listen, Vic, you're breaking up...Do you read?’

‘Maciek, hold on, you're not coming through. Something's banging on the hull! Hey, listen!’ Victor craned his head inside the helmet, as if to bring his ear up to the hull.

‘There. Hell, we're live!’ came Maciek's garbled voice.

And at that moment the clamour grew louder. Dobrowolski heard a slam, and a harsh light assailed his eyes. In the haze an image took shape before him, something resembling an angel. ‘Nonsense,’ he thought. ‘There's no such thing.’ But what else could it be? Shadowed

against a radiant block of light was an elegant figure with long, wavy hair.

A block of light? Long hair? But surely, an angel should have wings...

‘Victor, oh hell!’ The angel caught him by the collar. By what collar? *Shit*. Victor raised a gloved hand to his helmet visor and was surprised to find that both glove and helmet had vanished. He blinked. The image before him blurred, as if smeared to one side. Noise rushed in his ears. *Shit, must be the G-force*, he thought in a fog. Hallucinations from the solitude of flight, he resolved. He managed to focus his vision and made out a tangle of dark hair and eyes glinting with anger, fixed dead on him.

‘Victor, what the hell!’ Finally he recognised the owner of those incensed eyes. It was Gloria. His friend from the second year of Flight School, which he had just finished. Yes, only just finished, that's right! They'd sailed through their exams and test flights and pulled it all off. Gorgeous Gloria, who turned the heads of all her male classmates.

‘What... what's going on here?’ he moaned while all around them, the world was spinning like a centrifuge into which their trainers and instructors had thrown them to the mercy of the G-force.

Excerpt translated by Eliza Rose

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**BARTOSZ
BIEDRZYCKI**

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Translation rights: Bartosz Biedrzycki,
godai@gniazdoswiatow.net

Selected works

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Kompleks 7215, 2014

Bartosz Biedrzycki is a fantasy writer, editor and publisher, screenwriter, comic book journalist, and one of the first Polish podcasters.