

# WEGA

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# “VEGA”

I am writing this in the hope that someone, someday, by some miracle, will come across this letter. As I write this, the third year of our journey to Vega, in the constellation Lyra, is passing. The date is July 25th, 2267. We still have two years of travel left to our destination.

But we will not get there.

I must destroy this ship and what was born on it.

I am likely the only member of the crew still alive. The communications are down; I cannot send any signal.

The only means of communication I have is this piece of paper you are now reading, a pen, a bottle that once held two-hundred-year-old wine, and a cork for it. In twenty minutes, the reactor will reach critical value, the superconducting magnets will melt, and the antimatter will be released. The flash of the explosion will reach Earth in 14 years. This letter will probably be found long after, unless it happens to strike the hull of some ship sent to investigate what

happened here. I am sitting and finishing this letter, hidden in an emergency airlock, wearing a spacesuit. I will try to fly as far away as possible, to decelerate, but even if I survive the blast, I will die from lack of oxygen after two hours, alone in space, surrounded by a blanket woven from the light of alien suns.

But first things first. I will describe everything in detail. Thanks to this, even if someone finds this letter a thousand years from now, they will be able to look up the data on the science vessel ORP “Lis” and its failed mission in the archives.

We were the first manned vessel to travel through the first discovered interstellar shortcut—a spacetime tunnel connecting two stars. That is, connecting them figuratively, as the tunnel’s entrance was located about 90 astronomical units from the Sun, and its exit was one light-year from Vega. Still, the actual distance between the two worlds, thanks to the tunnel, was 3 light-years instead of nearly 25. Our ship’s crew consisted of 10 people (I list them for archival purposes):

Myself, the chief engineer, I was the creator of the ship's design; my deputy, Przemek Kisielewski; the Captain, Dariusz Szczeciński; the Pilot, Dorota Lewczuk; the Co-Pilot, Jacek Tworkowski; and the scientists: Alfred Bohacz, Elżbieta Jabrzyk, Joanna Sawicka, Izabella Ciołak, and Czesław Kowalczyk. We were flying towards the unknown, the first humans trapped in a two-hundred-meter steel spindle.

As we crossed the boundary of the shortcut after four months of flight, we felt great. Everything was working as it should, we were healthy. However, the first night, the first sleep inside the Einstein-Rosen bridge, brought nightmares. We all woke up drenched in cold sweat.

I later went to the ship's psychologist, Dr. Ciołak. "Hello, Doctor, may I?" I asked, entering her cabin. "Hello, please, have a seat." She looked at me for a moment, as if she knew exactly what to look for in me. "Are you here about the dreams?" "How did you know?" "Well, because I think everyone on board had

them. You're the seventh patient today. Everyone had terrifying, realistic nightmares. Myself included."

For a moment, we looked deeply into each other's eyes. The official tone of our conversation was necessary—the computers recorded everything and transmitted it to Earth. In reality, no more than two nights ago, the doctor had stirred emotions in me of an equal, though oppositely polarized, intensity to today's dreamlike ones. I still remembered the taste of her lips and the touch of her soft breasts.

"Please, tell me about the dream," she said, interrupting my, and perhaps her own, memory of that night.

"I dreamt of a man, of average height, quite thin. He had a black, pointed beard, thick black eyebrows, and was completely bald. In the dream, I was on a subway, reading a book. At some point, I looked up and saw him. He was standing by the doors at the other end of the car, staring at me. Despite the distance, I could clearly see the whites of his eyes and his piercing gaze. I couldn't look away. An irrational fear began to

grip me. I felt a pain in my stomach, lungs, and head, so terrible it felt like my brain would explode, but I still couldn't tear my eyes from him."

Izabella stared at me, dumbfounded. "Go on," she said hoarsely and took a sip of water to wet her lips. She looked terrified.

"So I stood there, nearly dying from the pain, and the people around me acted as if nothing was wrong: some were standing, others sitting. Only a child was crying and a dog was barking. Suddenly, everything went silent. I couldn't hear the rumble of the tracks, the crying child, or the dog. In a single moment, everyone turned to face me. Blood began to flow, first from their eyes, then from their noses and mouths. It was horrible. Not the blood itself, but the way they looked at me, as if begging for help, and I couldn't even move. A small child in a stroller, maybe three years old, bleeding more and more profusely, said to me, 'Help me, please.' And I could do nothing. I just stood there and watched. The blood started to fill the entire floor of the car. People began to scratch

themselves, tearing off their clothes and squealing in pain, and that bald man just kept looking at me, smiling slightly. I wanted to wake up, but I couldn't. I wanted to move, but I was unable." As I recounted this, sweat poured down my face, and my heart raced so fast I could barely catch my breath. I saw the same symptoms in Izabella. I continued. "When they had torn off their clothes..."

"...they began to tear off their own skin," she continued, and I looked at her and listened, horrified. "They screamed in pain, howling like slaughtered animals, tearing it off piece by piece, first from their chests, revealing muscles and veins, then from their faces, and finally, they ripped out their own hearts and died, holding them in their hands before them. I was that child who asked you for help, only in my dream, it wasn't you. I don't remember the face at all. I only knew that he was the only safe person."

"Jesus Christ, what's happening? Is there something in the air? A leak? I have to check everything."

“Or in the food. I’ll ask Alfred to take samples and test them.”

“Let’s get to it, then.”

We tested everything—food, water, leaks from the pipes, fuel, all kinds of radiation—and found nothing, nothing at all. One thing had changed, though.

According to the computer, the mass of the ship, including the crew, had increased by 75 kilograms.

Today, I know why.

For the next few months, nothing happened, aside from a few squabbles with Izabella, an unexpected dalliance with Professor Ela, the exobiologist, and a minor malfunction of the artificial gravity. But after two years of flight in the tunnel, it happened. I was on my way to take measurements of the ionizing radiation emissions from the reactor when, passing a junction of corridors, I saw a figure out of the corner of my eye. I walked a few steps further, but then decided it would be rude not to say hello. I backed up into the corridor leading to the bridge and saw Him. The man from my dream. A gut-wrenching gaze, a



smile that burned like hellfire, his whole figure seemingly normal, yet terrifying. I can't explain the feeling, but the very sight of him made my insides churn.

"What are you looking at?"

I turned, pulled from my trance, and saw Jacek, the co-pilot. We had become friends during the journey, spending a lot of time in the billiards room; he was once a county champion. I looked at him for a moment, disoriented, then turned back to where the stranger had been standing. No one was there.

"Oh, nothing. I was heading to the bridge and got lost in thought for a moment," I lied without batting an eye, but my voice was trembling, and the hairs on my body stood on end.

"I'm heading there too, to relieve Dorota. Let's go." Nothing yet, apart from my ghostly—and I hoped, imagined—vision, foretold the tragedy. We approached the hatch at the end of the corridor. The bridge was actually located in a separate vessel, a small shuttle, connected to the rest of the ship by a

20-meter corridor. In case of a major emergency, the corridor could be jettisoned, and since the shuttle contained cryogenic pods for 10 people in addition to the bridge, the whole thing served as a lifeboat.

However, when connected to the interstellar ship's systems, the shuttle served as the regular bridge. So, we approached the hatch. Jacek punched in the code, the door opened, and a terrible stench hit us. The stench of a toilet that hadn't been cleaned in years, the smell of old meat, rot, and fermentation. After passing through the airlock, we found ourselves in the connector. Ahead of us were the doors to the control cabin, and stairs leading down to the cryogenic room.

"God, it stinks. Don't they smell it on the bridge?" I was sure it was some kind of malfunction. "You go to the bridge, see if everything's okay. I'm going downstairs. Some chemical must have gone bad, and this oil on the floor... probably from the hydraulics."

"On it," he replied and ran to the door. I ran downstairs. A cursory inspection of the room showed

no signs of failure. The chemicals used for hibernation were in sealed containers, the computer mentioned no leaks, nothing.

I raised the communicator to my ear. "Jacek, what's your status?" Silence. "Jacek?" I shouted, already nearly at a run. Two leaps, the 6-meter cabin passed, three more, up the stairs. My heart was pounding like I was running a marathon. A turn, and the bridge.

Upon entering, the first thing I saw was Jacek, staring with wide-open eyes. I looked down, to the side. At first, I couldn't believe what I saw. A scene from some grotesque nightmare: skin. On the floor lay sheets of bloodied skin, with worms crawling over them.

Disgusting, fat maggots. In the pilot's chair lay something that had clearly once been Dorota, the first pilot, a cheerful blonde, quite a looker. She was skinned to the waist, her entrails hanging from a hole in her abdomen, reaching the floor. The contents of her torn stomach were slowly spilling out. And her head? Well, her head was gone. It had been unevenly torn off, not like in the movies where a head is

severed by a sword, an axe, or a laser. The head had simply been ripped off. The wound was jagged and frayed. Stretched muscles and ligaments hung all around, and from the middle protruded the stump of her spine, up to the 6th vertebra by my guess. I don't know how long Jacek and I stood there, staring at the sight, before we heard the laughter. I mean, the laughter and the sound of smacking lips had probably been there from the start, but we hadn't noticed—we were in shock.

We both turned slowly. The moment lasted an eternity. Under the main viewscreen sat the blood-soaked, naked Captain. In his hands, he held Dorota's head and was eating it. As we looked, he was tearing off a large piece of her cheek. He ate and laughed quietly, giggling like a child at a silly movie. He glanced at us, then licked his lips and extended his hands in a questioning gesture—as if asking if we wanted to try some. We were not prepared for this. Then again, what training could possibly prepare you for something like this?

“What do we do?” Jacek asked. “I tried to call the others, but the comms are down.” “I’ll disconnect the controls from here so he can’t do anything. In that case, I guess I’m in command?” “Yes,” I supported him. He was the highest-ranking officer among those still alive or sane.

He locked the control consoles, we sealed the door with a code, and we got the hell out. However... when we were halfway down the corridor connecting the *Hevelius*—the shuttle—to the rest of the ship, an alarm sounded. We ran, reaching the slowly closing main airlock just in time, and entered the main hull of the ship as the corridor was jettisoned. Through the porthole, we saw the flash of the explosion. The shuttle began to drift away towards the starboard side. Gas spewing from its left wing caused the vessel to rotate on its axis and veer even further to the right. It made a semicircle and began to approach the now-disabled main engines of the ship. We watched in horror, ignoring the proximity alarm blaring. The computer despaired: Evasive maneuvers! But

maneuvering is difficult when flying at  $0.3c$  in a narrow spacetime tunnel. The actions were taken too late. The shuttle struck the side wall of the right engine. At first, it seemed like nothing serious would happen. The shuttle bounced off the extended nacelle and flew into the plasma-lit edge of the tunnel. The rest unfolded at a speed that a human brain could not comprehend.

The shuttle exploded, torn apart by differences in hull stress. Its fragments struck the engine nacelle, tearing it off. The ship began to slowly tilt to the left. Before the inertial dampeners could kick in, both of us—and indeed the entire crew and all unsecured equipment—were slammed against the wall. The computer had already begun the alignment procedure. The maneuvering thrusters returned the ship to its previous position. I guess we were lucky... I mean, if we hadn't been, I wouldn't have to be writing this letter today, wouldn't have to destroy the ship myself. Nevertheless, we survived then.

We ran to the main engine room, where the auxiliary bridge was located. From there, Jacek could continue the flight without difficulty. The problem with traveling in the tunnel is that you can't turn back. You have to fly to the end and then re-enter it for a second time. So the journey had to continue. Of course, everyone was terrified and shocked by what had happened. Jacek and I were saved by the excess of work. We had to put the ship back together. He was switching the piloting to emergency mode, connecting the backup computer, while I checked the engines, systems, and subsystems, point by point. I even had to go out into space in a suit and patch up the hull plating.

Months passed and nothing happened. Everything began to return to normal, if the situation could be considered normal at all.

I felt increasingly strange. I was constantly hungry and sluggish. One day, we held a meeting to discuss our situation.

“Jacek, is the ship’s mass correct now?” I asked the current Captain. “Yes, it seems the extra 75 kilos disappeared with the shuttle.” “Don’t you guys think it would be foolish to go back into the tunnel once we get out?” asked Czesiek, the “egghead,” in other words. A weirdo, all in all, that’s how I can describe him. “I agree. We’ll conduct the planned research, if possible, and only then will we return,” Jacek was a real tough guy. I would have turned back immediately. Then the alarm sounded. “Warning,” said the metallic voice of the computer, “mass has increased again by 75.3 kilos.”

I felt strange. My vision started to blur, and I was weirdly, irrationally hungry. My sight slowly sharpened, but the image was oversaturated and tinted red.

I saw everyone looking at me, surprised and scared. “Jesus,” I heard Joanna’s voice, “what’s happening to you???” “I don’t know,” I replied, “I feel strange.”

I looked at my hands. The veins were bulging, and my skin had turned blue. I grabbed the tabletop to steady



myself as I felt dizzy, and with one move of my hand, I broke it. I fell to the floor. I looked up. I saw the others changing into monsters, bizarre creatures from childhood nightmares. They were slowly approaching me. I flew into a rage. I felt nothing but aggression, fury, and hunger, a monstrous hunger. I looked at the monster that had been Joanna a moment ago and shouted, "I'll taste you, you bitch!" Someone tried to hit me over the head with something. I felt a light blow. I waved my hand dismissively, without taking my eyes off Joanna, and broke the person's neck. I lunged at her. I plunged my hands into her chest and tore open her skin. Her whimpering continued as I ripped out her ribs to get to the lungs. The delicious lungs. I felt only hunger and the desire to murder, brutally, slowly, causing pain. Next in line was Jan. I caught him as he tried to flee the room. I grabbed his leg, pulled hard, and the stump, torn off at the knee, was left in my hands. Blood sprayed everywhere, and I beat him with that stump, hitting him from different angles, maiming

him. I looked around the room, but no one else was there—they had fled. Probably to get weapons from the locker. I gave chase like a hyena attacking a buffalo. I ran, I was faster. I reached the armory door just as Dr. Alfred Bohacz was taking aim. He fired a burst, but he was too slow. I leaped onto the wall. The bullets leaving the barrel missed their intended target, hitting the wall and ricocheting, shredding everything around. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that a few hit Izabella, who was hiding behind the door. Straight in the face, which in an instant turned into a bleeding mass. Before he could shift his fire to me, I was already on the other side of the room, closer to him. I pounced and bit into his neck, breaking his cervical vertebrae. I kept biting, I couldn't stop. I bit until his head rolled across the floor.

I ran through the ship, through its four decks, searching for the last two victims. I reached the bridge, and the bulkheads sealed behind me. "You must be idiots to lock me in here," I screamed.

“Computer, locate the remaining survivors.” “Voice not recognized,” the machine said. “Visual data matches the chief engineer by 70%.” “What?” I approached the console. I didn’t remember how to operate it, but my fingers danced across the keys on their own. An image of the massacre appeared on the screen. Some monster was slaughtering the crew. That monster was ME.

I began to fight with myself. I heard a voice in my thoughts: “You can’t win. You’ll kill the others, and then yourself.” And that laugh, the monstrous laugh of the thin man with the beard. *Oh no, my friend, you don’t know me yet.* From the depths of my subconscious, I summoned long-ingrained reflexes. The discipline I had practiced for years, the precision that had taught me to control every muscle—it was my last line of defense. My mind began to fight back, slowly surfacing from the depths. I felt immense pain. I felt a stream of blood running from my forehead, cut earlier. I felt myself. I grew weak and slumped to the floor. My body still wanted to kill, it struggled, but I

held it in check. Slowly, my thoughts regained control: over my legs, over my arms. My vision returned, sharp as ever, full of color, and so did the pain, but not a physical one. Before my eyes, I saw myself murdering my friends, saw the two women I cared about die.

“Mass increase re-detected, cabin 13, deck 2,” the computer announced.

At that moment, I was myself again. I knew what had to be done. Something had come aboard when we crossed the tunnel’s boundary. I had to destroy this ship. Definitively. And close this tunnel. The antimatter explosion should cause it to collapse. I destroyed the cooling systems for the reactor, the electromagnets holding the antiprotons in their trap. And now I sit, hidden in this airlock, hearing the pounding on the bulkhead. The steel is slowly starting to bulge. I am finishing. Farewell.

