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 3: Pulse (Vey)



HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Patron brief - Markéta Kalánosová

- **Hlavní funkce kapitoly**

  Vytvořit napětí

- **Změna hlavní postavy**

  Něco ztratit, získat nového spojence

- **Emoce po kapitole**

  Samota

- **Symbol nebo obraz**

  Rozbitý fragment

- **Věta, dialog nebo myšlenka**

  Uvědomil jsem si, že vše, co jsem dosud měl, jsem považoval za samozřejmost, teď tu sedím a přemýšlím, zda mi to za to stálo. Přišel jsem o ni, o jedinou lásku mého života.

- **Co se nesmí stát**

  Nesmí to být sen hlavní postavy.

HOW THIS CHAPTER WAS SHAPED

Readers' voice

I didn't answer.

People have this strange idea that if you stay silent after a knock, the person on the other side will just turn around and go home. That works fine, unless the person standing outside is Lyra — wife of one of the most famous poets in the Loop — and you're a Pulse dealer who can't figure out why someone like her would come looking for you in a grimy club.

"I need to talk to you," came the muffled voice.

It didn't sound like it did in the fragments. Not confident, not hysterical. It sounded desperate. I knew voices like that. They belonged to people who didn't have much time left. People who'd give anything for one more week of life. I felt sorry for them, but often there was nothing I could do except open another deal and hope they had something to pay with.

Something in that voice told me she wasn't here because of me, or some new fragment. I grabbed the door handle. The chain above my head rattled, and the door opened just enough for me to see her eyes. No makeup, faint lines around her eyes, a hood pulled over her head. The complete opposite of the woman practically the whole world knew.

"What do you want?" I hissed at her under my breath.

"I know you through a friend. She comes to see you sometimes," she began carefully, and my mind started running through the faces of my regulars, trying to figure out which one it could be. I'd always been fairly sure none of them belonged to the people up top. Apparently I'd been wrong.

I checked the hallway. Empty. Her hands. Empty. I could have just shut the door on her frightened eyes and let her find her own way. But I needed the money to stay here. And I'd have bet she could buy anything right now except time.

"Fine," I sighed, unhooked the door chain, and let her in.

She slipped inside and quietly closed the door behind herself. She doesn't want to be here, I thought. She wants this over as fast as I do.

"Five thousand," I said, naming my price, then immediately bit my lip. I should have asked for more. She could afford it.

She just nodded, pulled a stack of crisp bills from her pocket, and I took them from her. I liked quick deals, no chit-chat. I started counting, but my thoughts were racing faster than the bills between my fingers. I looked at her again, and that small voice inside me spoke up out loud.

"You actually left him, didn't you?"

I shouldn't have asked, not that fast. But the famous Lyra was standing in the middle of my room, and it threw me completely off balance. Then again, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. This could be a chance to gain an ally up top. And allies like that were priceless. Right now she had to be at rock bottom, but I knew she'd bounce back from it one day, and maybe then she'd remember me.

"I should've done it a long time ago. I just needed time."

I couldn't help but smile, and a hint of one appeared in her eyes too.

"Wait here." I winked at her and stepped into the next room. I locked the door behind me and felt around in the hidden box for a Pulse.

When I came back, Lyra was standing by the wall, looking at my sketches. A strange mix of shame and panic gripped me. I'd never had guests. Never. No friends, no men, nothing like that. Just me, four walls, and my fortune hidden under the floor.

"These are pretty good." She pointed at one of the snails.

"That's Lucky," I answered automatically, and for the second time in a few minutes, I bit my lip. Lyra shot me a surprised look.

"I don't know why I even told you that." I held the Pulse out to her, hoping this little outburst of mine would just blow over. Her eyes lit up for a moment. Then the question crept back into them.

"Do you think I could... here...?"

She nodded toward the couch facing the snail drawings. The question caught me off guard, and she must have noticed it. I tried to read her face. Was that fear?

"I... I don't want to go back to the bar for this."

There was something to that. People licking snail slime off their hands didn't exactly make for good company, and I had to admit most of the time they really weren't. Nothing would have happened to her at the bar, but there was no point arguing. I couldn't think of a single reason she couldn't take a dose on my couch.

"Fine," I agreed finally, doing my best impression of the world's best friend.

"But you're gone right after, okay? Next dose, you come to the bar like everybody else, deal?"

"Deal," Lyra nodded, and this time gave a faint smile.

Did she even have anywhere to go once it was over? Were the people up top just as lonely as the people down here, only in a different way? Did they have money and time, but were actually just as miserable as the rest of us underneath it all? Was I really going to just sit here while she went off somewhere else?

"Screw it, I'll go with you," I decided, swept up in the flood of questions filling my head, and slipped back into the other room for a moment.

A few moments later, we were sitting on opposite ends of the couch, glasses of water in hand, a neon-glowing tablet between our fingers.

"To eternal life," Lyra said, a little stiffly.

"Just to life," I answered, and placed the Pulse on the tip of my tongue. The electric tingle hit immediately, along with the smell of ozone. Like right after a storm passes and all that's left is that all-encompassing calm. Extra time, about to spread through every part of my body. I swallowed and smiled at Lyra. But she was already gone, no longer aware of anything around her. Her head was tilted back against the couch. Within a second, I followed her.

My body felt like it was inside a warm bubble, sealed off from everything around it. The room showed through it like it was seen through fogged shower glass. Drops of water ran down its walls and down my body. The water tickled against my goosebumped skin, carrying every worry away with it.

"Hey, Lucky," I greeted my old friend through the bubble and touched it. It burst with a soft pop, tiny droplets hitting my face. Or did my face hit them? My finger pointed upward, aiming at something. I looked in that direction, but there was nothing there except the ceiling.

"Why are you pointing at the ceiling?" I scolded him.

"Focus," Lucky answered my greeting, and I tried to do exactly what he told me.

I was walking down the hallway of an old house. Lucky lay inside a large glass container I called the Pickle Jar. His eyestalks tracked me, but I just walked past, as if I hadn't noticed him.

The next snail down the row of jars was asleep. Or at least I hoped it was asleep. I refused to accept that it might simply have died. I'd named him Dozer, and honestly, I'd never seen anything of him besides his shell.

I stopped by Dozer and pulled out a small notebook. I wrote something in it, but my eyes couldn't focus enough to read the text. I tried my hardest, but I couldn't make out anything beyond "Sample 143 — exhibits [corrupted glitching text], but in reality." I couldn't read any further than that.

Past Dozer, I turned into a study. On the desk beneath a blinds-covered window sat stacks of paper, leftover food, and mugs of old coffee. The worn carpet, covered in hundreds of stains, always reminded me of the marshes the snails had originally come from, and it gave the room a distinct, musty smell.

“How’s one-forty-three doing?” said a young man with a neatly trimmed mustache, short hair, and round-framed glasses.

“Excellent,” my mouth answered, but the voice wasn’t mine.

“Want to try it?” Mr. Tidy asked again.

My body nodded, but the moment I stepped through the study door, I opened my eyes.

The ceiling of my apartment, the ache of moving my head, the couch, me — full of life, tingling fingertips, Lyra. My gaze stopped there. She was still dreaming, and I watched her. Her breathing was ragged, her head twitching side to side, her chest rising and falling in rhythm. I had no idea what she might be seeing.

I picked up paper and charcoal, about to sketch Mr. Tidy, when Lyra’s eyes opened. She stared into space, and I watched her drift back into reality. I didn’t say anything, waiting for her to ride it out. She focused on me, and I noticed the lines around her eyes had vanished. Then she stood up faster than I expected and walked over to the pictures on my wall.

I’d never watched anyone else come down from a dose before. And I’d certainly never shared one with anyone. This little adventure had stirred up a strange cocktail of excitement and anticipation in my stomach. Lyra’s next question poured a healthy dose of curiosity into that mix.

“You see all this stuff after Pulses?” She pointed at the snail drawings, the notebook sketches from my dream, and the other devices I’d carried over from my dreams onto paper.

"So what? They're just Pulses." I shot her a confused look and kept going. "You see all kinds of things on them. Snails in giant mason jars, people taking care of them, stuff like that."

"But I saw them too," Lyra said, frowning at me, and for a moment darkness spread through my head. All I could manage to get out was one word:

"What?"

"Lucky. The incubation hallway. The fermenters. The record for sample one-forty-three. Corven." Lyra looked back at my sketches before I could react in any way. "Jesus, Vey. What you're selling isn't normal Pulses."

"Corven?" I managed to choke out.

"Yeah, the man with the round glasses. His name is Corven, but even with the Pulses you're taking, you're probably too young to know him. Do you even know how any of this actually works?"

"You see stuff and you feel younger. How else is it supposed to work?"

"They're not just 'stuff.' They're memory traces." She spoke sharply, hitting every word hard. Like she was quizzing me on something I should have known ages ago. "Regular Pulses contain fragments of memories from millions of Loop users. And what happens when you mix that many memories together?"

"I get a headache?" I shot back, irritated. I wasn't used to being lectured. Especially not in a tone people used on small children.

"No," she snapped, "they don't make sense. It's just a handful of images the Pulse dumps into your brain. That's why they're jumbled. But this..." She looked back at the wall. "This is a story, Vey. It's not random. Your Pulses were made by one person. One poet. Where did you get them?"

"I can't tell you that," I said, the automatic learned phrase coming out on its own, my anger building with every question. But another voice spoke up in my head. Quiet at first, but I found myself listening to it: She knows more, and she could help you. This is an opportunity.

"You have to tell me!" Lyra shouted, standing back up. "Pulses like these don't get sold in clubs."

I got scared. Things were starting to spiral out of control, and I didn't understand why this had hit her so hard. But then she seemed to notice her own inexplicable surge of emotion too, and sat back down. As if she'd just realized her name meant nothing down here.

"These sketches," she turned her head back to my wall, "this isn't just decoration. You're looking for answers. I can tell."

That was clever. And it was true. Someone had given me a box with enough Pulses to live off for centuries, and I had no idea who or why. The only clue to any of it was the visions, the box, and a short note some Mr. Somebody had scrawled on a scrap of paper and stuck to the inside of the lid. Could Lyra help me? Definitely. I already knew more because of her than I had before she showed up. She knew the right people, had access to information. Maybe she could even recognize the handwriting on the note in the box. Just thinking about it, I could feel my blood boiling.

But tell her the whole truth? If she found out how many Pulses I actually had, I'd never be safe again. Everyone believed I was small fry, someone who bought and sold a little here and there. How else, with a face that still looked like a teenager's?

That box was the secret of my entire life. Without it, I'd be licking snail trails off the floor like the poor souls down by the stage. It gave me independence, and in exchange it asked for nothing but perfect anonymity. But I had so many questions, and after all these decades, I'd finally run into someone who might have answers.

This whole time I'd been trying to protect myself, but I realized that everything I'd had until now, everything I'd taken for granted, was no longer enough. I looked around my apartment, a place I'd never actually felt at home in. Was it worth it? And so I decided:

"Fine, I'll show you the box," I said, and with those words I gave up my independence, the only love I'd had so far, and the one certainty of my life.

Lyra took a breath, as if about to say something, but in the end just nodded.

I led her into the other room and, out of a habit almost as old as I was, locked the door behind us. I dragged the nightstand aside, pried up the false floorboard, and pulled the box out of the floor. When I opened the lid, the room flooded with purple light. Thousands of Pulses lit up like tiny stars.

"That's not possible," Lyra breathed.

She knelt beside the box and lifted one of the Pulses up to the light. She wasn't looking at me anymore. Every question that had belonged to me a moment ago now belonged to the thing she held between her fingers.

I stayed standing behind her. Suddenly she felt farther away than she had before, back when a locked door had stood between us.

For a moment I'd forgotten why she'd actually come to find me.

Not because of me.

Because of the Pulses.

Just like everyone else.

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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