The Loop



SCI-FI NOVEL

Jan Kaluža

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OFFICIAL SOURCE

https://jankaluza.cz/en/smycka/

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Front cover (Nox and Lyra): Rex (https://www.instagram.com/threshcoremain/)
- Fermentor: Gottmi (https://www.instagram.com/_gottmi_/)
- Snail divider: Gottmi (https://www.instagram.com/_gottmi_/)

Chapter 2: The Club (Vey)



New customers were always a problem.

They were unpredictable.

They knew exactly what they wanted, but had no idea how to get it, or what it would cost them. That often led to misunderstandings, and those misunderstandings hurt.

I was watching one just then. He was sitting a little way off from me, on the far side of the bar. Skinny, gold-rimmed glasses, jeans, a threadbare black sweater. The kind of outfit that screamed I'm trying to fit in.

He didn't fit in. And he knew it well. He'd ordered a drink but hadn't taken a single sip yet. He'd already scanned the club three times, as if he expected to spot someone waving Pulses around in a paper cone like popcorn at a football game.

He was either a cop or a rich idiot. Down here, those two categories tended to overlap. I was hoping for the rich idiot, because those were the ones willing to pay thousands for things other people fished out of dumpsters behind skyscrapers.

The bartender walked up to him and nodded at the untouched glass of whiskey. A few words passed between them, and then Mr. Suspicious asked his question. Over the music from the stage a few steps below the bar, I couldn't hear a thing. Even so, I knew exactly what they were talking about.

Pulses.

Everyone asked about them eventually, because the desire to live forever was stronger than fear.

The bartender pointed my way, and I tucked a strand of sweat-damp black hair behind my ear. I winked at him and he smiled. Though his eyes still held that frightened look of a man who didn't want to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He took a sip from the thick-bottomed glass and made his way to the empty stool beside me.

I could have spoken first, but I liked making these types wait, watching their fear build. There was something thrilling about it. I used to dream that one of them would come over someday and be interested in me. Not the merchandise. Not the price. Just start hitting on me, and I'd pretend to be unavailable.

There it was again, that bashful smile. I gave it back, almost without meaning to, trying not to break character while also trying not to look like a desperate wreck.

"I hear you might have some Pulses," he asked, sounding confident, though the glass in his hand trembled slightly. Whatever warmth I'd felt evaporated. All that was left now was a question of supply and demand, and I started wondering how much this one was willing to pay, and whether he'd already tried his luck somewhere else.

"I hear you've got five thousand burning a hole in your pocket," I answered with a question of my own. Five thousand for an extra week of life wasn't a bad price. Not according to the people who were dying, anyway.

The smile fell off his face and his eyes started working. His lips searched for words.

"I don't have that much," he finally admitted, but kept going before I could respond. "I'll give you three."

"Now listen to me carefully," I began, leaning toward his ear so he'd hear me over the noise. He smelled surprisingly good, and that annoyed me more than it should have. Just then the crowd around the stage started shouting and clapping, the music swelled, and I snapped back to reality.

"Either you give me what I want, or you can try your luck down at the stage," I said, tilting my head toward the crush of bodies below.

The lights dimmed and the crowd was washed in garish purple neon. Faces vanished, leaving only silhouettes. Mr. Suspicious turned to look at the stage beneath us, where a snail had just been wheeled out on a transporter to the crowd's roar. Not the kind that crunches under a shoe. This one was over half a meter long, and it could have crunched Mr. Suspicious himself, if he were foolish enough to be in the wrong place for too long.

The shell sat quietly at the center of the stage, ignoring the crowd. The snail was asleep, waiting for someone to wake it. Most of the people in the club were here because of it.

Mr. Suspicious left me, and I let out a quiet sigh. He made his way down the light-lined stairs into the crowd. He didn't push forward, and I kept my eyes on him the whole time.

"That one'll be back," the bartender said behind me, finishing off the rest of our shared guest's whiskey.

"He'll be back," I nodded. "For now he still believes he has a choice."

One of the poets ran out from backstage. That's what they called themselves, but compared to the ones in the Loop, they were absolute nobodies. Still, compared to the Loop's poets, they were useful. They gave people hope. Ugly hope, reeking, sticky as tar, but the kind everyone could afford. Hope that kept this place packed every single night.

Some faces I saw every night. Thinner, more tired, each time a little closer to the stage. One guy had been coming for three months straight now. Judging by how he looked, he didn't have much time left.

Another man ran out from the other side of the stage, a black hood pulled over his head. The crowd greeted him with applause and chants of his name.

"Orion's going to wreck him," the bartender said, mostly to himself.

"Whether Orion wins or the new guy does, people are going to lose their minds, and we're going to line our pockets," I laughed.

"To eternal life, then," the bartender said, handing me a glass.

"Just to life," I answered, the way I always did. The glasses clinked and the show began.

The rhythm shifted, and the crowd swayed like a churning sea. The new poet grabbed the microphone. His pants hung looser than they should have, but that could just have been his image.

"Orion?" he started, mocking. "A star falls, make a wish! I wished for a rival and got you instead. Want to go back up to that shining sky? I'll grant it — bury you right here, next to myself!"

Not a bad opener, and the crowd agreed.

Beneath the snail's translucent skin, pale purple blood began to pulse.

The unknown poet kept going, but Orion just listened quietly, tapping his foot to the beat. As if he hadn't even noticed his rival flailing his arms in his direction. Every eye locked on the center of the stage. The neon blazed, and the snail's head slid out of its shell.

The poet worked his way through insults about Orion's mother and on to trashing his girlfriend. The crowd devoured every word, and the unknown poet started to believe he had them on his side.

Orion never once stopped smiling.

For a moment, I genuinely believed it would all be over before Orion even got a turn. But then the snail began retreating back into its shell, and the unknown poet had to hand the microphone over to Orion.

If the crowd had been cheering before, it was pure hysteria now. They knew what was coming.

And judging by the other poet's face, so did he.

"You bring up my girl, the crowd cheers for a beat. When I bring up your name, they all ask, 'who's that, even?'"

The front rows erupted in laughter.

I don't know how he did it. His rhymes weren't anywhere near perfect. There was just something more to it. Personal charisma. Something only poets had.

Orion could just pull people over to his side. Me included, of course.

I took another sip and started running my finger along the rim of my glass.

The snail reacted instantly. As Orion kept going, it stretched its head out and tilted it toward him. Orion had been waiting for exactly that, and turned straight to face the snail.

"Your mom? Yeah, that's rough, man... I look at this snail and I see her, real cute. Her life turned out fine, well... except one thing — kids. Those never worked out."

People in the front rows shrieked. The unknown poet forced a smile, though it looked more like a wince. The snail's head lit up in a purple glow, and its tentacles rose into the air.

"A snail carries its house on its back, about the size of yours, I'd guess. And your girl? She wanted a place with a view. Well, now she's got mine."

At that, Orion spread his arms wide and the snail moved. The bartender smiled and got to work lining up shots along the bar. A good poet made money for everyone standing on the right side of the counter.

The crowd went quiet, watching the snail move. The music kept playing, but the atmosphere in the club had shifted into something almost sacred.

It always fascinated me how the snails moved. As if they levitated a millimeter above the ground, without a single visible motion. And yet a snail could cross from the transporter to the stage in a single second.

Orion laid his palm on the pulsing tentacles and, with his other hand, waved the unknown poet forward to go first. It was an unspoken rule, and no one dared break it. The unknown poet pulled out a plastic case and scooped up a heaping helping of snail slime. It stretched like honey and dripped from the case's edge back down to the ground.

The crowd didn't wait even a second — they surged onto the stage and started fighting over the sticky trail the snail left behind.

Live forever. Or at least a little longer. Most people never got their hands on Pulses. They weren't part of the Loop, didn't know the right people, and no poet had ever picked them for a challenge. So this was what was left for them. This, or shots at the bar, which at least let them forget for a while.

I automatically checked the Pulse in my pocket. Concentrated, pure, safe, and many times more potent than anything people were licking off the stage right now, slime running down their fingers to their elbows.

I looked back at Mr. Suspicious. He stood over all of it, and I knew I'd be making money tonight. I started scanning the crowd with my eyes for others like him. People who'd come here with a clear goal, only to lose their nerve under the weight of it all.

And then I saw her. The only one not facing the snail — she was looking straight at me instead. Styled hair peeked out from under her hood, and her shoes were suspiciously clean. This one wasn't trying to fit in — she was trying to hide. It was Lyra. Nox's wife. My stomach clenched with fear. Everyone who'd ever opened the Loop once knew her face.

And yet here she was. Somewhere she didn't belong. Maybe she wanted some fun? Maybe she and Nox were cooking up a new fragment? Whatever it was, people like her didn't come to places like this without bodyguards and cops in tow. Getting caught with a single Pulse in my pocket, I could talk my way out of. My room was the problem. And so was Mr. Suspicious. Why the hell hadn't I just given him what he wanted for three grand? Either he'd have walked off with a Pulse, or he'd have flashed a badge. At least then I'd know where I stood.

"Go," the bartender said quietly. "If there's trouble, I'll hold them off."

I threw back the rest of my drink, slipped behind the bar, and swiped my card to unlock my room. I dove for the fake floorboard, beneath which sat a hidden iron box. I opened it, and light from a pulsing glow lit up the corner of the room. I tossed the Pulse from my pocket in with its companions, my hand brushing, out of habit, over the note stuck to the inside of the lid:

I hope they give you more time than they gave me.

The box vanished back into the floor, and I dragged the nightstand back over it. Then came a soft knock at the door. Right after it, a woman's voice:

"Vey? I know you're in there. I'm not here to hurt you."

That's how it always started.

And it was rarely true.

Resonance after chapter 10

INFLUENCES CHAPTER 11

Chapter 10 is out — and now you can decide who Oren's shot hit and what Vey is willing to sacrifice. In a short form you choose details that will shape the direction of chapter 11.

The strongest votes really make it into the text. Open the link below, or scan the QR code — it takes about a minute.

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