

**Avgust Demšar**

# **EUROPE**

**The Fourth Case for Inspector Vrenko**

## **SAMPLE TRANSLATION**

**\*The novel begins with a prologue, which has not been translated.**

## **Part One**

## Chapter One

### Schedule

The hotel lobby was gradually filling. A registration desk stood at the entrance, where a long table was laden with brochures, folders, promotional pencils, trays of chocolates, and floral arrangements. Behind the counter, a group of young women attended to guests. They were friendly, beautiful, and (at least appeared) competent. The wall behind them was covered in memos in both Slovenian and English. WI-FI PASSWORD: conference, read one. Another announced, You can collect your parking ticket HERE. Amidst the official notices, an advertising poster for the Pohorje funicular had somehow been squeezed in, featuring round red gondolas suspended over a dark spruce forest, with a clear blue sky above. In the corner, the poster simply stated: GREAT VALUE.

A crowd gathered before the counter. The hostesses handed out folders to newcomers, double-checking their names on the list and scrutinising the receipts for the registration fee. Guests affixed plastic badges displaying their names, institutions, and countries of origin. Those who had paid a higher fee were given special vouchers for the evening's dinner.

A well-dressed man in a dark suit, carrying a shiny leather bag and sporting a neatly groomed charcoal beard, asked in Croatian, "But where is it being held?" His question referred to the gala dinner promised in an authentic Styrian setting, as stated on the voucher in his hand. The young woman behind the counter who was there as a volunteer faltered, she fluttered her eyelashes, betraying her unease. She didn't know, they hadn't told her. Or had they and she had forgot? The student job agency had assured her that all she needed to do was smile, but now she was being bombarded with questions.

Just then, a woman fortunately approached, wearing a lanyard with ORGANISER written on the badge and a friendly note beneath it: Don't hesitate to ask! It was in a playful, handwritten-style font, and it concluded with the name: Nataša Jenko.

"Umm," the young woman hesitated, trying to read the name on the badge. She thought she had seen and even spoken to this woman before, but she couldn't remember her name. "Umm... Umm... Nataša, this gentleman has a question." Then, turning to the man with a sigh of relief, she added, "You can ask her."

The dark man thanked her and turned around, only to find himself facing a rather unremarkable woman—at least compared to the goddess-like figure behind the desk. (Though lacking in tact, the man prided himself on being a connoisseur of beauty.) Still, he thought this Nataša was likely more capable than the flustered girl.

"Yes, how can I help you?" Nataša asked in a surprisingly pleasant voice.

The man's eyes dropped to the sign on her lanyard, and he grinned, saying in Croatian: "I won't hesitate to ask, Nátaša." He stressed the first syllable of her name before continuing: "But seriously, I'm curious—where exactly is tonight's gala dinner? Here? I've got something to take care of later this afternoon and won't be here..."

Nataša smiled. "No, not here. The dinner will be held at a private farmhouse restaurant. But don't worry—transport is provided both ways. We're meeting at the main entrance at half past six."

Her tone was professional yet inviting. However, once the man was assured he wouldn't miss the lavish banquet, his interest waned. As Nataša began to elaborate, he had already drifted off, now shaking hands with an older man who seemed to be an acquaintance.

Everything was prepared in the hall. The table for the working presidency was set on the podium. Hanging from the dark wood lectern was a sign that read:

EUROPE NOW  
International Scientific Conference  
IES, Maribor  
15–22 September 2006

IES stood for the Institute of European Studies, the event's organiser. This was the first time the Maribor-based institute had hosted such a significant event. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation. Photographers paced the room. Waiting. Glancing through viewfinders, searching for the perfect shots of the speakers, audience, and hall. The stage, thankfully, wasn't too high—good for visibility. They had already captured the (slightly kitsch) flower arrangement. They also took photos of the bustling crowds outside the hall. A local TV crew had just arrived. Their large camera mounted on a massive tripod was placed in the centre of the hall. Thick cables were being dragged across the floor. A loud camera operator in a comical hat barked orders. Like many in the media, his volume exceeded what was necessary.

The hotel lobby slowly filled up. A few guests were already seated, reviewing documents in their folders, polishing their reading glasses, and carefully perusing the abstract booklets to mark the lectures they didn't want to miss. The front row was nearly empty, save for an elderly couple who did not seem like the other guest nestled in seats directly in front of the podium. These chairs were reserved for special guests, each with a white A4 sheet labelled VIP and the name of the attendee.

Among them were the trio from Vienna, who had braved yesterday's torrential rain. There were also a few staff members from the organising institute—although there were only five in total. Additional seats were reserved for city and university representatives, though the latter were merely honorary guests, as the institute had no affiliation with the local university. The minister responsible for science was expected to arrive from Ljubljana, but so far, he was a no-show.

Two figures stood out amidst the crowd. One appeared stressed; the other, the picture of composure. Both were members of the organising committee and both (like Nataša Jenko, who has just pacified a concerned Croat) were wearing lanyards emblazoned with the familiar Don't hesitate to ask message.

"Pika," the calm one began, addressing the woman beside her, "Is that sign by the entrance alright? People seem lost—they're wandering about. And the parking—ministers don't usually arrive in just one car, you know. Did we reserve enough spaces? And what was that man fussing about at the entrance? Did the girls mess something up?"

Pika, whose real name was Darka Logar, was the institute's secretary. She was an attractive woman who had recently turned forty, though few would have guessed her age. For today's event, she had swapped her usual jeans for a more formal suit. That she actually had something like this in her wardrobe? Well, this surprised only those who knew her. Others, however, noticed something else: her hair. It was an unusual colour (a striking hue somewhere between bright orange and cinnabar) and very distinctive, but Pika knew how to carry it off. About the colour: it had been her trademark for many years, more specifically since Tuesday, 5th of May, 1998, when she first saw Milla Jovovich in *The Fifth Element* at Maribor's now-defunct Udarnik cinema. The film hadn't left much of an impression—monsters, flying cars or Bruce Willis, none of that resonated with Pika—but Jovovich's hair did.

Pika's vibrant hair had become so synonymous with her that people could hardly imagine her any other way. It was also a practical asset in moments like this, making her easily identifiable in a crowd. Need something? Just ask Pika... Who? Ms Darka Logar. Who? The woman with the orange hair.

Pika took her superior, Ema, the institute's director, gently by the elbow. "Don't worry," she reassured her. "I've sent one of the girls to guide lost guests at the entrance. The parking is reserved and taped off, with hotel security on alert. We sorted the issue at the entrance—it was just a misspelling of one of the participants' names. We apologised and printed a new tag."

"Good, good," Ema replied, her eyes darting towards the entrance as the crowd bustled through the narrow doorway. Ema Žnidaršič, Master of Sociology, currently a bit overwhelmed and the perfectionist driving force behind the conference, wouldn't relax until the speakers took their place at the lectern and the programme was underway. Thank God for Pika. She was worth her weight in gold. Pure gold. And the other girls too—all of them. When this is all over, they'll definitely be treated to a good meal.

The schedule of plenary papers and workshop summaries for the international meeting, titled Europe Today, is published in the proceedings. It is read in Slovene by locals and a few guests from the former Yugoslavia, and in English by foreigners. The start time is scheduled for 10am, with the usual protocol of welcome speeches set first. Despite the exemplary organisation, today's meeting starts some twenty minutes late, but this is still within the expected timeframe. For instance, last year in Berlin, the delay was much longer. At 10.23am, a woman takes to the podium. She taps the microphone with her finger, and since it's on, the taps echo through the room. A packed house listens in. The audience turned their attention to the woman, particularly her orange hair. Many of them are flicking through the proceedings, eager to know who this striking figure is. Contents, not here, Special Events, not here either, aha, Schedule, here it is! The first scheduled speaker is the Director of the Institute, Ema Žnidaršič, MSc, an internationally renowned expert. But that can't be right, think those unfamiliar with Mrs Žnidaršič personally. The person on stage doesn't quite fit their image of Ema Žnidaršič, MSc, Secretary General of Europe Now, IES. Then, at the bottom of the page, they notice an asterisk: a note indicating that the plenary protocol will be moderated by Darka Logar, executive secretary and member of the IES staff. This seems more in line with the person on stage. A few men (and one or two women) glance at Pika and think it would be a good idea to get to know this charming executive secretary a little better over the next few days. They hope there will be plenty of opportunities—perhaps over drinks in the evenings or at one of the banquets, maybe even tonight at the gala dinner. But then they remember where they are, gather their thoughts, and focus on what's happening on stage.

Speakers queue up behind the massive wooden lectern. The Director of the Institute is brief and to the point. She welcomes the participants on behalf of herself and her colleagues. She wishes the guests a pleasant stay in Maribor, Slovenia, and Europe, and hopes for a productive collaboration. Two men appear behind her. One is some sort of minister, the other a local politician, possibly a mayor or his deputy. Fortunately, they are also formal and brief. Then the main part of the session begins. There are four plenary papers in Part I, featuring many internationally renowned experts. First up is an older Canadian man, the surprise star of the conference, whose presence the organisers managed to keep under wraps until the last moment. Participants only discover his name when they get hold of the conference proceedings. Darka Logar introduces him as Professor Kevin Douglas from Quebec. Most of the audience are well acquainted with his books and articles, his much-cited scientific works. Him? They actually got him to come to Maribor?

The man on stage is unremarkable in appearance. A man in his sixties, wearing a suit, shirt, and tie, with a build that could pass for a butcher's. But Professor Douglas's lecture is a revelation. His hour at the podium flies by. His English is clear, easy to follow, with a singsong quality, and his slight French drawl adds to his charm. He shares amusing anecdotes and impressions of Slovenia, which he is visiting for the first time. In fact, he admits that it's his first time in this part of Europe at all, which surprises many in the audience. He goes on to say a little about himself, but with appropriate restraint, making it clear that he has his ego well in check. He then delves into his professional topic, speaking on Europe Today from the Perspective of the Other. Superb, well-argued, logical, and accurate. When he finishes, the audience rewards him with a long round of applause.

Next is Dr Kirsten Kärner, an authority on European women's studies from Denmark. As Professor Douglas steps down from the podium, he makes an effort to theatrically pay tribute to his colleague, whom he calls my dear Kirsten. He bows deeply and sweeps his hand in the air as though he is a musketeer tipping an invisible hat. He is pleased to see he is delighting the audience with his theatrical flourish. The elegant Scandinavian returns the gesture, albeit in a more restrained manner. They seem to have formed a rapport, although supposedly they only met the previous evening while sharing the back seat of a black Mercedes on the way back from the airport.

The third speaker is a local woman, Ema Žnidaršič, now in her role as a scientist rather than a director. This time, there is no sign of stress. Her presentation is professionally sound, engaging, and meets the highest academic standards. She too receives a long round of applause. The final speaker is from the United States. He is the youngest of the four, and though his topic is interesting, his delivery is rather uninspired, despite his obvious passion for the subject. It's part of his postdoctoral research. My recently completed post-PhD research at Columbia, NY, he boasts. Some in the audience find the American tense and unrelaxed, as though he's constantly on edge. Europeans chalk it up to the baffling competitiveness that seems to define life across the Atlantic. And then there's his name, which, for many, feels almost like a joke. He's introduced as John Brown Jones—as if in the UK someone would be named John Smith.

The plenary session for the morning concludes with Brown Jones's speech. By now, it's well past 2pm, and time for lunch.

## Chapter Two

### Lunch

The restaurant is located on the ground floor of the hotel, nestled against the hillside. The front-facing, open side boasts large, floor-to-ceiling windows, while the rear is softly illuminated by discreet, subdued lamps placed along the walls. Between the lamps hang artistic paintings—naturalistic landscapes framed in carefully colour-coordinated frames. Beneath each painting, prices are listed in both euros and dollars, signalling the works of a local artist on display. Hotel lunch is served between 1pm and 3pm. As the conference participants file out of the hall, they hurry up the stairs. Many stop briefly at the toilets. A surprising number, considering the anti-smoking climate of today, gather around the ashtrays, eagerly puffing on their cigarettes, smoking quickly as hunger starts to hit.

The hotel's dining room is bright, spacious, and pleasant. The staff are attentive and accommodating. Place settings are elegant, with cloth napkins and what is almost certainly homemade bread. The food is delectable, and the portions are generous. As the conference attendees scan the menu, they realise they're not just hungry; they're absolutely famished.

Today, there are two soups to choose from. Alongside the homemade beef consommé with saffron and liver dumplings, there's a classic Italian vegetable soup—minestrone. For the main course, most of the attendees (well, mostly the gentlemen) opt for roast veal with porcini mushrooms and Refosco wine, accompanied by a light side of fried potato gnocchi. The second option is grilled turkey steaks with rosemary, served on a bed of dark rice. The third offering is vegetable lasagne, with a side of courgettes sautéed with pine nuts, garlic and olive oil. Dessert is the hotel's speciality: a rich, dark Sacher Torte, topped with a generous portion of whipped cream. Well, I don't have to eat the cream, and cakes are low-calorie these days anyway, the (mostly) ladies reassure themselves. Alongside the coffee, the dessert is divine. The hotel, aware of the importance of such conferences, has made a special effort. Tomorrow, they plan to offer their foreign guests something truly different: traditional Slovenian koline.

A section of the dining room is reserved exclusively for the conference participants. Round tables are set with five place settings each, adorned with a small bouquet, a "RESERVED" sign, and a commemorative flag of the organising committee. People begin to settle in, seeking out good company. Acquaintances group together, while strangers take the opportunity to get to know one another. For the tables reserved for special guests and organisers, seating is carefully pre-arranged, with name plates placed beside each setting.

As people begin to take their seats, something happens at one of the tables, but no one takes much notice. Everyone is far too hungry to pay attention to others at this moment. Besides, given the number of bottles of Merlot and Chardonnay being ordered—drinks had to be ordered and paid for separately—the lunches promise to be both merry and successful.

## Chapter Three

### The Dance of the Dead

Late evening, darkness and a light drizzle. An insignificant back alley on the outskirts of Maribor. The street is not long, the road is asphalted but riddled with patched-up potholes, and the pavements are poorly maintained. Broken wooden fences and illegally erected garages line the street, each uniquely unattractive. The houses here are old, with residents attempting to maintain small patches of grass in front of their façades, while vegetable gardens flourish behind them. Most of the buildings are multi-apartment complexes, primarily rented out. Some sections have seen restoration, yet the façades remain neglected, grey, and dilapidated. In certain places, new windows have been inserted, their surroundings hastily plastered.

This is a typical Maribor street, where people sit on benches outside apartment entrances during the day, and in the evenings, they peer out from behind their curtains to observe their neighbours. Despite the unappealing surroundings, there is a sense of peace and quiet. The street is too short to attract night-time revelry from mopeds or cars, and there are no nearby bars.

A car is parked next to one of the buildings. While many others are scattered throughout the street—having always been there—this one is new. It sits in a dark section, equidistant from two widely spaced streetlights. Inside, someone is seated; their hands rest on the steering wheel, their face obscured by shadows. It is impossible to determine their age or gender; all that is clear is that they are alone, likely waiting for something or someone.

After a while, the car remains stationary. The occupant is still in the driver's seat, hands still on the steering wheel, face still cloaked in darkness. Then, a shift occurs. Two cars—a Mercedes and another saloon—turn into the street from the dual carriageway exit. In the stillness of the night, the engines sound surprisingly loud. The two saloons pass by the parked car. Did the occupant hide when the headlights of the passing vehicles brushed over them? Regardless, no one seems to notice anything unusual.

The saloons stop in front of a family-run motel at the end of the street. The drivers are in a hurry, flinging open their doors, and a lively group spills out. The engines continue to rumble, exhaust fumes swirling in the red glow of the taillights. Powerful headlights illuminate the motel's wall, revealing the purple-hued façade, making it appear even more unattractive. The group paces back and forth, engaging in animated conversation, laughter, and handshakes. Two or three share hugs as they bid farewell. The men are dressed in dark suits, while the women wear evening gowns. Though the sounds don't reach the parked car across the street, the atmosphere is palpable.

Once the farewells conclude, some attendees return to their vehicles, slamming the doors behind them. One person rolls down a window, eager to exchange a few last words. Those outside listen, laugh, and nod in response. Finally, the two drivers pull away, their large cars speeding confidently out of the backstreet, their sounds fading into the illuminated dual carriageway.

Three figures—two men and a woman—remain outside the motel. They stand in front of the entrance, where a shorter man is explaining something to them. It appears to be a joke. When he finishes, the other two laugh more out of politeness than genuine amusement, and they make their way inside. One of the men unlocks the door. The motel lacks a night porter, so room keys also unlock the front entrance. The three people disappear within, and the door clicks shut behind them. The light bulb above the entrance slowly fades back into darkness. Peace settles over the street. Moments before, the last light in a nearby window extinguished.



The occupant of the parked car has been watching the scene unfold outside the motel with keen interest. It is midnight, and the threesome seem to have gone to bed. Or have they? Less than ten minutes later, the motel door swings open, and the sensor activates the lamp outside once more. Someone is emerging. The three white vertical stripes on the dark blue sleeves and trousers glow in the dim light.

A person in a tracksuit locks the door, slips the key into their trouser pocket, and diligently zips it up before turning towards the ring road and starting to run. Well, who would have thought it was true! The bastard really is running! The car, emerging from the shadows, begins to follow the figure, keeping a safe distance. The runner's steps are steady and purposeful, their movements clearly habitual.

As the runner approaches the flyovers, they descend under the overpass towards the dual carriageway, moving along the outer edge of the protective fence. The uneven grassy surface proves challenging, but a metal fence shields them from potential collisions with careless night drivers. Exiting the flyover, the figure veers right towards the bridge crossing the Drava River.

The bridge is a striking structure, formed by two unconnected arches spaced just under a metre apart. Each arch supports two one-way lanes, with a cycle path and pavement running alongside. Once on the bridge, the runner climbs over the guard rail and begins to sprint along the wide cycle path, free from the hindrance of uneven ground, their pace quickening. The car also accelerates. The bridge is deserted, with no traffic in sight.

The occupant of the car glances around one last time. There is no one ahead, no one in the rear-view mirrors, and no one on the opposite side. The car makes a turn; it nearly comes to a stop before carefully pulling onto the cycle lane. As the rear wheel crawls over the kerb, the engine roars with a sudden surge of power, propelling the vehicle forward.

A few seconds later, the car collides forcefully with the runner from behind. Upon impact, it brakes hard. The figure in the tracksuit twists violently, arms flailing, head jerking back as their body contorts. Then they are launched forward, their head striking the metal fence with a dull thud. The now limp body rolls on the ground, coming to rest a considerable distance away from the car.

During this brief and grotesque dance of death, performed by a body in a blue tracksuit under the yellow streetlights of a concrete bridge against the backdrop of the night, the vehicle comes to a stop. The engine hums as the car comes to a stop, the gearbox squeals when it jolts into neutral, and the driver then engages the handbrake. Then, slowly, they step out of the car.

## Chapter Four

### The Body

It was a chilly Saturday morning. Moist fog hung over Maribor and the Drava River. An old, tired Škoda, its paint faded and cracked, crawled along an otherwise empty road. It creaked past a still-sleeping nursing home, a closed petrol station, and yellow flashing traffic lights. The roads and pavements were deserted; there was no one anywhere. At the turn-off for Malečnik, the car veered off the road, descended a slope, passed under a bridge, and pulled into a driveway in front of an abandoned factory building before coming to a stop.

A skinny man emerged from the car. He wore cheap jeans and a sleeveless fisherman's jacket over a jumper. This was his habitual parking spot—a habit he developed during his time working at the factory. Thirty-two years! He had started as a warehouse assistant and eventually climbed the ranks to quite a senior position, a shift maintenance manager. Those old machines had not been easy to maintain in the last few years; even then, they seemed ready for the museum. The same thoughts always crossed his mind when he saw the factory. Fond memories always flooded his mind at the sight of the factory, despite the exhausting work, the chaotic decline of the industry, and the painful early retirement. The factory had been his life, his *raison d'être*, he would have thought, had he received a classical grammar school education rather than a two-year vocational qualification.

The now-defunct Svila textile factory lay in the depression of the Drava Canal, an artificial embankment that began right there. After the factory, the river wound its way out of Maribor and flowed down the Drava Valley towards Ptuj. Here, by the old riverbed, just before the embankment, was his sanctuary. Although the area around Maribor remained populated, the immediate riverbank was completely overgrown and uninhabited—a wilderness in the heart of the city, so to speak. That's why he often came here. He relished these early mornings—the peace, the silence, the coolness, the mist, the sleeping river, the solitude, the herons gliding silently by, and the lonely cries of the river gulls. Fishing was often just an excuse for him to retreat into this solitude.

From the car park, he walked to the river, choosing a quiet spot on the embankment. He settled onto his folding chair and tuned his transistor radio to Radio Maribor, turning the sound down to a whisper to avoid disturbing the morning tranquillity. He took his time sorting out his fishing gear—a ritual he performed without any rush. Once he had everything ready, he cast his line and relaxed. Sometimes he caught something, but mostly he did not. Yet that hardly mattered. He preferred to immerse himself in the surrounding nature, admiring the gradual awakening of the world. The eastern sky would first turn yellow, then the sun would peek over the hill. The atmosphere would warm, the fog would lift, and traffic on the bridge would begin to stir. By around 10 am, the city would finally wake, its sounds perceived as a distant humming and buzzing.

At fifty-two minutes past six, the lone fisherman was startled by something unexpected—something far from the thrill of catching a fish. Initially confused, he could not discern what he had caught due to the fog, but as he pulled on his fishing rod, he sensed he had hooked something substantial. A giant carp? A half-dead catfish? He only realised what he had truly caught when the mass floated into view, two or three metres in front of him. There, lying face down, a large human body bobbed in the water. It turned slowly—a little here, a little there—shifting like a tiny boat made from a walnut shell.

Now understanding what he had hooked, he saw that his line had snagged the trouser leg of a corpse, which was caught on a branch in the shallow river. The former maintenance manager was a composed and clear-headed man. Using his fishing rod, he carefully pulled the floating body into the

shallows. He did not touch anything. Instead, he retrieved his mobile phone from his sleeveless jacket pocket and called the police.

“Yes, on the left bank, just after the Malečnik Bridge. ... What? ... Yes, I'll wait.”

He then sat back on his folding chair, rummaged in his bag for a can of beer, opened it (usually, he refrained from drinking before ten or eleven in the morning, but finding a dead body was, of course, an exception), and took a long swig. Lighting a cigarette, he turned his gaze back to the corpse. For now, the joy of fishing had been lost to him.

As the nearby bell tower struck seven, Radio Maribor switched to Radio Slovenia, heralding the start of the Second Morning News.