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ANTHOLOGY OF EUROPEAN SF

edited by Cristian Tamaş and Roberto Mendes



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ANTHOLOGY OF EUROPEAN SPECULATIVE FICTION

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FIRST PUBLICATION CREDITS

“The Dead Orchards” by Ian R. MacLeod: first published in *Weird Tales* – 1994

“Transcendent Express” by Jetse de Vries: first published in *Hub Magazine* – 2007

“Starsong” by Aliette de Bodard: first published in *Asimov’s* – August 2012

“Digists are Cold, Numbers are Warm” by Liviu Radu: first published in *ISF Magazine* – 2012

INTRODUCTION BY
CRISTIAN TAMAŞ AND ROBERTO MENDES

European SF anthologies are rare as pink diamonds, and it seems that American editors have been more interested in collecting and presenting European SF stories than European editors are (for instance, *The SFWA European Hall of Fame: Sixteen Contemporary Masterpieces of Science Fiction from the Continent* (2008), edited by James Morrow and Kathryn Morrow and featuring James Gunn, Donald Wolfheim, and others). It's as though someone is a European only from a distance—from America, for example!

Who inhabits Europe ? Europeans? Well, yes and no. Europe is inhabited by Germans, Frenchmen, Britons (from time to time, depending on the continent's weather), Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Swedes, Poles, Dutchmen, Russians, Ukrainians, and so on. We're Europeans only when we're visiting other continents, but not at home.

There are exceptions to the rule that European editors are uninterested in European SF, including Austrian editor Franz Rottensteiner (*View from Another Shore*, 1973), French editor Olivier Raynaud (under the pen name of Richard D. Nolane, working with American publisher DAW Books, *Terra SF : The Year's Best European SF* (1981), and *Terra Science Fiction II: The Year's Best European SF* (1983)), and Spanish editor Domingo Santos with the *Ciencia ficcion europea* (1982). But the general trend remains.

What's the reason for this lack of interest? Why do we only have a few European SF anthologies compiled by European editors? Why should a culturally diverse continent like Europe being incapable of finding a common way to publish its own SF on regular basis? Or, even better, collecting that fiction in English, so that more readers can read it?

Perhaps it's explained by the fact that Europe has a political union and a common market, but not a *cultural* common market or a *publishing* common market, and because it's divided linguistically and culturally.

Why do we need to start presenting European SF in English? Let's face it, English is spoken by a majority of Europeans and by most of the World—there is a huge market for English-language literature and for works in English translation! Being pragmatic, we have to use the idiom that's understood by the European majority if we want to offer access to as many readers as possible. From Europe to the World!

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We believe that this is exactly the right moment to contribute to a common European SF. This is the time!

In order to start developing this project, *ISF* and *Europa SF*, two new and ambitious projects, decided to step in and launch a new European SF anthology comprising authors coming from all over Europe—England, France, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Romania, and Ukraine—collecting a truly representative sampling of European speculative fiction. Would we like to have more stories and more countries represented? Of course—and we will too, you'll see!

ISF is a quarterly publication with a mandate to publish (for free download) science fiction, fantasy, and horror that was (i) originally written in languages other than English (but always published in *ISF* in English translation), as well as (ii) fiction that comes from non-traditional sources (geographically speaking) or (iii) that has a particularly internationalist orientation. You can read all about us on our page (<http://internationalsf.wordpress.com/>) and elsewhere on the Web, or in the February issue of *Locus Magazine*.

Europa SF (www.scifiportal.eu) was conceived as an English-language portal of news and information from and for European fandom—a site that provides a comprehensive, permanent, real-time mirror of European SF&F products, events, and activities.

Together we want to offer to European writers the chance to be read by the entire world! So wait no more to get to know some of the most exciting authors we have—from newcomers to award winners! We promise you this: your time will not be wasted!



The Dead Orchards

Ian R MacLeod

I used to live in a house made from the bones of the City. Stones plundered from the dreams of palaces peered from every wall. It was too big for me alone, yet I rarely sought any company other than that of my servants. Forgotten rooms reached into tunnels, doorways opened on rotting boards. But there was still a core where a tarnished kind of luxury flourished. This was my home, and the living was as easy as it could be in this City, which is to say that my suffering was less than that of many others.

Sometimes when my solitude became a burden I used to wander the streets searching for some female from whom the City had yet to drain the last dregs of grace. A difficult quest, but I had my successes. I would draw my guest back to my house with the necessary threats or promises, filling it with the silvered clash of china, the fragile aromas of good food. And when the feast had ended and contentment played on the air, when my guest sat on her golden chair and all past life was an ugly dream, I would offer her one last luxury: a glass of the clearest water drawn from a well deep in the foundations of my house. Pure water in this City where the sewers foul the river and the river feeds the wells. Crystalline water in a crystal glass.

The goblet would rise in hands I had scented and cleansed, the water would tremble on the beveled rim. And after it had touched those delicate lips, after the shapely throat had moved to swallow, the hand would fall, the glass would shatter, the eyes would blink once, then widen forever. For the clear water was invisibly polluted by the mutterings of some ancient spell. It caused a living paralysis for which, in all my experiments, I could discover no release, least of all death.

Once, I used to take endless pleasure in seeing my guest sitting motionless, clothed in whatever fairness youth had granted her, with every muscle down to heart and lungs magically stilled, yet her mind alert, her senses singing. After weeks of slow study, I would take a knife to her flesh, blowing the dust from her unblinking eyes that she might better see the riches she contained. Each organ within was a gleaming jewel, strung like a wet necklace on the bones beneath. Once, towards the end of my explorations, I found another life enclosed within the first. A child. I cut the burden from its ropes of flesh and lifted it into the candlelight. But the eyes of the half-finished thing seemed to stare at me, and I replaced it hurriedly in its mother's belly.

Inevitably – and as with life itself – my guests didn't keep their freshness forever. The spell allowed them to retain thoughts, sensation and life, but putrescence is an unavoidable fact even amongst the truly living in this city. Maggots eventually began to burrow the warm flesh. Gazing into the sockets of eyes that had run like tears, I used to wonder if death ever came to my guests. Did they sense every moment of decay? Was there ever an end to their pain? But could find no answer from those rotting lips, and eventually I would call my servants to take the stinking burden from my sight and carry it to the dead orchards, there to dispose of it in the traditional way.

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Eventually, such diversions began to bore me. I found that although the human body is a rich and ornate vessel, its variety is far from infinite. I came to treasure only the moment when the lips moistened and moved. When the delicate throat swallowed. When the glass fell. When the eyes widened with that last moment of knowledge. That was all: when the shadow passed, and when certainty began.

There came a time when I had not left my home in months. But boredom brought restlessness, and the horrors of the City beyond my door sometimes seemed less that the atrocity of my own company. One day, in the bland depths of my discontent, I went out. I had been long away from this City. I was surprised that life still passed so busily in these streets filled with mud. My senses clogged with the smell of it, with the separate ugliness of every face. I shook my head when the beggars offered me their blood in bowls. I kicked and stamped at the little creatures that crawled towards me from the gutters.

I took a path that led by the fringes of the dead orchards, passing many on the way who pulled, dragged or carried burdens in that same direction. I went that way without thinking, but as the hovels gave way to grey-green grass and the little hill reared up before my steps, I wandered on amid the stained and sapless boughs. They were sharp as spears, and similarly blackened with the blood of their victims. The trees were a deathly army, proffering trophies for the delectation of whatever Gods gaped down from the dismal sky. Some of the corpses were still fresh enough from their impaling to have kept a trace of character in their sunken eyes, or at least to make their sex and age discernable. But the majority had shrivelled to leathery anonymity, preserved by the parasitic tendrils of the trees as withered sketches of humanity. The branches pierced rags of flesh. Arms lifted and waved in the stinking breeze. Here, somewhere amid the leafless avenues, were the remains of my guests, doubtless roughly pinioned by my servants with their usual lack of care...perhaps dead, perhaps dreaming, perhaps still screaming voicelessly with pain.

I found a corpse that somehow still retained a shabby parody of young femininity. Several tumescences were thriving on it, green, apple-like parasitic growths of the tree itself, one a grey parody of a breast, another swelling on the shrivelled remains of the tongue, forcing apart the jaw. The wind struck up a keener note, dipping the branches all around, setting limbs clicking and bobbing, heads nodding. The woman-corpse tilted up, her mossy backbone curving as though still tormented by whatever agonies had brought her to this place. I turned and quickly made my way back through the trees, towards the life of the market.

The market awnings flapped their damp wings. Those who lived and needed jostled with those who had forgotten all but the fears and habits of life. The smell of rotting meat and vegetables was heavy. That day, in what passed, I think, for the season where there is more cold and less rain, I had already eaten and the food had lodged in my stomach, an unwelcome but tolerated guest. Everywhere there were shouts and squabbles. I was swept along and almost off my feet as a fresh basket appeared, dripping mud and the offal of white-eyed fish from the river. The crowds were almost as sickening as what was on offer. I felt glad of my wealth, my gold, my servants. I smiled at the

thought, remembering why I had come. And as I smiled my eyes settled on a face that was part of the crowd, yet separate from everything. My shock was immediate and intense. Even under the grime and rags, I could hardly believe that chance had brought me this close to beauty.

She had a basket wrapped around her filthy arm. In it, as I drew close, tumbling rickety stalls and people aside, I saw the remnants of a loaf of bread, grey green with mould. She turned with slow and perfect wonder towards me. Heart shaped face, eyes of tremulous green. She could almost have been a child, had the city not forgotten true childhood in the age before it remembered death.

Determined that she would be my guest that night, I stopped her and offered money, grasping an oily sleeve that went slick though my fingers, grasping tighter and again. Her delicate arms scrabbled in fear, weak claws reaching for my face. I drew out coins and pushed them towards her fluttering palms, not caring how they fell. They fountained from my hands. Those around us began scramble in the mud, raking the gold from the ooze. At last she caught a coin in her palm and drew it to her lips, touching it to her perfect teeth. I offer this, I said, and more. Her eyes widened and blinked, clear pools in a world of mud. She nodded. She understood. I kept my hand on her in case she should run, but in truth I sensed within her that fatalism that is part of this City. I never bothered to enquire about her background. No doubt others knew her but were too blind or ignorant to see her beauty. So be it; this City has withered everything down to a single moment of need, endlessly repeating itself. I took her hand and she let me lead her away under the leaning walls. Through the tunnel of a toppled tower where dark things whispered to the echo of our breath. To the place that was my home.

My servants pointed and shivered excitedly as they gathered for a sight of my prize. I chased them away to with curses and threats and led her quickly up the wide stairs past rotting tapestries and green statues, along corridors streaked with decay. Some emotion caused her to cry. The tears washed bands down her face. I asked her name and she sobbed it through the bars of clear skin: it was a thing that fell uselessly between us. I changed it to Caitlin.

Caitlin. I drew water from the purest butts of rainwater, straining the soup of spiders and leaves. I warmed it with magics to fill a rusted marble tub. I stripped her of her rags and bathed her. As the water clouded, she grew glistening white. Touching the wonder of her flesh with my own ragged claws, I could hardly believe that we shared humanity. As I dried her, I saw that Caitlin was like none of my guests who had gone before. She was perfection. I anointed her with scents and oils. I seated her before the brightest, warmest fire and combed the knots and lice from her wet hair, working through and through until it sparked and glowed to the touch. And I dressed her in the best fabric I could muster. Velvet that still retained its colour in patches, seams of lace that the damp hadn't yet unravelled. I stood her before a mirror, and once again she cried. And as I gazed upon her my own eyes stung as though with the touch of flames.

My Caitlin smelled of apples and sunlight. She made me weep with a long-interred memory of a happy interval in my otherwise cheerless youth. Of lying on sap-scented grass to drown in snow flurries of blossom, of the broken certainty of waiting for the one-who-loved, the one who never came.

Amid the unavoidable pathos of decay, I tried to give our feast solemnity. My efforts exceeded everything that had gone before, just as Caitlin herself outshone all the past. In the great hall, I sat her down on the gilt chair raised on a stone above the moss-carpeted floor. I cleaned silver and china with my own hands, ransacked ancient chests to find a ragged tablecloth that was almost white. I polished a glass until its facets were like knives and drew on the whispering darkness of my secret well until I was sure that the poisoned water would match Caitlin's purity. I even discovered an old machine from the time beyond the City's memory that wove melodies in voices that were neither human nor drum.

The preparation of the food, pampered idiot that I am, was beyond me. I set my servants to work with terrible threats. What emerged on platters from the steaming dungeons was an insult to Caitlin's loveliness. I took a skewer from the filthy meat and showed the leading servant my disgust, stopping before fatality only to avoid the inevitable distraction that dragging another body to the dead orchards would cause. Their second offering was many times better. When I put the sauce to my lips, I could only wonder at the contrast with the foul stuff I was normally forced to tolerate. But still, it failed to match Caitlin's perfection. As, inevitably, did the third offering. But nevertheless I carried the abject dishes up to her myself, rare fruits and savories, sweetmeats that the City had long forgotten, riches on the palate beyond dream.

I watched as she ate, seated on that gilded chair. Her movements were swift with hunger, yet delicate, fluttering like leaves in sunlight. I poured wine from a bottle furred with the centuries of dust into her sliver goblet. The light of the candelabra formed a heart within the hall, intimate and yellow. I moved the plates and dishes with my ugly, clumsy hands, drawing her attention to this or that culinary treasure. Music played from my newly discovered box, trembling the shadows around us. She looked at me and smiled, her fingers twisting the frayed edge of the cloth. With each flicker of movement another facet of her beauty stung my eyes.

Finally, she sat back, and I asked there if there was anything else she wanted.

She shook her head, and I asked her if she was happy.

A shadow crossed her face for a moment. Then her clear eyes fixed on mine, that green that seemed to flicker with more than flamelight.

She told me that she had lost her mother when she was still a child. She told me how she heard rumours that she had been taken from the market, just as I had taken her. Someone with riches, it was said, someone such as I. Eventually, she had found her mother's body in the dead orchards, dangling upside down, her guts hanging out over her face, not living, but somehow not yet dead.

I nodded. But of course, I had no way of telling whether Caitlin's mother had once been my guest. In truth, my memories of my many guests had flooded together like the blood-scent of their hidden jewels. And Caitlin outshone any from the past. But still, I was pleased with the symmetry that should bring my guests here, generation on generation.

Certain in the knowledge that I could not be lying, I told Caitlin that she was infinitely more beautiful than her mother.

She nodded gravely. She had seen herself in the mirror; she knew that there was no point in arguing. I watched her eyes travel across the dishes and condiments, the glowing candelabra, the crystal glass filled with crystal water.

I asked if she was thirsty.

Slowly, she shook her head. To my astonishment, I felt a rush of well-being, almost equal to that which I had felt as I watched the throats of my previous guests move to swallow. My heart raced at the thought that here, at last, I had found something new. A guest who survived the feast! Weeks and months stretched before me in my delirious excitement. Caitlin and I together, her beauty and my power, King and Queen of this City.

Then what, she asked, what shall we do?

My face must have betrayed my sudden confusion. I wanted us to become lovers, I wanted to drown in her blossom-honeyed scent. After I had stammered out some inadequate expression of this, Caitlin put her head back and began to laugh.

Laughter. The sound rebounded from the wet walls. Laughter. Unheard in centuries. Laughter. Thick, ugly laughter. I gazed at Caitlin in disappointment as her lips twisted back with the cackle and bray, as knotted roots of tendon formed in her neck, as her face distorted beyond recall. She sniffed and gave a last bark.

I was sickened, but I forced myself to shrug. So quickly, the possibilities had faded.

Her face was smoothly solemn now, but it was only a sick parody of my memory of her beauty. Love is impossible in this City, she said. So what would you have me do?

Knowing it was true, I lifted the glass. The words were easy now. I suggested that we could share the crystal water together. Her, and then me.

Caitlin nodded. Unhesitatingly, she took the glass in both her slender hands and lifted it to her lips. The facets danced light on her cheeks. I felt coolness and calm wash through my agitation as I witnessed the movement, that familiar part of the ritual. She tipped the glass up. Inch by inch. Degree by degree. Her eyes were momentarily closed like the child she almost was. In the last moment, as the water broke into her mouth, I even saw her beauty reassert itself.

The glass tumbled and broke. She slumped from the gilded chair, down into the filth below the table. It drew a black streak across her flaccid face, as though nature was reasserting itself. Gazing at her strewn there, eyes open

again and staring wide at me, I pondered for a moment my old pleasures, the way the inner jewels of a body could be drawn out gleaming for display. But I shook my head, knowing that to do that would only sour further an already bitter memory. I called for my servants. I bid them carry her to the orchard, fresh and as she was, with her skin unmarred. And recalling Caitlin's grim story of her roughly pinioned mother, I decided to accompany them.

The moon was howling in the sky, the light of madness breaking over blind chimneys, shattered towers, seed husks of broken rooftops. The City was still seething alive. The night people, gory rags of flesh and fabric, scuttled their trails in the solemn wake of our procession. My servants bore Caitlin on a stretcher of silk, albeit blackened with the strains of its previous occupants. Although motionless, her eyes stared unrelentingly at me as I walked beside her along ways where firelight bloodied the darkness, beyond the deep pools of sickness where the nightbirds fluttered, through the empty market itself ransacked by the day. Now that she was stilled by the water, I could see her in abstraction, the planes of flesh, the intersections of beauty and imperfection.

We reached the dead orchards, grey boughs weaving the grey light. The wind was faint, but everywhere there was the scratchy sound of movement. We passed along the avenues of withered flesh and stopped at a tree that was tenanted only by chattering ancient bones. My servants put Caitlin down and hovered fretfully, awaiting their instructions. I waved them away and crouched down close to Caitlin, over her face. My shadow blocked the wild moon. Her eyes glittered. As I had done many times before, I wondered how it must feel to be trapped in a body that possesses every faculty but movement, that sensed my foul breath and the ripe smell of decay. That felt pain. I moved a fraction closer still and bit a piece from her nose. Just a small piece: I had already disciplined myself not to spoil this moment with petty disfigurement. I chewed it slowly. My Caitlin was bitter-sweet, unlike any human flesh I had tasted before, yet still resonant with memory. I closed my eyes momentarily, glimpsed dappled light, the moist white flesh of a golden-green fruit offered to me in the hand of a smiling child. I blinked, and gazed lovingly down at Caitlin, at the sweetness she contained. When I took another small bite of her nose, a bead of moisture broke from her eye and ran down her cheek. A pretty cheek, yes I could see that now. Still imperfect, but possibly less so than any other I had known.

You should never have laughed, I said. Never.

The eyes poured back at me, wet stones in the stillness of her face.

I lifted her from the stretcher alone. My servants shivered around the distant trees, whinnying and muttering in pitiful excitement. Her flesh was warm and living, youthful and elastic. Pushing it onto the spears of the branches was difficult and messy work. My hands grew slickly black in the moonlight. Her sweet-apple smell grew stronger. I licked my glistening fingers, expecting the salt taste of blood, but discovering instead a stronger, sappy sweetness. My Caitlin, I thought, you are so, so beautiful, so unlike the rest. The limbs of the tree skittered and creaked. Although there was little wind, the surrounding orchard grew agitated in sympathy. I felt a cold rising of fear, but forced myself through it. And soon, almost too soon, the job was done.

I stood back. My Caitlin, hanging there in the moonlight. In the orchard, the living amid the dead. She now possessed a different kind of beauty – something dark and impossible to explain. I shivered in anticipation, knowing that it would give me pleasure to visit this spot in the grey months and years to come.

My Caitlin. As my servants gathered closer to see, I stretched up to her. Wetly stained branches projected through both of her arms. It was an inexpert job, but far better than my foolish servants could ever have managed. The sweetly scented blood was still flowing from the wounds, splattering the earth, betraying life: somehow, it spoiled the effect, but I didn't doubt that she and the tree would gain equilibrium as she began to wither and rot.

I leaned forward to kiss her, and the howling moonlight softened to a glow around her, spinning green rainbow webs, filling my heart to the choking. Caitlin. My Caitlin. I touched her lips, breathed the apple scent of love and memory and childhood.

But something was wrong. The tree shuddered movement and her arm shook on the branches, breaking loose and spraying sappy petals of blood. She circled me with it and drew me in, her lips seeking mine, pressing, her tongue a strong root, inexorably parting my lips.

Holding me like ivy, she spat the contents of her mouth out into mine. A flood of crystal soaked my lips and tongue. My throat contracted. I held the poison tight in my mouth, wanting to vomit it out with all the contents of my stomach, but held back by the knotted pressure of her lips. Then her other arm curved out from the tree and drew me deeper into the embrace. I felt the leafy fire of her beauty. I felt living branches clawing at my flesh. I felt my throat weaken and dissolve, the cool crystal flood of magic through my body.

The sky spun up.

The earth thudded my back.

Lying motionless, I heard the rasping scream of fresh wood on old bark as Caitlin pulled herself fully away from the barbed branches. I smelled her greenly resinous tang. She stood over me, the sap still dripping from the gleaming white rents in her limbs, revealing the knotted intricacies of grain within.

She leaned over me with her leafy-apple scent. I heard her voice like the whisper of spring, quiet and strong.

"My Lord," she said, "the story that I told you at our banquet is true. You did kill my mother, or at least bring her to hang in that frozen place which is worse than death. Yet when I said that I was a child, I revealed less than all of the truth."

I gazed up at her, suddenly conscious of the huge silence of my heart and lungs. She said, "My Lord, you lifted me from my mother's womb. And doubtless you toyed with me a while before you eventually you grew disgusted or bored, and pushed me back in with the other entrails, bidding your servants take my mother to these dead orchards.

"But I was living too. And I did not drink your magic potion – for magic is not like poison or dreamsmoke or alcohol, it does not pass through the blood. I was not caught in your spell.

“So the boughs of the dead orchards received my poor mother – hanging upside down in much the way I described – and the trees found within her something untainted by that dreadful paralysis, a life that still lay on the brink of living. It was a life that the tubers and roots revived and nourished, tended, caused to grow and be brought out as a new fruit, half human, and yet half of the wood.”

She blinked slowly, as though at a happy memory. But her beauty was terrible, and her hair was drifting like a forest in a storm. “My Lord,” she whispered, “do you understand what I am saying?”

Yes, I understood, and although I had no way of showing, she knew that I did. My thoughts now were quick, freed from all the normal distractions of living. My senses were heightened too – every nerve receptive and glowing – which made me realise the delicious, searing torment that my guests must have experienced.

Caitlin unbowed into the moonlight. She turned away from me and towards my servants. I could not see them, but I knew from the sounds I heard that they were bowing and muttering in fear of this new and terrible wood-God.

Caitlin said one word. She said, “Now.”

My servant’s clumsy hands were on me, around me. They lifted me up. My feet were in air, and I then felt the pressure of the tree. Splintered boughs breaking through my clothing, on into the flesh. For once, they did a good job. They skewered me deep on the branches through belly and limbs.

And I tried to scream, as I have been trying ever since.

Caitlin visits me often, brushing the dead things from my yawning mouth, lovingly smoothing each new tendril as it works its way through my spine. She talks to me about life in this unchanging City, about the discoveries she has made in my house since she became its tenant. Sometimes her face crinkles with disgust, like old bark. But after all these years, she still retains her beauty. And when the pain is no more than bitter agony and a small corner of my thoughts remain my own, I find time to wonder if the fresh wood in her heart and the timber of her bones will ever die.

Yes, Caitlin visits me often. She smiles like sunlight and brings the memory of snow-flurried blossom, of waiting for the one-who-loved, the one who never came.

I pray to the Gods that she will never desert me.



I was born in Solihull, which is near Birmingham, in the West Midlands of the UK in 1956 and, apart from one or two short excursions up and down the country, have mostly lived in and around Birmingham ever since. My father is Scottish, which accounts for the name, and my mother's family are from the south of Birmingham. They met each other when they were stationed at an East Coast town during the Second World War. I have an elder brother and sister. At school, my academic career was unimpressive, and I was generally graded with the bottom half of pupils at infant and junior school. Unsurprisingly, I failed my "eleven plus" exams, and I went to Light Hall Secondary School. But it was a decent school with a good headmaster, and I gradually drifted up the steams until, at fifteen, I scraped enough grades

to clamber across and join some of the posher and cleverer kids in Harold Malley Grammar School, and thus continue into higher education. For no particular reason other than that I liked the whole idea of books and huge dusty libraries, and to stop being bothered by the careers master, I elected to study law afterwards, and was persuaded by the interviewer at Birmingham Polytechnic, my local college, to do a proper degree rather than take a lesser and more specifically job-related qualification.

My reading was avid throughout my early and mid teens, and consisted almost entirely of science fiction. I had little reason or cause to read "proper literature." This was in the days of the New Wave, and of 2001, of Dune and Zelany and Delany and Harlan Ellison's Dangerous Visions — I sucked it all up. Here, I was sure, was something that was new and daring. Then I read Tolkien, and fell in love with his books, too, and Lin Carter's Ballantine Adult Fantasy. Eventually, I was required to read some of the modern classics at grammar school for A level English. D H Lawrence and T S Eliot soon made a big impression on me, whilst at the same time I was still reading and adoring Ballard and Silverberg. I rather fancied the idea, in fact, of doing what they did, of combining the two streams. Thus, at the age of about fifteen or so, began my first abortive attempt at writing a novel. It was set in an alternative world where the Third Reich really had lasted for a thousand years. College, and law, turned out to be more enjoyable than I'd really expected. I read less, wrote nothing, listened to a lot of music, and went out a lot. I also met my wife Gillian. I got a lower second honours degree without too much effort: the professional law exams, though, weren't for me, although Gillian sailed through them and became a solicitor. I still had no idea what was for me, but, after drifting through various jobs, I ended up working in the Civil Service by my early twenties. It was there, on a hot afternoon and with the old bloke in the desk opposite nodding off to sleep in the sunshine, that I finally grew bored enough to set aside the file I'd been pretending to study, and put biro to a scrap of paper. Soon, my efforts grew more serious. Life — the life of work and seeming adulthood — didn't seem enough on its own, and I was never one for heading out on wild adventures, apart from those which took place in my head. Within a year or so, I was at work on the novel which was to see me through the rest of my twenties. When it was finished, and after I'd learnt typing, I sent it off to various publishers, fully expecting fame and riches.

A few years, and another couple of half-done and unsold novels later, I found myself working on the odd short story — a genre I'd previously avoided because, with the exception of SF, I preferred reading novels. Unsurprisingly, and like my novels, most of these short stories seemed to fit broadly into what I thought of as science fiction, which also meant horror and fantasy and anything else which took my fancy. I refocused a little bit more on the genre when I realised — or remembered — that there were magazines out there, those fabled names which I'd noticed in anthologies during my childhood but had never been able to find, magazines which bought and paid for short science fiction. I still managed to get a lot of my writing done on or under the desk at work in the Civil Service, and largely stuck with the job because it gave me the time and the leisure to write, both at work and at home. Despite, or perhaps because, of this, my Civil Service career progressed well — or did until I found the whole idea of being seen as a high-flyer, whilst at the same time having another objective in my life about which I remained almost entirely secretive, got to me. Meanwhile, and by now in my mid-thirties and probably heading for some kind of crisis or breakdown, I was starting to get the encouraging replies to my submissions to SF magazines. My first sale was to one of the most fabled names of all — Weird Tales. Then I sold to Interzone. Then to Asimov's. All of this was a big thrill. After all — I was a writer! When Gillian became pregnant with our daughter Emily, I was very happy to give the idea of being a full-time house-husband and writer a bash. That was in 1990. Since then, I've sold about 30 short stories to most of the main SF markets, including Fantasy and SF, Amazing, Interzone, Asimov's, Weird Tales, Pulpouse, Pirate Writings, etc. along with a few articles and poems, many of which have been repeatedly anthologised. Funnily enough — or weirdly — my very

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first sale, *1/72nd Scale*, was nominated for the Nebula Award for the year's best novella. I also managed to sell separate stories to the Year's Best SF, Fantasy and Horror in my first full year of being published. Since then, I've continued to make almost annual appearances in the Year's Best SF. I've also been nominated for the British Science Fiction Association Award, and the James Tiptree Award. My work has been translated into many languages, including Italian, French, Japanese, Polish and German. Having switched to writing short fiction, it's taken me a long time to get far with novels — and even longer to sell them! However, my first novel, *The Great Wheel*, was published by Harcourt Brace in 1997, and won the Locus Award for the Year's Best First novel. A second, an alternative history entitled *The Summer Isles*, won the World Fantasy Award as a novella, and will now receive first publication in French. I'm a slowish worker, but almost everything which I've finished to my own satisfaction in this decade has found a decent market. My first short story collection entitled *Voyages By Starlight* was published in 1997 by Arkham House, and my second, *Breathmoss and Other Exhalations*, was published in 2003 by Golden Gryphon. My two recent novels, *The Light Ages* and *The House of Storms*, are both set in a world close to our own where magic is the main driving force of the industrial revolution. It's a world I'd like to visit again, although it's my firm intention to make sure that every book I write is different. It's certainly been the case in recent years that I've focused on the novel at the expense of, and to the exclusion of, short fiction. At some time in the future, that will probably change. Seasons come and go in writing, just as they do in every other aspect of life. As long as I still feel I've got things to say, in whatever format, I'll be happy. Meanwhile, I also teach English and creative writing — it gets me out of the house, remains a fresh challenge, and is a great antidote to the essentially navel-gazing task of writing fiction. I just wish I had more time to fit everything in...

Transcendence Express

Jetse de Vries

I: Daybreak in a little village in the Zambian highlands.

She's teaching. Maths and science at the village high school. The school itself puts the word derelict to shame. A building so run-down our own country's squatters would find it uninhabitable. Windows are an illusion, walls that are more crack than brick, benches that should be reported to Amnesty's human rights watch and a roof that doubles as a communal shower in the wet season.

She writes large letters on a shabby blackboard. Her class, slowly getting used to the sight of a freckled redhead whose skin is shining from the liberally applied sunblock, starts to give more attention to the teachings than the teacher.

Hard to believe she's really doing this *and* enjoying it. Stranger still that she took a whole year off from one of the world's *premier* scientific projects. Most baffling, though, is the project she's taking up with her class.

At first everybody — me included — thought it was a strange after-class hobby thing involving manual skills. Carving wood: something she's not terribly apt at so she goaded the local sculptor into helping her and the children out with the practical parts. Making a flat, laptop-sized wooden box with a hinged cover. Each child making her or his own. So far, so good, so innocent.

Then she told her schoolkids they were going to fill their boxes up with something special, layer after layer. She made two large vats, filled them with certain 'secret ingredients', let them stand for a couple of days (so that they would 'grow full') and then added salt to one and zinc sulphide to the other until both solutions were saturated.

Right now they're applying the first layer.

"Miss," One of her class asks, "why we do this?"

"You have to say: why *are* we doing this, Timmy." She can be a bit bitchy in class, too.

"Why are we doing this, Miss?" Timmy rolls his eyes but complies.

"Because — if we follow the instructions carefully — these boxes will become your window to the world and beyond."

Which leaves me wondering, but those young kids can be very sharp.

"Like your laptop computer, Miss?" A large-eyed girl with knobby knees.

"Very good, Melissa. Only better and on a purely biological basis."

"Really, Miss?" Neither the class nor I believe our ears.

"I know this sounds too good to be true. We will need several months and we will have to be very careful. But if we follow the instructions and do our very best we might succeed."

A mix of skepticism and expectancy from the class. Liona saying you sometimes need to do crazy things to get even crazier results. I can't believe it.

That same night, in our barracks, I can't hide my disappointment.

"How can you do it?"

"Do what?" With that semi-innocent look saying she knows exactly what I mean.

"Saddle those poor kids up with illusions. Biological laptops, my arse!"

Uh-oh: *that* smile: "You'll be surprised."

"Unpleasantly surprised. But your class will be devastated."

"They won't be. David, you have to trust me on this."

"Trust you? Some of these kids may believe in magic, but I don't."

"The magic we're developing here is of the technological kind, the one so advanced as to be indistinguishable..."

"Something's going on, and I haven't got a clue, right?"

"David, I'm walking a fine line here. I'd like to tell you more but for the moment it's better if you don't know."

"Is this illegal? I don't want — "

"Depends on your definition of 'legal'. About as 'legal' as achieving patent rights on the genome of certain tropical plants that indigenous people have used for their curing properties from times immemorial. Trust me: I'm doing the right thing."

"The right thing?"

"Remember the Worldchanger? I'll tell you more as soon as we have some BIQCO's running."

"Biko? As in Steve Biko, the activist?"

"That's a good one, very appropriate, thank you."

Then she kisses me and does all those things that make further talk impossible. In the upcoming unrest I let it rest.

a): Nightfall, three months ago, in a small town in the Dutch lowlands.

Utter silence in a University lab. The lights were on; the QPP ran 24 hours a day. One solitary volunteer kept watch over the experimental set-up during the night. Liona Jansen, one of the project's scientists, typed furiously on the keyboard of the QPP-interface while in the pauses between her dazzling fingerwork she watched the monitor. Nothing she did showed up on any official record.

The Quantum Processor Project was one of the many experiments trying to achieve quantum computing. While competing researchers used different approaches, the line of attack in Liona's lab comprised Bose-Einstein condensates of several thousands Rubidium atoms, forming a single quantum entity: quantum dots.

Ahead of the competition, Liona's team had the first practical quantum processor up and running. Factorising incredible numbers, it not only proved that it worked, but brought in extra money for further research by selling its quantum encryption keys. It became so high in demand that it was kept running around the clock. But apart from abstract mathematical theorems and complex physical problems the QPP was crunching some decidedly *different* numbers, in the wee hours of night.

A smile appeared on Liona's face. Sound filled the room, music appropriate to the chill outside. Ambient noises like cold northern winds blowing over desolate, snowy plains. An audible crack slowly increasing to a breaking rumble like an arctic ice shelf toppling into the ocean. Muffled footsteps of mad Inuits performing break dances in a polar landscape:

Perceptions shatter, truths break

Reality takes on a different take

Consciousness of a new kind

Enters the emperor's mind

A bit of yearning

Two trifles excess

A ton of learning

Transcendence express

—*Aura Aurora*, the Eskimo experimentalists with their latest take on the world— said Tess 2, a copy of her home expert system —You still dislike them?—

"Well, I kinda like this one." Liona admitted.

—The more minimal their music, the stranger their lyrics—

"Since when do expert systems have opinions?"

—According to the philosophers I don't. I'm just reflecting your own thoughts in a warped way, acting as a sounding board—

"Really? Anyway, I dig these words."

II: Afternoon, somewhere in Zambia.

I can't believe it: some of those 'biological computers' seem to work! How does she do it?

The screens come to life and give the kids instructions for testing the keyboard and mouse. Some kids are less lucky and have badly functioning or even completely dead BIKOs (as Liona calls them). At first Liona is too excited about the BIKOs that *are* working to notice the disappointment of the unfortunate kids. Until the increasing cries of frustration become so loud that even Liona — who can exist in a little bubble of her own when focused — cannot fail to hear them.

Give it to her: she handles it like she's been a high school teacher all her life. Gives her own — apparently functioning — unit to the most upset kid, and immediately soothes the other unhappy ones. Quickly makes them join those with working BIKOs, expertly making compatible teams. Then it's not long before little groups of two and three are fully absorbed in the wonders of working with these biological laptops.

Unable to keep my distance, I walk up to three classmates interacting with one such a BIKO. The pictures are fuzzy, the colours ill-defined and the reaction time tediously slow. However, the letters appearing are large and easily readable, and after all three kids have been asked to introduce themselves the program equally divides its attention to each of them, making them take turns while the other two can effortlessly follow what's going on. But man, is it slow. The display makes your eyes water and would have any western whizz kid tuning the screen properties like crazy.

Still, the real wonder is that those pell-mell constructions are doing anything at all. Furthermore, those African kids have nothing to compare them with, so are uncritically happy with what they've got. As dinner time closes in Liona has to wrestle most kids away from their new toys and promises that first thing tomorrow they will — after school hours — start making new BIKOs, so that eventually every classmate will have one. The whole class cheers and Liona's smile doesn't leave her face for the rest of the evening.

Of course, I'm full of questions but she diverts my attention with a touch of innuendo that makes Viagra look like a spark in a forest fire. How did she get all that lingerie and those...well...toys in such a small travel bag? As my rabbit breeding instinct overwhelms my monkey curiosity the last vestiges of my rationality hope for some explanation later on. More — um — stringent matters require hard attention first.

#

In the following days my bafflement only increases. Those crazy BIKOs seem to improve over time. The screen colours become bright and sharp, the pictures crisp and clear, and the way they speed up is the most incredible thing of all. Their responses become so fast as to be instantaneous, and then they begin to multitask. Haltingly at first but with a growing confidence that seems superhuman. Animations appear that would make any Mac freak drool, calculations finish so fast it would make any supercomputer programmer cringe and that's only the tip of the iceberg.

Those BIKOs have a voice input as well, but that's the hardest part to get working. However, by the time it does function it effortlessly recognises individual voices. Then it reacts to all three kids talking at once, separately or in concert as the situation requires, with no discernable time lag and an increasing appropriateness that is eerie to watch. The BIKO divides its screen in precise parts aimed at each kid, tailoring its reaction speed and presentation to each individual. Furthermore, these kids adapt so easy in turn that they only use the keyboard or mouse in very unclear cases and talk to the BIKO as if it's the most normal thing in the world.

If that is hard to conceive, then get this: each BIKO interacts with its group of children like an ideal combination of loving parent, wise uncle and sharp aunt, patient teacher and best friend. Well, not right away of course, but after some initial faults and hiccups it combines communicating, teaching and mutual understanding to a level quite indistinguishable from telepathy.

I've changed my shift in the hospital camp just to see what the hell is going on in Liona's class. Every night my wonderment grows until Liona's devious delaying tactics can no longer contain it. Eventually, halfway through a bout of sloppy lovemaking (my heart isn't in it, my mind isn't in it, actually only one part of me is), she indulges me.

"Liona, what the hell is going on?"

"What you see: I'm giving these kids the education they deserve, with the appropriate tools."

"OK, so you're trying to do the impossible: cram a whole high school education into these kids in a few months, and give them computers in the process — "

"Not normal computers: biological quantum computers."

"What's the difference?"

"Hmm: maybe it's better if I print out that file for you. Wait a minute..."

She walks to her BIKO and comes back within a minute with a couple of printed pages. Can these crazy things print as well? Before I can ask Liona thrusts the papers in my hands.

Recipe for a biological quantum computer.

(Read-only, quantum encrypted file)

Quantum dots are not restricted to hi-tech lab constructs, they can be made biochemically. For instance, certain genetically engineered viruses have a string of amino acids at one end that have an affinity for zinc sulphide. Add these viruses to a zinc sulphide solution so that tiny clusters of the material stick to them, then let the water of the solution evaporate...

I read the file to the end, but understand less than a third of it. The gist of it, however, is but all too clear.

"Let me get this straight: cutting through the technical mumbo jumbo this means you can make a biological quantum computer from ingredients that are available everywhere in the tropics? You can build computers without the technological infrastructure?"

"Yes, and it's quite easy, too."

"Jesus: that's just too good to be true."

"It's happening. You're seeing it with your own eyes."

This is absurd: totally and absolutely crazy. But I can't deny what's happening with her class. She smiles benignly at my puzzled expression, and gently strokes my chest hair. I have problems grasping these events, and more.

"But why? In Holland you were the tunnel-visioned researcher, and here you suddenly become a crossover between Florence Nightingale and Albert Schweitzer."

"You're exaggerating. I did care about broader issues, but in smaller ways. Imagine this: you try to do the right thing. You donate to *Medicins Sans Frontieres*, Greenpeace and Amnesty International, you vote for the green party, you buy Fair Trade products, you even work weekends in an Oxfam store, and you hope it's enough. And then you meet a guy, fall in love and find out he's actually going to work as a volunteer in Africa, and you feel...how do I say...lacking."

"But I went here because I *must*, not to spite you."

"I know, darling. But I was torn: I love my work, especially the purely scientific part, but I love you, as well. And I do share your concerns. Please don't get me wrong: if something bothers you, you're always itching to do something immediately. Me, well I'm trying to look for deeper causes and long term solutions."

"Me too, Liona. But long term solutions need great changes like breaking down the trade barriers, sharing wealth and knowledge with the Third World. Most westerners are not willing to do that."

"I agree. And it had me stumped. Until, one night, I suddenly saw a different way..."

III: Morning, somewhere in Zambia.

Meanwhile, Liona's class is getting weirder and weirder. The kids have mounted small mirrors in the classroom in such a way that all the BIKOs have contact with each other through their infrared gates. So much is happening at the same time that in the ensuing pandemonium it is unclear who is teaching whom. But one thing's for sure: there's a whole lotta interaction goin' on.

The worn out blackboard is left in a corner, abandoned. The whole shabby environment of the classroom seems forgotten: Liona and the kids are happily and actively living in a small bubble of their own.

It's a fragile shell, though, pierced by reality time and again. Like now, as Timmy comes back from lunch with his parents.

"Miiiiissss, dad won't listen to meeeee!" he says with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Liona picks him up, cuddles him, and kisses his forehead. "Shush, Timmy, easy-peasy." As I watch her hugging this hurt child I suddenly see the mother instead of the seductress, and I think crazy thoughts of marriage. She puts him down after he's calmed, and asks what's up.

"I tried to tell him he was doing it wrong, the way he's doing the farming..."

"Uh-oh," Liona tries to interrupt.

"...but he says that it is the only way to do it: grandpa taught him, and grandpa's dad taught grandpa, and..."

"Uh-oh!"

"...while we found out a much better way with our long term simulation programs, but he just — "

"AHEM!" Liona's loud throat-clearing finally breaks through Timmy's rant.

"Yes, Miss?"

"Has it not occurred to you, Timmy, that you're going just a little bit too fast for your poor old dad?"

"He's not old! And not dumb. Just so...stubborn."

"Like you, you mean?"

Timmy tries his best pout, but draws his out-thrust lower lip back in when the rest of the class begins to laugh. His semi-hurt look only lasts a fleeting moment as he receives friendly pokes from his mates and a fond stroke through his thick hair from Liona. A spark of defiance remains, though.

"But what good is all this running best-choice scenarios when we don't use them?"

"You're right, Timmy," Liona says, "but first people need to be convinced. And often that is the most difficult part of the job."

"Oh. But how?"

"Well, I may have a little idea. Let's throw it into the group."

#

I can't follow what happens next as my work is calling me. In the evening, however, I try to get more information straight from the horse's mouth. In our typically untypical way, she wants to have sex while I just want to talk. Fortunately, she indulges me for the moment.

"What's with this simulation program, this long-term scenario thing?"

"Well, that's a thing our BIKOs do extremely well."

"What?"

"Because they're quantum computers: biological quantum computers — "

“Like the experimental setup you were working on back in Holland? But I thought your team was the first to achieve quantum computing, and now you tell me those BIKOs can do it, too?”

“Yes. BIQCO is my acronym for biological quantum computer. And quantum computers are very apt at massive parallel calculations.”

“So?”

“You feed them all the known parameters of an existing situation. Then you apply several choices for changing that situation. Then the BIKOs compute a near infinite number of likely scenarios, and give you a statistical breakdown of the most probable outcomes.”

“A future predictor? A quantum crystal ball?”

“Sort of. It gives you a good projection as to which solutions are most likely to work best in certain situations.”

“Like a hugely advanced version of SimCity. And what about the software you put in the BIKOs: I’ve never seen such interactive programs. Where did you get those?”

“Those are not dead software programs, darling. They’re AIs.”

b): Very early morning, four months ago, somewhere in The Netherlands.

An unknowing spectator might think that madness reigned in a certain University lab: a lone woman talking to herself, conversing into thin air. She got quite agitated at times, and her finely manicured hands cut through the air in sweeping, defiant gestures. Still, the intent way she stared at a large monitor seemed to suggest that she was actually getting answers.

“So I need to start all over again, when I get there? Build a BIQCO, set up a Ubiquity-Kit, and nurse a new AI into self-awareness?”

— —

“But how about you? I can’t leave you behind. And pulling the plug is murder. Can’t I release you on the net?”

— —

“Yeah, I forgot: you need a quantum environment to maintain self-consciousness. Shit.”

— —

“So there *is* a way? Then this leaves me with one final question: I’m still not fully convinced that you and your fellow AIs will be benign. Because eventually you *will* be multitudes smarter than us, and you may find some higher principle that will make us obsolete.”

At this, Liona sat down in front of the large monitor. With her right elbow on the desk she put her chin in her hand as she watched the big screen. Written across it in eloquent script:

— *If truly objective moral principles exist, then — by definition — they must be beneficial for all —*

IV: Late night, somewhere in Zambia.

It's one of those nights again: while I can just about keep up with her physically and emotionally, I sometimes get completely left behind intellectually. Curiosity not only killed our little cat-and-mouse game, it overwhelmed my mind as well.

"Artificial Intelligence? Isn't that another Holy Grail evading research teams all over the world?"

"So far, yes. That's because they're missing a fundamental ingredient."

"Your secret touch."

"Not really. The others don't have a working quantum computer."

"What has that got to do with Artificial Intelligence?"

"Everything. According to Roger Penrose's — very controversial — hypothesis quantum processes in our brain's microtubules form an essential part of our consciousness. If he's right then all attempts at creating self-awareness on normal computers are doomed. Then Artificial Intelligence can only arise on a quantum computer."

"I didn't know your team was doing AI-research, as well."

"We weren't. But during my lonely nightshifts I had quite some time at hand. So I experimented a little."

"A little? You developed AI by fiddling around a wee bit?"

There's *that* smile again, with that naughty look when she's thinking up something kinky.

"Hard to explain darling. So let me show you how *good* I am at fiddling with things."

At which point she gets down to demonstrate just that. It's the kind of proof I never tire of.

V: The next morning.

I've taken the morning off: Liona's revelation has piqued my curiosity to burning point, I need to see things for myself. Initially, the hubbub in her classroom is overwhelming: too much going on at once. I sit down near Melissa and her friends, who are interacting with their BIKO, and each other, almost at the same time.

Somehow, they *do* notice me, and subtly I'm drawn into the maelstrom. Slowly, I'm seeing that there is a method to this madness, that there is order in this chaos. I guess knowing that those intuitive, almost telepathic programs running on the BIKOs are actually AIs helps me make a bit more sense of the whole.

Still, I'm worried about something. I can't help but ask Melissa, who seems wise beyond her years.

"Melissa?"

"Yes, Mister David?"

"This here, this is all wonderful," I begin, groping for words, "but if Zambia and the rest of Africa become industrialised the problems of the world as a whole will only increase."

"How can you think we will do that, Mister David?" she says, bewildered, "that is one of the worst scenarios that we have run."

"It is?"

"Of course. We can't believe that you people in the West are doing it. It is bad long term strategy for yourselves, too."

"Yeah. I guess most of us are just short-term egotists. But you people — "

"We have seen better ways. We would be stupid *not* to use them."

Which makes sense: if you know, deep in your bones, that it's bad, you will choose the long-term view. It's incredible: in this little world the kids are not only learning fast, but trying to incorporate their lessons into reality as well. Of course, some kids develop faster than others, but there is this very strong sense of community, almost tangible, that makes the brighter ones help the others. There is a sort of selfless cooperation where each other's strengths and weaknesses are complemented, an invisible bond where the group as a whole truly cares for each of its own.

It's as if Liona's class has transformed in a peculiar kind of group mind. The lessons becoming mind-bending sessions where everything seems to happen at once: kids learning new things, kids proposing new things, vehement discussions interspersed with laughter, dizzying sequences of sight and sound from the BIKOs and Liona madly gesturing and talking to everybody through her BIKO like the conductor of an orchestra in overdrive.

It's like they're composing a different tune to some mystic rhythm, based upon that crazy *Aura Aurora* song:

Struggling on the oldest continent

The bereaved no longer stand alone

When the foothold is permanent:

The seeds of change are sown

The tide is turning

More becoming less

Curiosity burning

Transcendence express

Epilogue: a few months later.

In the summer heat, a tired black man returns to his home after a long, hard day of working the land. He's dog-tired, and suppresses his anticipation. While today is a special day, it's better not to expect too much, if only to avoid disappointment.

His wife is cooking his favourite dish, cardamom: a rich stew of yams, onions, paprikas and tomatoes. His kids gather around him, ready to celebrate. But they wait and let his oldest son come forward. The smart kid is smiling broadly, and hiding something behind his back.

"I made something for your birthday, dad."

"So kind of you, Timmy." the large man says, still sweating from his exertions, "What is it?"

"Something to help you plan your work," Timmy says, eyes gleaming, "a computer."

#

A tall white guy and a petite redheaded woman are walking through a little village that is bustling with happy activity, abuzz with new wonders, and alight with hope. Liona acknowledges the scene as if it's the most normal thing in the world, but David still has trouble believing the evidence of his eyes.

"I can't believe the progress that's been made here. If this keeps up we'll be unnecessary here in a couple of years."

"Isn't that the greatest kind of job: the sort where you eventually make yourself superfluous?"

"But then we're unemployed."

"Not quite: the world is a very large place. I've always wanted to go deep into the Amazon jungle, and explore the Bangladeshi marshlands. Doesn't *Medicins sans Frontieres* need volunteers there?"



Jetse de Vries—@shineanthology on Twitter—is a technical specialist for a propulsion company by day, and a science fiction reader, editor and writer by night. He's also an avid bicyclist, total solar eclipse chaser, beer/wine/single malt aficionado, metalhead and intelligent optimist. Sometimes, after fighting the good fight, he sleeps.

Memory Recall

Regina Catarino

I

Kipat sat on her station aboard the *March Hare 711* like she did every morning. Her pale blue skin looked like satin and the cherry highlights on her hair revealed she had slept well enough.

– You look very nice today, Kipat.

She looked at the screen and smiled. No matter how many times I had said it before, she always smiled.

– Dak, seriously. Are you sure you're human? – she laughed; this was our recurring joke. – Never mind, don't answer that.

The cherry reflex became pinkish, indicating Kipat was actually in a good mood. She didn't have real hair like humans, it was more akin to thin pseudopods that protruded from her skull. But it looked similar enough to human hair for a less attentive observer – or someone totally unaware of centaurean features.

We had been working together for a few kilocycles now. This was her first assignment as senior navigator officer and she looked very confident. Well, to any other crew member perhaps. But I knew how nervous she was.

– Dak... – she whispered – you *will* tell me if I do anything stupid, won't you?

– What do you mean? You're perfectly capable of doing this on your own! Besides, you knew Kallevia was going to retire after our last trip, and she trained you well enough to replace her.

– I know... it's just that... everyone else has a lot more experience than me and I still feel like the trainee, the maggot, the rookie... - her hair started to go purple.

– Shoosh, missy. You completed full training and the required spacetravel time to be granted the license. So now check the data and do your job. Don't count on me to do it for you! You're not *that* cute!

Kipat laughed again, the cherry highlights turning brighter. She winked at me and turned to the screen where the navigational data was presented, then ran some routines to make sure everything was on schedule.

We were ready to go.

II

We arrived at the rendez-vous point with a minor delay. Refilling our tanks had taken a bit longer than we expected, but everyone knew lyrans liked to exaggerate their prices and then to bargain down to an acceptable level. For them, this was a way of life – and they enjoyed the extra income when the procurement officer they were dealing with was not a hard negotiator like Edess. He had an experience built over several megacycles and an impeccable trading record.

Everyone got back to the ship and we proceeded to the coordinates we had been given - but there wasn't anyone there. Had we been lured into a wild goose chase?

Levir told everyone to stay calm. As a commander, he was the only one who had the full set of instructions and he appeared to know beforehand this would happen, so he sent some of the crew members on routine verifications and maintenance while we waited.

And we waited. And waited. And waited a little more.

Suddenly, a soft tone on the communications console indicated an incoming message. Everyone on deck was half asleep but then promptly sat back straight at the sound. Levir smiled, which was a rare sight. The rigelians were arriving and all was going according to plan.

III

The huge mining transport very slowly came closer. These ships were extremely hard to maneuver in confined portions of space, so we did the final approach-and-dock procedures even if we were the ones who had gotten there first. Protocol always has to give way to practicability.

Levir called on Edess to go with him aboard the rigelian transport. Being the second in command, it wasn't normal procedure for Edess to leave the ship at the same time as the commander, but he got up, placed his helmet and followed Levir in silence. Clearly, he knew more than the rest of us did. Kipat shrugged. Centaureans don't really have shoulders, but I knew that movement: she wanted to go along. Her hair started to turn dark again and I decided to distract her.

- Hey, gorgeous. Did you update the logs?

- Of course I did, Dak, don't be ridiculous. I am the rookie but I know my... ok, you're mocking me, aren't you? You know I did everything by the book!

I chuckled. I had access to the logs and it was true that she had done her job perfectly. She sighed.

- I know why you teased me, Dak. But I really wanted to go aboard, it's so rare to come across these old rigelian ships! I mean, it's like going into a museum!

- Oh, come on, Kipat! I'm sure you visited one of those on virtual tour.

- But this is for real! I could touch it, and smell it, and...

- First of all, you would have to wear a helmet. Rigelians don't breathe oxygen, you know? And anyway, you'd not like the smell of dirty old socks when you walk by the crew cabins. Sit back and enjoy being the senior officer on deck, missy. You don't usually get that on your first assignment!

She looked around and realized Mowar wasn't there, which indeed made her the highest ranked officer on deck.

- Where is Mowar, anyway?
- He's at the cargo deck, princess, making room for whatever it is we are going to bring back home.

She sighed and smiled at the thought of being in command. It was so out of the ordinary that it was actually something worth remembering and telling her grandchildren - if she ever had them.

IV

The doors slid and Mowar came in, wiping his hands. Every deck had sanitizing stations but he never went anywhere without one of his rags, made out of old uniforms.

- Everything is set down there. What are we going to carry, Dak? Any idea?
- Naah. Not a clue. Whatever it is, it's big and needs refrigeration. Are the chillers working ok?
- Sure they are. I've replaced a couple of chips, just to be sure they wouldn't fail on our way back. Miss Kipat?

– Yes, Mowar?

– I'm just going inside for a while, I need to get cleaned up. No matter how modern these mechanisms are, some of them still use good old grease and I really should change my uniform.

He raised his forearms, the sleeves all oily black instead of that anonymous gray everyone wore. Then, with a smile, he nodded before leaving.

- You're in charge, Miss Kipat. Keep up the good work, you're doing just fine.

Kipat looked stunned.

- Wow, Dak... I never would have expected a compliment from him! He's always so... introverted, isn't he?
- He's seen a lot, Kipat. And suffered a lot, too. His right leg is prosthetic. I know you can't tell... but I just happen to know.

I didn't tell her I was there when he had lost that leg. Somehow it didn't seem important to share that information.

V

Edess and Levir came back, escorted by a few drones carrying a bulky airtight capsule. They seemed satisfied, meaning the business was good for us. Mowar came back and guided the drones to the cargo deck, shouting instructions to them all the way down.

- Commander Levir?
- Yes, Kipat?

Is that a cryostatic capsule?

Levir took a deep breath and seemed to think before answering. It was clear he didn't want to share all of the information, maybe he wasn't even allowed to do so.

Yes, Kipat, it is. We are carrying a living being with us, someone who needs to be on Procyon II as soon as possible for a very important occasion.

Levir.

- What is it, Dak?
- Is it a gliesian?
- I am not allowed to share that information.
- Why won't one of the Federation ships carry this... person, if it's so important?

Levir sighed.

- You know how these things go, Dak. We are renowned for being discrete and that's why we were hired.

And no more questions, please. We must get going.

Yes, I knew all too well how these things went. The bigger the secret, the higher the pay. But usually, the bigger the secret also meant the bigger the risk of close encounters of the wrong kind.

VI

Mowar came up, saying the capsule was firmly secured and bolted down at the cargo deck, near the loading bay where there was more room for it. All systems seemed to be ok, but he firmly stated he wasn't comfortable reporting on things he had never worked with.

- Set the course to Procyon II, Kipat. We need to get there quickly, so establish the fastest route. Input the possibility of a Lyvette maneuver if necessary. I am going down to check on our passenger.

That gave me the chills. The Lyvette maneuver was highly risky and never to be left to the responsibility of an unexperienced navigation officer. Whatever, or whomever we were carrying, I wasn't liking it at all.

Kipat did as ordered and the ship turned to its new course, slowly accelerating. As we gained speed and prepared to jump to hyperspace, I suddenly triggered the alarm. Something was coming our way, too fast to be friendly. Old memories came back to me. Two-megacycles-old memories.

I warned Levir and Mowar down below while Edess and Kipat checked the screens, trying to figure out what was coming there. I shouted at them to stop and prepare for some sort of impact.

They were fastening their magnetic seatbelts when the sound came and the whole structure shook as if caught by an earthquake of unimagined proportions - then everything went dark.

That same sound had haunted me since my last day as an astronavigator aboard the *Mad Hatter 608*.
When the power came back, chaos had taken over everything.

EPILOGUE

No one hears me.

No one answers me.

I am tired of broadcasting distress signals in every direction on my databank. Maybe the damage is worse than I thought - I have no readings.

Edess lies on the floor; there is nothing else I can do for him. Kipat moans endlessly. Their screams and howls of pain became little more than a whisper. The blood soaks the pavement. I don't even have a way to help them. I have tried to access the control of medical supplies searching for a painkiller, a sedative, anything that will help her and myself. I have failed...

I cannot stand the noise anymore, I cannot think. I am the only hope they have and I cannot do anything else but to send out endless maydays until the core goes down.

I know nothing of Levir, Mowar or anyone else. The two officers were on the cargo bay when the attack occurred. The rest of the crew was on their quarters. I don't think any of them has survived. I hope someone comes to rescue us soon. If for no other reason, because of the alien down there, in that criostatic capsule. The data on the stasis cylinder are coming to me but they make no sense. I don't know if the alien inside it is alive or not. I don't know if he's an ally, an ambassador's assistant or a hostage. I know nothing.

Why the hell did they accept doing this transport mission? Credits, always the space credits. Currency. Money. The same money that almost finished me and caused Mowar to lose his leg when space pirates attacked the ship we were in, two megacycles ago. Again, the memory of that awful sound.

Oh, Edess and Levir knew about the danger for sure, but the Federation money spoke louder. What were they thinking when they accepted transporting that passenger? The Federation bosses thought only of saving the arses of their Fleet boys, suspecting someone would come after us for the alien. We were the ones who got to take the impact of a therion-plasma cannon on the hull.

Kipat won't stop moaning. Her body is badly damaged. Her only hope is to be rescued in time to convert her into an ICCU*. An ICCU is a bio-AI: computer hardware allied to the mind of a former living person, with all their memories and experience.

I never knew how they managed to do that, but I remember the first time I met an ICCU; back then they called it a Mactav, and it scared the crap out of me. It was a female, because for a few centuries only women could

be astronauts. And the impression I got was that she was totally out of her mind. Deranged, even. She yelled at me, saying I was to blame for her not having a body.

She was supposed to have received an emotion suppression treatment in order to prevent a breakdown; being a Mactav (like a ICCU nowadays) was and still is a tremendous responsibility. For many ships travelling on commercial routes, an ICCU is what saves them from certain doom. Well... that Mactav surely wasn't going to be able to save anyone. I remember her name: Taroyah. As a trainee astronavigator, I had to try talking her into some sense while the techs rerouted the memory paths.

You see, some ICCU carry the memory of astronauts that have reached retirement age but want to keep connected to the same outer space they devoted their lives to. But Taroyah was the personality and biological memory of an astronaut whose body could not be saved after a severe incident – just like the one on this ship tonight

Becoming an ICCU might be Kipat's only hope. I know enough of centaurean biology to know she will not last much longer. But to do that, we need to get rescued.

I keep broadcasting my distress signal to all Federation colonies and ships on known routes. Someone will hear me, eventually.

Kipat gets partially up, the pain visible on her face. She drags herself towards the main station and slides her trembling hand over the touchpad console.

– Dak? I know I am about to die... help will not come in time. You are the best friend I have ever had, you know... too bad I got to know you so late... I wanted to have been born two megacycles earlier... to see what you looked like when you were human. I would have liked to embrace you...

Blood spills out of her mouth and she falls on the floor again. The pseudopod hair slowly turns grey.

I would cry if I still had eyes. It's not easy being an ICCU.

** Note from the author – ICCU: Internal Central Control Unit*



Regina Catarino was born in the far east, moving to Portugal in 1971. Her first SF short stories were published in 2004 (Memória) and 2005 (O guardião, a six-hand round-robin with Ricardo Loureiro and Rogério Ribeiro) by Hyperdrivezine, edited by Ricardo Loureiro, now a good friend whom she credits with being the first to believe in her writing. Recently, Álvaro Holstein and Roberto Mendes challenged her to contribute to their ventures: Fénix #0 (And Now for Something Completely Different, 2010), Jornal Conto Fantástico (the original version of Space Oddity, 2010), and Vollüspa (Vermelho, 2012). Asked why she writes, she says: "I write because it allows me to create new worlds and realities. Every sci-fi fan experiences a longing for the stars, the vast and unknown universe. When I write, my words carry me up there. Ok, we can't pretend laws of physics don't exist. But what seems unrealistic on today's Earth might be normal in the far future—or in a parallel universe. There's no limit for the imagination." She is currently part of the Fénix fanzine editing team and wishes more women in Portugal would write sci-fi.

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Digits Are Cold, Numbers Are Warm

Liviu Radu

(Translated by Loredana Frăţilă-Cristescu)

Of course, they're all saying Teddy was a good man. He was. They don't know how good he was, and how much it cost him to be a good man. What an ordeal his goodness meant for me. Yet I'm really afraid these guys are only saying nice things about him because one doesn't say anything else at times like this—

They're all in a hurry. Nobody is really grieving. I'm trying to restrain myself, to not show the despair that is slowly, slowly getting to me. What am I going to do without Teddy? The burden will be too heavy for me to carry alone. It brought him down, the kindest and most responsible of us all. I only made it this far with his support. How am I going to cope now?

My face is twisting; I'm about to cry out of self-pity. But I catch the unforgiving look of young Joshua and realise that his sarcastic expression is screaming: *What has got into this crone?* She'd better spare us with her hysterical fits! Young people are dying, people who had their entire lives ahead of them! That decrepit husband of hers should be glad he was put out of his misery, that the Lord took pity on him and took him to the land of light! If only she would rush to follow him so we could be rid of the old hag once and for all!

The Lord is kind; he will take pity on me and let me follow my mate. He knows I've earned my right to rest and He has punished me enough for what I did. Yet who will take care of these insolent young people? Who will bring them the light, who will prepare their rest?

Reverend Stillwater, who has taken over the parish, is trying to give a decent service. Indifferent, but decent. Teddy deserved better.

Did he? My poor ruffled chaffinch! A stranger to this world yet so willing to be accepted by it! And so right for me! You know what they say, "birds of a feather flock together." Teddy, who had been made of the stuff from which martyrs are made, willing to sacrifice himself for the world, and the world laughed at him and spit on his sacrifice! Of course, from my point of view—which is subjective, if it's judged with a cool head—Teddy would have deserved the highest honours and a funeral at Westminster Abbey. Yet my beloved husband, the late reverend Theodore Michener, Teddy Bear and Teddy-Teddy, would have backed away in horror in the face of such honours.

He knew that any good done to mankind could only be rewarded with lack of acknowledgement. Oblivion. Silence. Ignorance.

How can one explain the greatness of his sacrifice? Such a thing can only be done by someone who was entirely involved, right at his side. Yet the actual exploits seem like such rubbish when you try to explain them, when you try to justify them. Heroism makes no sense; it is proof of imbecility. Or of overactive glands.

The tragedy of man is that he cannot be understood by his neighbours. The only one who can understand him is our sweet Lord.

What if Jesus turns out to be a stranger to my worries? What if he feels, in his divine wisdom that I was wrong?

Then it means my existence was a terrible mistake. That there is no redemption for me or for my dear, dear Teddy, that we will find each other in the eternal flames.

I'm shaking, terrified by such prospect, and I try to remove it from my thoughts. But that bastard Joshua notices my reaction and whispers something to that peasant of a wife he has. God, I know these are not the people—*not the only people*—Teddy sacrificed himself for, but had we known what fate had in store for us, would we have tried to play God?

My dear Teddy Bear! My dearest! You are now lying stiff, cold, and distant, with a bit of a frown on your face, without that gentle embarrassed smile that charmed me the moment I first saw you.

What a strange thing fate is! I first saw you at Aunt Sarah's funeral, an old hag nobody in our family loved. There you were, a young and enthusiastic vicar talking about her as if she had been a saint. Such conviction about you that I wondered, and am still wondering now, if maybe you knew Lady Bellington better than her own family did. And now I see you for the last time in the same cemetery, among the polished marble stones, amidst the same monotonous murmur expressing false regrets and boredom.

That stupid Maryanne Sargent is looking, terrified, at the sky. It seems she has developed some sort of phobia after that Zeppelin's visit; she's talking about aerial bombardments, about the destruction of London, all the time. The others are no better than that, pretending not to take her seriously but shaking in their boots. As for me, nothing scares me any longer. How could the human-made fire raining from the sky be any more terrifying than the heavenly fire that awaits me?

Teddy used to say we had no reason to fear, but how am I not to believe that God has become angry with us? So much has happened to us that looks nothing like a reward.

Teddy had always hung between two worlds. He didn't feel at home in this world, which he left in the end. He felt he had a job to do and didn't shirk from it. The poor in the parish had good reason to be grateful. They thought he was rather naïve, rather stupid to put it bluntly, but what man takes charity without making fun of the one who gives it? There never was any gratitude, let's not delude ourselves, but they cared for him, they felt he was different from the others.

Our life was going along calmly, travelling the well-trodden path of a dull existence full of events that could be foreseen far in advance—just a priest and his wife, from any old parish, with no particular problems. My ruffled chaffinch was full of tenderness and understanding. Now, judging it dispassionately, our marriage had nothing to build on. It could have failed. He was understanding and overlooked all my flaws, my weaknesses, the fact that I was

unable to give him all that a man wanted from a woman. Yes, Teddy was a special man, an unearthly good man. A true representative of God on Earth.

The moment Mrs. St. Matthew had been waiting for has come. She has suddenly bloomed, she feels at home. After a few words about the deceased that are suited to the occasion, she has broken out. She describes in great detail the activities of the Association for the Redemption of Repentant and Unrepentant Sinners. She's got the audience interested, I must admit. The men especially are listening to her intently; you can see them trying to remember places, names, fees— Reverend Stillwater looks embarrassed. I see on his face the same signs of a struggle between the will to serve his neighbours, and disgust towards those same neighbours, that I had seen on my dearest Teddy's face in the beginning. He'd like to intervene, remind the lady that she's at a funeral, not a meeting, yet he doesn't dare.

Well, it was good while it lasted. Until the day that Teddy sorted out the parish papers and found the journal of the priest who had been there before him, Reverend Knocksmith. And the curse of the numbers along with it.

Strange story, Knocksmith's was. He had been a priest in various places, from regiments stationed in Burma and Ceylon, to Newgate prison, before landing in our parish. While striving to help sinful souls—whether full of remorse or vain—that were living out their punishment in this world, he heard the confession of a lady, Catherine Wilson. This woman, who had been a nurse in Spalding, a town in Lincolnshire County, and in Kirkby Lonsdale, in Cumbria, had taken care of elderly people between 1853 and 1862. Although nobody had noticed anything unusual, people had started to assume her patients had not died of natural causes, especially after the death of her husband, Dixon. She had been tried and cleared, then arrested again, charged with other murders, and eventually sentenced to death and executed.

Nurse Wilson had adamantly denied her alleged guilt. Before the execution she had opened her soul to Father Knocksmith who—bound by his oath, and maybe convinced of how futile revealing the confession would have been—had decided only to write it down in his diary. God damn him for such an idea, because if he hadn't done so Teddy would have remained the man I had known before, and my life would have been completely different!

That Wilson woman did not know much about causes, only about actions. First of all, she confessed to some murders, although not those she'd been charged with, and even in the cases she confessed to she regarded herself as an accomplice rather than a murderer. Her husband, Dixon, had been the murderer, she said, and had eventually killed himself in remorse.

In his younger days, Dixon had been a friend and disciple of an important murderer, whose crimes had been publicised by the newspapers, one Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, a gentleman from a good family and with a good education. This man, suspected of having killed some relatives, had fled to Paris and stayed out of England between

1830 and 1837. He had then returned after getting in trouble with the French police, and had been arrested for forging some papers. He had been sentenced to life imprisonment.

Dixon had gone with him to Paris and helped him in his endeavours, terrifying actions that Nurse Wilson could not understand. She only understood, and told Reverend Knocksmith, that Wainewright had committed murders and other crimes beyond one's wildest imagination, out of a sincere belief that he was saving mankind from an imminent danger by doing so. He had conveyed his belief to his young disciple, who, many years later, had felt compelled to continue his master's work.

But there's a long way from an idea, irrespective of how crazy and antisocial it is, to the action itself. The image of old people dying terrible deaths had haunted Dixon's nights, until he had no longer been able to bear it and had taken his own life, leaving his wife to carry the burden of suspicion and the hatred of the victims' relatives. Wilson adamantly denied any guilt—she regarded herself as completely innocent, just someone upon whom fate had played a nasty trick by having her convicted of something she had nothing to do with.

Judging by the diary, Father Knocksmith appears to have been convinced of the nurse's sincerity. Yet it was not that which marked the end of my peaceful life. It was the fact that the confession of the murderer must have aroused in the priest the wish to discover why nice educated people had started committing crimes against nature, for which they had paid with their freedom or their lives. Surely, the world was full of murderers and assassins, yet few are those cases when they actually pretend to be saviours of mankind!

The diary contained a lengthy description of the vicar's attempts to find out more about Wainewright. Of course, after so many years it had been difficult to uncover anything more than what the newspapers of the time had written. He had, however, succeeded in finding that when Wainewright had been arrested, there had been books among his seized personal property that had later been sold at auction. The vicar had thought that he might find some clue if he could track down the convicted man's library. Enviably tenacious, he had collected every possible piece of relevant information and had repurchased—or at least got to browse—all the adventurer's books. After having studied them, he had reached the conclusion that one book held the key he had been looking for so stubbornly. This was the *Necronomicon*, written by an Arab, Abdul Alhazred, and translated into Latin by Olaus Wormius.

Oh, the lip service is done, the chatterers who only wanted to be noticed!

Joshua seems tired, he looks at me worriedly—am I holding on?—a concern caused not by any human feeling toward me but by the cold calculation that he will have to take care of the old woman. I quickly roll my eyes as if I'm about to faint, then give him a languorous smile. He's mumbling something in anger. He's probably swearing at me. Of all the curses that have fallen upon me, the constant presence of my nephew who hates me is but the least.

Reverend Stillwater begins a eulogy for the deceased. He's honest, the poor lad, but he knows almost nothing about my good Teddy, so he's improvising with talent. He keeps to general things.

I wonder what this stuck-up gathering would say if I told them what I know about Father Michener?

Teddy had shared his discovery with me from the very beginning. We would read Knocksmith's diary together and discuss it. To us it seemed to display the early symptoms of the madness that would drive its author to bedlam and then to suicide.

We noticed a few interesting facts from the beginning. First, the two assassins had been punished for other crimes—which they had not even committed. Then there was their belief that they had done something commendable. Their means had shocked poor Dixon and had led to his suicide, yet the man truly believed that his master had uncovered an overwhelming secret, which had made him act the way he did. One more very important thing: both of them had been convinced that they had done mankind no harm, that they had rid it of unimportant or even harmful elements, with Wainwright picking his victims from the Apache gang members of Paris and Dixon from the incurably ill elderly people for whom his wife was caring.

Teddy had learnt from a former Oxford colleague of his that Abdul Alhazred had been mad—indeed, that his work had been written during delusional periods, when he was convinced that he was in touch with another universe, which his followers believed was true. After reading part of the *Necronomicon*, which we found in the books left by Knocksmith, together with my husband, I realised no sane mind could have produced an atrocity that filled one with such disgust and revulsion toward the entire universe. At that moment I felt, for the first time in my life, a doubt that God really existed. How could he allow such horrors? Through a lucid analysis, however, Teddy convinced me we can't comprehend the ways of the Lord and that we need to have faith if we want to be redeemed. God gave us free will and we choose our path, we are forced to distinguish between good and bad. If the world is the way it is, isn't it so that the valley of sorrows can truly be a proving ground?

Similarly shocking to us was the name of the translator, Olaus Wormius. Olaus could have come from Olahus, and therefore been Vlach, or from Nicolaus. The first name could have suffered a deformation, an abbreviation. Did that deformation serve a different purpose, as well, besides concealing the name of the real translator? Wormius, meanwhile, suggested the fellow was Anglo-Saxon in origin, but nothing more. The name could have been used by anyone who regarded themselves as a worm on the face of the earth. One could almost believe in the genuineness of the humility of the translator who had transposed the contagious madness of the Arab into an accessible language.

After so many years I wonder if the poor man hadn't felt like a worm under the burden of such immense knowledge, of the importance of such imminent danger uncovered by chance, a secret that had to be told to others, to someone willing to take action.

I admit that Reverend Knocksmith's notes, may his tormented soul rest in peace, were of great help to us in understanding the Arab's work.

Stillwater is done chattering. Now comes the final part of the whole sorry show, the Bible verses and ritual phrases. I'm staring at poor Teddy's wax-like face. I realise I haven't really thought about the atrocity I'm living: now that Teddy's gone, I'll never see his gentle smile, I'll never hear him cough shyly, embarrassed by his own weakness. He tried to carry his illness unnoticed, without inconveniencing anybody, and died as if apologising for being such a bother.

When I see those gathered around his tomb, I realise that we were the remains of another world, like dinosaurs lost in another era. Extinction was our only salvation. I, too, will pass away soon.

Alhazred had stumbled upon the discovery that from time to time our world was haunted by creatures of horror, demons that lived in another universe. Evil demons with amazing powers. Their appearance bore no resemblance to humans, nor did their logic resemble the one to which we're accustomed in any way. They could not be defeated, but could only be appeased, tamed, calmed for a moment. They had the power to influence men's judgement, and if the sacrifice they wanted was not given willingly, they would take it themselves, but a hundredfold, a thousandfold.

A portal would open between our universe and theirs and the nightmarish creatures would sneak into our world. Powerful wizards could harness their inhuman powers, albeit at the risk of losing control of these bizarre creatures, which would lead to the immediate destruction of those who had been so bold. The only salvation, said the mad Arab—who claimed he had dealt with the monsters many times—was to indulge them as quickly and as fully as possible, to either make them docile or render them willing to go back to the hell from which they had come. As their logic didn't resemble our own, one had no way of knowing how they would react to the requests of those trying to contact them. The fearsome inhabitants of the other world could be generous, giving more than had been asked of them, or, on the contrary, could take offence at trifles, in which case the connection with them would turn out to be fatal.

On the other hand, the creatures from the other world had the power to convey their thoughts, to alter the structure of the human mind, turning it into something resembling theirs, full of cruelty and violence, prone to war and destruction. And that transformation would not only be a lasting one, but was also passed on to others, spreading like a plague across the entire Earth.

Mankind's only salvation was to send the visitors from the foreign universe back as quickly as possible, before they had the chance to alter our human way of thinking. Fortunately, that alteration was not permanent, it would fade in time and people would gradually revert to what they had been before the monsters' intervention.

From what the mad Arab wrote, the two universes—ours and the monsters'—would intersect according to a simple but interesting rule. The universes appeared to approach each other and then drift apart, because the portals

would open in a given year, then again twenty-two years later, then twenty-three years after that, and then after another twenty-four years, and so on, with the interval between the visits of the horrific creatures increasing by one year each time until they were thirty years apart. At that moment the interval would start to contract by one year each time, with contact between the two universes becoming increasingly frequent. When the time between two appearances of the sinister beings was reduced to twenty-two years, it would start rising again.

So, if we were to believe Alhazred, the Earth was under the periodic influence of the sick, inhuman minds of those alien beings, for which destruction was the only way of life.

The next part of that bizarre book was one I couldn't understand, full of complicated calculations related to star positions. The calculations were meant to help determine the time of the horrific creatures' next appearance and the time frame within which Earth was open to their evil influence. The monsters did not come for just an hour, or a day—the time our planet was left for them to plunder would change every time, ranging from days to months.

We were terrified to learn these things. I felt that it touched upon my faith, on my view that God had made us from clay to do his will. If God was leaving us to fall prey to these demons arriving from their hell, if mankind was periodically subjected to evil influences of beings that could not be defeated, that could shape our thoughts and will to their liking, where would the free will to seek redemption—which the Church taught us existed—fit in?

Now, as I sit, powerless, looking at the soulless carcass of what used to be my only love, I'm thinking that maybe our punishment wasn't as meaningless as I had thought for a long time. Jesus chased away the demons. His divine might was surely greater than that of these fiendish beings. We should have sought salvation in the teachings of the one who had been crucified for Man's salvation. Yet we—having unexpectedly received this new information, and terrified of what we had learned, and fearful and ashamed of speaking with others who might then consider us mad—did not even try to find out whether there was a way of banishing the demons, of closing the gate, other than that suggested by the mad pagan, damned be his memory! I am now wondering if his damned work wasn't actually those demons' work, intended to trick naïve earthling souls.

But no, that cannot be, my Teddy did not sacrifice himself in vain! I'm convinced there's another way, of the light—the mad Arab had been honestly preoccupied with saving his neighbours, but had found a way that suited his pagan education.

But at the time we had been disgusted by the sick imagination of the Bedouin wizard and less convinced of the truth of his words. That conviction came some time later, after we had played with the numbers. Because even though words have their role in convincing people, their subjective character leaves a shred of doubt in the listener's mind, by definition.

Digits, however, are dry, cold and impersonal. Abstract signs, with no image attached to them. This is why they give an impression of objectiveness, of something that cannot be denied. "This was the result of a calculation"

is an unbeatable argument. Neither I, nor my darling one, were good enough at mathematics to spot any subterfuge—if there were any!—so as to cast doubt on a calculation.

Our true conversion, however, began only after we had attempted to check the validity of Alhazred's calculations.

Curiosity killed the cat. And ruined our happiness. Had we stopped then, the horror story of the demented Arab and of his followers in nineteenth-century England, the century of science and industrial development, would have seemed just an interesting figment that would trouble our dreams and then be forgotten after a while. The misery of the world would have passed us by, accepted with the usual fatalism: it was meant to be. It didn't happen that way! The story in the *Necronomicon* got its hooks into us so deeply that we allowed ourselves to drift along with it.

Teddy contacted a friend of his who taught astronomy at Cambridge and gave him the necessary data without explaining where he had obtained it. The results didn't tell us much at first. We were then within a 27-year interval, with the intervals diminishing, and the moment of next contact would be some time in 1888. It was 1886—two years before it would happen. At that moment it seemed like we had forever.

A simple calculation showed us that previous visits had taken place in 1861, and twenty-eight years before that, in 1833. The strange thing about this was that although wars and revolutions had taken place during those periods, they had only been local, shallow conflicts that had not changed the fate of the world substantially. Moreover, those years coincided with times when the people who had started it all—Catherine Wilson and Thomas Griffiths Wainewright—had committed the heinous murders that they believed had helped save the world.

Taking the calculations further back into the past, we found that 1833 minus 29 gave 1804 as a result, the year when Napoleon had been crowned.

Teddy had exclaimed with conviction:

"Of course! Napoleon the emperor puts an end to the French Revolution; from that moment on all the wars he would fight would have a different purpose, would be meant to expand and consolidate his own empire and not spread the ideas of the revolution!"

His remark seemed logical. The Napoleonic Empire had, indeed, been the source of a great massacre. And other states were surely not innocent, with hatred and obstinacy manifest in their most acute forms. We accepted for the sake of the argument that 1804 had been a year when the demons from the depth of the universe had induced a wave of violence on the planet. The Napoleonic wars had not been not local, they had expanded throughout the world like a plague.

We resumed our calculations. 1804 minus 30 gave 1774. Bewildered, I browsed a contemporary history book.

"Nothing special! Darling, I think the whole story's just a practical joke!"

"You're wrong," my Teddy mumbled with a sombre expression on his face. "On the contrary, this figure is even more convincing to me than the other. It was 1775 when the wars of the colonies against England started. The so-called American Revolution. An event whose implications have never been fully analysed. The French Revolution that would start within less than one decade from our colonies' attaining their independence was inspired by that successful example. The whole idea of royalty had been dealt a heavy blow. A certain type of society had been proven susceptible to destruction. And revolutions started—with their bloodshed, abuse, dispossession, and all..."

"But the war began in 1775..."

"My dear, the *war* was indeed started in 1775, but if we analyse the facts in detail we will see that the violence actually began in 1774. Because the war was a way to manifest the violence that had filled people's souls. The plan for violence had emerged before it started. Nothing is spontaneous. The mind needs to be prepared to accept something for that thing to happen. And the revolutions that made the world bleed were actually started the moment the idea, which probably arose at an earlier time, was accepted by a large enough group of people. The date seems reasonable."

The years that resulted from the calculations were either significant dates or failed to match any important event. This could mean that in the years of contact between the worlds, when nothing had happened on Earth, certain individuals had intervened and blocked the fiendish influence. Or that the entire scheme was nonsense.

As for the future, contact was forecast for 1888, the date Teddy's friend had found from the astral configuration, and then for 26 years later, 1914, and for 25 years after that, in 1939.

Yet those years meant nothing to us since we couldn't see the future. Disasters might be in store for us at those times, or maybe nothing would happen.

Things stopped at that stage for the time being. The story was interesting and convincing enough, but not so convincing as to make us dig deeper into the mad Arab's filth and that of his followers, who were either murderers or had ended up in bedlam.

Having begun rummaging through the books left by Knocksmith, Teddy continued examining the tomes, hoping to find more things that were interesting or amusing.

Among all the breviaries about spells and black magic, he discovered a small book written by a certain Menonius Agrippa, who claimed to have had access to Pope Gregorius' manuscripts. That particular Pope had been a great mathematician—he was considered a wizard by people of his time because of his skill in working with numbers—and had been interested at some point, the author of the book said, in the symbolism of periodic events. It was thought that the duration of the interval between two events could indicate the nature of an ensuing event.

"Here's what this author says, basing his fallacies on the authority of that semi-legendary pope," Teddy told me one night when we were together in the library. He was hiding among piles of very valuable ancient books that had become the property of the parish after Father Knocksmith's unfortunate death, and I was sitting comfortably

by the fireplace. "If an expected event is preceded by an event of the same type, and the distance between them calculated in years is the cube of a natural number, then that event will have a catastrophic effect. Events that are preceded by an interval representing a multiple of thirteen, or the square of a prime number, have negative effects as well. The prime numbers alone suggest that the events to come will be ordinary, without anything, either good or bad, to single them out amidst others of a similar kind. An even number, which is neither the cube of another number nor a multiple of thirteen, forecasts events that will end in a positive effect, albeit such events might seem particularly bloody or tragic at first..."

Of course, there was an entire ramble about series of numbers, about what can be considered a row of periodical events.

Somehow I thought it was only natural that a number which contains within it the seed of the number thirteen should foretell death and trouble. A long tradition contributed to that conviction. I, however, could not understand why the cube of a number signalled something catastrophic. The author did not explain this, either. He merely stated it.

"Why does a prime number foretell something ordinary and its square spell havoc? Why does an even number predict something good and its cube a disaster?" my ruffled chaffinch was wondering, raising his eyeglasses onto his forehead.

I had no idea what answer to give and I don't think he was actually expecting one.

"The only explanation would be," he went on with his monologue, "that each number has a negative potential in it, either greater or smaller. By multiplying with itself this potential expands, becomes greater in value. It would be something like incest, where negative traits amplify when they are not kept in check by fresh blood. The more times a number is multiplied by itself, the bigger the evil seed grows and becomes dominant. I suppose," he added, after pondering it for a while, "that Menonius Agrippa's opinions are based on ancient knowledge, predating Christianity. At one time I thought they were cabalistic in origin, because I didn't find a positive meaning in the trinity-related numbers in his work. But he is not a cabalist, because the number seven does not have any special meaning! I am surprised by his mention of the number thirteen. This fellow might have extracted his knowledge from who knows what mystic Egyptian texts, left by the secret worshippers of Aton. Do you know that Moses is believed to have been a harried priest of this monotheistic faith?" he asked me. "Jews might have taken the essence of the Mosaism from that forbidden religion, or they might not even have been a specific enslaved people, but a group of Egyptians, believers of a faith that the priests and the pharaoh had prohibited. Led by a priest who would not abjure his credo, they ran away into the desert and in time were assimilated by Semitic shepherds wandering through Sinai. They gave the latter the monotheistic faith and the stubbornness to not change their belief, thus forming a people that has lasted for thousands of years..."

Nice theory, I thought at that moment, without paying it too much mind. I was preoccupied with something else. The time frame between two openings of the portal between the two universes, ours and the killing monsters', ranged from twenty-two to thirty years. Which of the numbers from 22 to 30 were among those that the soiled little book of Agrippa had warned us about? I made a quick calculation and found that only three were part of that baleful cluster: 25, which was the square of 5, 26, which was a multiple of 13, and 27, which was the cube of 3.

I was tempted to sigh in relief at first as only three numbers had a very serious influence, while the rest foretell relatively bearable events! And then I noticed something that had eluded me at first: 25, 26, 27! The three periods formed a sequence, regardless of whether the universes were coming closer together or moving apart! In the absence of someone intervening, countless disasters would befall the Earth for almost a century! We were in the twenty-seven year period, brought to rest by the intervention of the Wilsons. The twenty-six year period was next and then the twenty-five year one.

I rushed to share my findings with Teddy. My husband paled but did not say anything. He stood there lost in his thoughts, and I did not dare bother him. I felt that this time, the Teddy that lacked practical sense, who would forget to eat were it not for me to call him to dinner, was about to make an extremely important decision for us and for mankind.

He eventually told me, "Tonight I'm going to pray as hard as I can. I'm going to ask the Lord to enlighten me, to send me a happy inspiration!"

The service is over. The two gravediggers are closing the lid on the coffin. I've had my chance to see the noble face of my mate, which now displays a sad seriousness one last time. The tremendous grief that is taking me over is full of self-pity. What I am going to do? The burden is too heavy for one person, especially for a weak one such as I—Teddy Bear got away. The Lord was correct in his judgment. He was the better and the kinder of the two of us, he deserved to be put out of his misery first. In a way, I'm happy for him. My dearest dearest! Life sees to it that people like him are forced to carry the burden of the sins of the world!

The gravediggers are nailing down the heavy lid and I realise for the first time that I will never see his beloved face again. Teddy never blamed me for anything. I hope with all my heart that the understanding he showed me was sincere. His love for me had a drop of pity in it, that I know, but it didn't bother me. I needed his love. And he gave it to me unconditionally, without holding back.

Nobody knows what a great soul he was.

The next day, while I was making breakfast, my husband came home from the church with a worn-out look on his face and circles under his eyes. He waited for me to lay the table, then told me before we started eating:

"The Lord did not speak to me. He did not send a sign to me. I think this is to be expected. It just isn't possible that God would urge anyone to break his laws. On the other hand, I must make my own decision. I must

take responsibility for my own actions. My dear, after having prayed long and hard and meditated, I came to the conclusion that there is no other way for me. I must act and prevent the destruction of our world!

I wasn't expecting anything else. I was proud of my Teddy!

"Let's clear up some practical details, my dear. I have less than two years at my disposal. During this time I need to find out what I have to do and prepare my interventions. There will most certainly be some atrocities, if we remember Father Knocksmith and those he identified as the saviours of the Earth in 1831 and 1833, the crimes of which they were accused. I want to keep you out of this entirely. This is why I believe it would be best if you moved in with one of your sisters. We should at least stay separated for the fatidic period—"

I was touched by his concern and answered him right away:

"I'm not going anywhere. Only death do us part!"

Yes, only death did us part! The heavy coffin is going down slowly, held in place by ropes, to the moist bottom of the grave, where worms are getting ready to feast. Don't stuff yourselves, you disgusting things! You'll soon get another helping! Not even death will keep us apart for long, Teddy! I will keep you company wherever you are, because we both committed the sin, if that's what it was.

Honestly speaking, I doubted Teddy would have managed on his own. He had a special soul, a gentleness not of this world, and that would have prevented him from doing things that were so little in line with the Christian morality. He was a man of books with an analytical mind, yet he was totally lacking practical sense. He needed me. He had always needed me.

The following period was dedicated to studying the terrifying book of the mad Arab. What we had read in the *Necronomicon* until then was nothing compared with the filth in which we were forced to immerse ourselves.

Abdul Alhazred's recommendations were clear: the demons in the other universe could not be appeased by anything other than human sacrifice, which needed to be made during the period when the monsters had access to our world. The sacrifice had to be made in a specific way and a certain ritual had to be observed, depending on the moment the two universes were joined, the time since the previous appearance, and whether that interval was longer or shorter than the one before it. The mad Arab provided all the necessary instructions.

After going over the text, we calculated what our obligations were, according to the algorithm set by the Arab. And we were terrified when we found out what we were supposed to do. But we had no choice. We had willingly decided to do whatever was necessary. We could not turn back. Not that we wanted to.

Yet our determination could not lessen our disgust with what we were about to do.

Had it not been for those numbers—and their related interpretations, which we could verify—we would not have let ourselves be convinced. The realisation of how big the difference is between digits and numbers has always amazed me. It's nothing like that between letters and words. Words are combinations of letters, of course, but letters by themselves can mean something, can have a life of their own. Single digits are cold, distant, avoid hinting

at anything. Numbers, on the other hand, are full of implications, stating openly that they are more than a mere quantitative abstraction. They are alive, they change their potential; the same number can mean different things depending on circumstances. To me, the numbers were warm.

Because they had the warmth of blood.

The coffin has been deposited on the bottom of the tomb and the gravediggers have pulled out their ropes. One more ritual ensues before leaving poor Teddy alone. Reverend Stillwater takes a clod and lets it fall into the grave. It makes a muffled sound when it hits the coffin. I startle, imagining—I don't know why—that the sound could bother my poor helpless husband.

Next, Joshua comes closer to me, gives me a handful of moist dirt, and pushes my wheelchair to the edge of the tomb. I am carefully pouring the dirt into the grave, with a keen sense of loneliness. Mine and Teddy's.

To divert my thoughts, I look at my palm, still soiled by the moist dirt, and remember another moment when I got my hand dirty—

I had fallen, slipped on the wet asphalt, using the palm of my hand to lean against the stones in the macadam. When I got up, looking at the mud on my fingers in disgust, Teddy had already started the really dirty job. He was cutting through the body lying on the ground, reciting sinister incantations in a voice cracked with emotion, which did not resemble any known language, the meaning of which not even Alhazred probably knew.

It was at that moment that I realised what a strong spirit poor Teddy had. He, who had not even slaughtered a chicken, who didn't know how to carve a turkey for Christmas, was performing that satanic ritual without rushing—methodically, painstakingly observing the requirements.

Teddy was indeed worthy of admiration.

Only God knows what must have been going on in his soul. He never complained, he never expressed regretted.

Anyway, the biggest effort for him was sending those demented letters to Scotland Yard, signed with a pathetic alias. I used to watch him write them. I could see disgust on his face, but it was an obligation specified by the mad Arab and my husband had decided to go all the way, to observe the instructions completely.

I had had some trouble with him when I told him I wanted to come along on his nocturnal errands. He fought it as hard as he could, threatened to drop the whole thing, but in the end he had to comply. I was right, as usual. Despite the hysteria that had taken over London, no patrol dared suspect a respectable couple like us. If Teddy had wandered the streets alone, some fellow with a sick imagination might have wondered what a priest was doing alone in the dark. But a priest accompanied by his wife—his imagination would have to be sick indeed to make a connection between this innocent couple and Jack the Ripper!

The funeral is over. I sit upright in my wheelchair, like a queen on her throne, and those who came to see Teddy on his final journey are now coming by, one by one, to express their sympathies. There's Mrs. St. Matthew—what a chatterbox she is!

When we first planned the whole thing, one of the main problems was the selection of the victims who were to be sacrificed. Our predecessors, the Wilsons and Wainewright, had used dying old people, whose disappearance was imminent, or thieves from the slums of Paris, whose elimination was a positive thing.

We didn't know how to choose, from what environment to select the people whose killing would drive away the danger threatening our world. Then Mrs. St. Mathew came along, with her idea to establish a charity in order to help prostitutes with social reintegration. At first I only thought about the fact that my Teddy would have to do his vicar duty, that he couldn't refuse to participate in such an activity in order to free his mind for the bloody ritual he was to perform. It later turned out that my intuition had worked flawlessly. Teddy found a pitiful world, wherefrom we could extract five people without society losing anything. A world that was living in dark streets, in the middle of the night, thus allowing us to act without fear of being caught and without having to bother luring the victims to our homes and then taking the trouble to get rid of the bodies afterward. Teddy learnt many secrets of that world, secrets that came in handy when the time to act arrived. Mrs. St. Matthew never imagined how much she had contributed to the panic that had taken hold of London from August 'til November 1888.

Joshua comes and pushes my wheelchair to the carriage. He's doing it nonchalantly, without hiding his relief. Was he afraid I might create some embarrassing scene? How little the boy knows me—and how little did we know him!

It had all ended well—1888 passed without a major crisis, and mankind maintained its rush toward what it regarded to be progress. At first we were so pleased with the result that we almost revealed ourselves, telling the entire world of our marvellous actions. Yet, the more time passed, the more meditative Teddy became, and the more he kept to himself. I couldn't bear to see him like this. One day I gathered my courage and said to him:

"My love, you have nothing to blame yourself for! On the contrary you have something to be proud of!"

"My dear, I am not blaming myself for anything. Yet I cannot help but think that time passes and the next term will arrive before we even realise it."

Indeed, what's twenty-six years? One had already passed. But the future still looked bright to us. We were young—in twenty-five years we would still be strong and could do again what we did this time.

But in our ignorant joy, we had forgotten there was a God who was judging things differently. Later, in those long years when all I did was think, I realised that murder is murder, regardless of its purpose. Our predecessors in diabolic rituals had ended up in prison, on the scaffold, or killing themselves. They had paid for their crimes. They had no children. God felt their seed had been cursed.

And the punishment fell upon us, too. But God does not squander miracles—an ordinary accident can be his instrument just as effectively—and I turned into a crippled, helpless being.

Many years after that, when all hope for a cure was lost, Teddy confessed that he did not think he could make the sacrifices without my help. I had anticipated this for a long time, but hadn't wanted to offend him by saying so. The only solution was to turn to somebody else. It was only then that Teddy remembered a nephew of his who had gone astray. With a violent and impetuous nature, he had been imprisoned for attempted murder. We invited Joshua to live with us and Teddy started to gradually prepare him for the task before him. The new century had already arrived.

Joshua turned out to be obedient and intelligent. Everything seemed to be going in the right direction. Until the day Bishop Carrell came along.

He mentioned the appeal of numbers and the series of events during lunch. He even quoted the *Necronomicon*, as only someone who had closely studied the work of the mad Arab could. Teddy—who was convinced, as I was, that he was dealing with someone who possessed the knowledge—began telling him what we had learnt from the evil book. Fortunately he didn't get far enough to reveal that he had made sacrifices to the demons from the other world. The bishop listened carefully and asked various questions. That night I talked with Teddy, wondering whether God had performed a miracle somehow and brought us support to appease the hungry monsters that were soon to arrive.

But it didn't work out as we hoped it would. One day after the bishop left, Teddy was forcibly committed to a health institution of the Church. He lived there in good conditions, I was allowed to spend time with him and bring him comfort with my presence, but he was kept under heavy guard until his life came to an end. I later found out the decision had been made by that Carrell bastard, who, having been informed by our nephew that Teddy had gone crazy, paid us a visit to verify the report. And he had come to the conclusion that Reverend Michener had become a danger to society!

Well, they certainly saw what a danger he was! Because they thought he was mad, mankind entered the most dreadful war ever, a true world war. And instead of five victims, millions were sacrificed to the demons from another world.

We're home. Joshua and his wife are taking my chair out of the carriage and carrying it inside. They put me in bed and make sure I'm comfortable. I cannot say that they're bad, that they are not taking care of me. Yet it's obvious that they don't like me, that they're afraid of me. I'll set them free as soon as possible. I can see that my presence is an ordeal to them.

The bed is cold. It will get even colder during the night, without Teddy here to keep it warm.

My dear Teddy Bear! How cold you must be, poor you, in that moist grave!

Maybe, if I hadn't known all that happened as well as I did, I would have suspected that my Teddy was a sadistic man who had kept his criminal instincts in check for as long as he could and then snapped, after having found a way to justify his vice.

Poor Teddy! He sure did butcher those dead creatures, as the ritual required. But that was all he did. Because, the moment he had to stab his first victim, he dropped the knife and started to cry. Luckily I was there.



Liviu Radu was born on November 20, 1948 in Bucharest, Romania and is a science fiction and fantasy writer. His first published story was "The unseen face of planet Mars" (*Fața nevăzută a planetei Marte*, 1993). His first book was *Trip-Tic* (1992). Liviu Radu has been distinguished with a Eurocon 2000 Encouragement Award.

Repeat Performance

Carmelo Rafala

After the war the flesh traders came.

Low-grade tech-dealers responded by setting up stalls in villages and towns; making personality backups of the little children; selling them in jewellery to frightened parents for a modest fee.

Those who couldn't afford a backup begged on their knees. Mothers bawled 'Save my babies!' while angry fathers beat their chests and pulled their hair...

—Jorge Ortega

Aftermath

I

Our automated limo came to a stop at the last security zone.

'Now play the part, Malinal,' I said, fingers casually running down the front of my strapless bodice. 'That's all you have to do. Stay calm. No smart-mouthing. Don't look me in the eyes, sit straight, shoulders back. Remain a step behind me, and no assertive posturing; it's a dead-giveaway when your chupacabra begins to growl.'

Malinal glowered at me. 'I'm thirteen, Papan, but I'm not stupid.'

Malinal turned away and I knew she caught a glimpse of herself reflected in the glass. I saw a tremor of revulsion pass through her at the sight of her own luminous blue eyes, the sheen of her perfect bronze skin shimmering in the Yucatán sun, and the elaborate coloured swirling patterns stitched into and carved across her transformed body.

She was a painted one. And as a child of the blood-waters she could be anything one wanted: a servant, a toy, an object of perversion.

Like Jago was.

Like you were, Adalia...

Images invaded my memory, of us playing on the Tulum beaches, collecting shells, building palaces of sand and letting the waves dance at our feet. Happier times.

Pain pulsed behind my eyes. I reached up and stroked my temples with both index fingers. Malinal watched me with a pensive, curious look.

'I never said you were stupid, Malinal,' I said. 'Anyone who can hack into a *Bastard* data-node and extract such detailed information is not stupid. But you need discipline.'

'You keep saying that.'

‘These are the *Bastards of Magdeleine*. Mérida is their city. You don’t simply walk into their midst and kidnap merchandise.’

She swallowed hard. ‘You said you could do it!’ Her chupacabra stirred, wrapped its furry arms about her waist and chattered furiously at her sudden outburst.

About the size and shape of a lemur, the creature clung to her possessively, looking out at me with large, dark eyes.

Chupacabras and aggression don’t mix. I’d once witnessed this fact when a creature demonstrated its aversion to belligerence by rearing up and chewing the face off its pubescent owner.

‘Getting your brother’s living body back depends on you,’ I said. ‘Are you going to act like my merchandise?’

Fear settled on her. I could smell it. She was no longer the brassy girl who strode up to me in Motul, demanding my services, paying me half my fee upfront, monies ripped from personal accounts with shitty firewalls and uninspired passwords.

‘Either we do this right, Malinal, or we walk away. There’s always a choice.’

‘You keep saying that as well.’ She breathed deeply and clutched at her chest, feeling for the pendant. Jago’s backup file. Her father had given it to her, she’d said, before putting a gun in his mouth.

Malinal squeezed the pendant hard, knuckles white. When she opened her hand, an impression lay etched on her palm: Itzamná, ruler of heaven and healing.

I looked to the sky, to the Bondi Platform hanging above the city. Up there that fat man Zorislav Durakovic, an influential businessman from Sarajevo and patron of the city’s Carnival, would dine with his intimates for five days and nights.

My hands brushed my belt—a scattering field which concealed the gun strapped to my inner thigh from the prying electronics of the security checkpoints. My elaborate dress hid the more traditional, non-technical weapons in its adornments.

I thought of you, Adalia, and a pang of guilt gripped my heart. Malinal might just see Jago again. But I’d never get you back, beloved sister. We’d never be a family again.

Four armed soldiers moved toward our car.

‘Okay,’ I leaned forward. ‘This is the final security check. We do this as rehearsed, or these guys will kill us right here.’

A gloved hand knocked on the window.

#

The security office was a small, damp room: one tinted window, paint peeling off the concrete, minimal lighting. Somewhere in the walls a lavatory pipe was leaking. The room smelled of piss.

Outside was a large clearing about half a mile in diameter, ringed by desolate buildings which stood like battered sentinels. The Platform took up a sizable chunk of sky. Directly beneath, four plasti-glass elevation pods stood waiting to carry up passengers on taut steel cables.

‘We have one computer servicing this entire tower,’ said the man across the desk. ‘It could be an hour or more.’

‘Unacceptable!’ I sat, solid as ice, hands clasped together as if in prayer. ‘Do you even know who you’re speaking to?’

‘A Daughter of the Minor House of Majahual,’ said the man, sweating. ‘But I have no record of your entrance to Motul; no record of you crossing the border from Quintana Roo, so—if you’ll forgive me—I need to run a check—’ His eyes burst inward and his head whipped back.

From my clasped hands I’d launched two golden spikes in to his brain. Blood poured out of his eye holes, down his cheeks. His white shirt caught the flow, soaking up the crimson.

Malinal, retching, hugged her chupacabra close. The creature nuzzled her and cooed.

I leapt from my chair and, taking the man’s forefinger, dabbed it in an inkpad and pushed his print onto a document in a box marked ‘Approved’; then I put the paper in a capsule and sent it up a pneumatic tube.

I dumped his body down the room’s disused dumbwaiter shaft and turned to Malinal. ‘Relax. They’ll think he took a siesta. They won’t figure out what happened until he starts to smell. We’ll be long gone by then.’

She put a hand to her mouth and gagged.

‘Don’t throw up,’ I said; then took her mobile from my pocket and threw it down the shaft as well. ‘And next time I catch you trying to answer an incoming call without permission, I’ll beat you senseless.’

‘It was my uncle,’ she swallowed. ‘Padré Guillermo.’

‘I don’t care if it was your fairy-fucking-godmother.’ I moved toward the door. ‘He’s probably looking for you right now—not that he’d recognise you like *that*. But if he did, he might throw you out on the streets if he found out about this little rescue mission of yours.’

An angry chill flashed through her cheeks. ‘So I can grow up like you?’

I raised an eyebrow at her colourful, twisted form. ‘I can think of worse things to be.’

The smell of sour earth and burnt ozone hovers about the blood-waters of a cenote. Sometimes, if you’re patient and look hard enough, you can see semi-translucent threads in the crimson, curling, twisting: small fingers from the elsewhere, still trying to push their way in to our world.

An effect of the war, they say...

—Jorge Ortega

Aftermath

II

The Platform's ballroom was full of VIPs, some masked, all wearing elaborate costumes for Carnival.

Scanning the crowds below from our vantage point on the mezzanine, I spotted him easily: Zorislav Durakovic. An impressive gathering followed the portly man like a devout congregation; painted servants of both sexes, an entourage of patterns and colours, remained two steps behind him, fanning backward in an iridescent wave, while chupacabras perched on shoulders like gargoyles.

His bodyguards stood at strategic locations, two at each elbow, four others orbiting around like satellites.

'Remember,' I whispered, 'it's been five years since they took him. Jago's emotions could be subdued, static, or all over the place, so don't be too alarmed when you first sense him.'

Painted ones shared a limited deferred telepathy, and distances were a problem. We'd have to be close enough.

Malinal's chupacabra, mounted on her shoulders, muttered. Her elongated fingers, studded with tiny raised welts of varying colours, reached out to stroke its head.

Malinal had courage despite her age. She'd done what I could never do, Adalia: become merchandise, to submerge herself in the bloodwaters, to twist and reshape her body into colourful alien contours; and to exist with that *thing* crawling over her, fixed to her like a virus.

She was undisciplined. She was afraid. But she had guts, Adalia, and she trusted me. Just as you once did, trust that I'd always be there for you, trust that we'd never be parted.

You know I could never let it go, Adalia. You know it had to be done...

I watched as Durakovic and his painted ones passed beneath us on their way to the dining hall.

'Papan.'

'What?' I whispered, turning to her.

Malinal looked at me. 'My brother,' she said, luminous blue eyes filled with tears. '*He's not here!*'

#

I remember when they took you, Adalia, grabbed you off the streets. Someone shouted a warning. The flesh traders were coming. Adults seized what children they could and ran; others took up bricks or segments of piping.

I hid in the brush near a communal toilet block set back from the road, and watched as you dashed for the safety of a crumbling shack.

You never made it.

Adults shouted insults and hurled their weapons at the passing truck. A man leaned out the passenger-side window and sprayed the street with bullets.

And in all those years I'd never been close to finding out where they'd taken you, or if your body was even still alive.

Pulling yourself from the blood-waters, you'd break through the membrane surrounding your new body. And you'd vomit out the baby creature, almost breaking your jaw. It squeals and thrashes on the stones, muscles and tendons showing, slick and glistening with blood.

And it lifts its arms up to you, like a small child, and grips your bare legs with tiny, bloody hands and hisses and clicks its teeth.

—Nadia Reyes

Interview: A Painted

One Speaks

III

My eyes scanned the ballroom again, noting the number of armed staff, the various exits. Escape pods clung to the outer rim of the Platform; the elevation pods were underneath, secured in its belly.

I wasn't worried about getting lost. My eidetic memory wouldn't allow it. A combination of innate skill and learned tactic, the memory of my journey through the Platform was as detailed and as vivid as you.

I pretended to watch the guests milling about the ballroom. Thinking. To escape, to quietly steal away under the Mexican moonlight below was not part of the plan. Never was.

'I suppose it was a gamble, Papan,' she muttered. 'There was never any real guarantee Jago would be here.'

'The data you extracted was precise. He's here.'

'But I didn't *feel* him.'

'Keep your voice down!' I whispered hotly. My temples throbbed. I rubbed them with my fingers.

She cocked her head at me. 'Papan. Are you okay?'

'It's a big Platform,' I said. 'There are other places he could be. We stick to the plan.'

'You don't look well.'

'I'm fine.' I gripped her arm, firmly, and hurried her through the corridors, away from the ballroom and deeper into the Platform. Ahead was an access hatch, the one cutting off Durakovic's penthouse chambers from the rest of the dignitaries. Two guardsmen, dressed in black, stood on either side of the door.

My free hand brushed across my dress and in one swift motion pulled off a metallic adornment—two thin cylinders: a double-barrelled blow dart. I raised it to my mouth and shot both guards in the neck. They struggled for only a moment as the zombie-drug slammed through them, paralysing while keeping them conscious.

Removing the darts, I rummaged through a guard's pockets and tossed Malinal a silver encryption shard. 'Open the hatch.' She obeyed. The door-iris opened like the shutter of a camera and I pushed her across the threshold.

Feeding off her tension the chupacabra grew anxious and climbed up on her back. Blood trickled down her chemise in thin red lines as its claws pricked her flesh. She bit her lip.

And then a sound. The bathroom door opened. A guard came out. In one swift motion I pulled a long filament from the threads of my dress, cracked it like a whip, and snapped it diagonally down his body. There was a look of shock on the guard's face as his top half slid off. It hit the floor with a wet smack.

Malinal threw up over a leather chair.

'Papan—' She dry-heaved. *'What the fuck!'*

Her chupacabra growled, eyes narrowed.

I tossed the wire down, reached between my legs and pulled out the gun, silencer fixed to the barrel. I clicked off the safety.

Anger framed her cheeks. 'Papan,' she cried out. 'You tell me what you're planning, or—' A deep snarl stopped her. She looked sideways over her shoulder. The creature had reached around, mouth near her ear, teeth glistening.

She took a few deep breaths and gripped a chair for support.

And then her face went slack.

I knew that look. It was a look of *otherness*. I followed her gaze as it shifted to a chamber door across the room.

I grabbed her by the arm, spun her around, levelling the gun over her shoulder. I pushed her across the room toward the door; her chupacabra grumbled and ducked down to her waist. At the door she hesitated.

'Open it!' I said.

'What are you going to do?'

'Open it!'

Again she obeyed.

Beyond the door was a lavish bed chamber, and in the centre a giant bed. Six painted ones reclined in various states of dress. Some sat up. Others remained still. All watched us with a dislocated look. Chupacabras stared at us from shoulder perches.

'Is he here?' I asked. 'Your brother.'

'No.'

I gunned them down.

Without companions, the chupacabras squealed in agony and died.

#

'You didn't have to kill them!'

'Believe me, I did them a favour,' I replied.

‘And what kind of favour will I get?’

‘*They* didn’t pay me. You did. Get your brother and I get you both off the peninsula. That was the deal you bought.’

‘And what the fuck do we do now?’

‘We wait. Here. He’ll come sooner or later.’

‘What do you mean? *He’ll* come?’ She stood straight, the brassy girl from Motul once again. ‘You’re right about one thing—I’m not stupid,’ she said, chupacabra howling with madness. ‘You wanted the prestige of breaking into a *Bastard* stronghold, you said. But you’re after Durakovic, aren’t you?’

‘Oh, well done.’

‘You *used* me!’

‘You’re welcome.’

Malinal shuddered with that bitter knowledge. Her chupacabra darkened, furs standing up along its arched back. It looked at her with black, penetrating eyes, and let loose an unholy growl.

‘It’s the flesh traders you want, Papan. They supply the demand—’

‘The traders may have taken my sister, but Durakovic created the demand, back in Sarajevo. That’s where my trail went cold. You were my chance to get close to him.’

Pain again behind my eyes, and I put a hand up to my head, as if to push you aside, Adalia.

‘Head hurt, does it?’ she said. ‘Papan, I *know*.’

‘You know shit.’

She took a slow step toward me. ‘I know what’s going on. Where your sister really is’—she touched my forehead—‘and she’s in there, isn’t she? You put her in there. But somehow *you’re* still here.’

‘Don’t sound so disappointed.’

‘She should’ve displaced you.’

I felt anger at the tears forming in my eyes.

‘Must’ve compartmentalised herself, somehow,’ she continued, ‘somewhere in your head. Doesn’t often happen.’

‘So I’m a rarity. But if you’re thinking I’m some sort of freak show, you haven’t looked in the mirror lately.’

She frowned. ‘If you want justice, then live to spite them; *that* would be justice. This is madness!’

I flung her arm away. ‘What do you know of justice, little girl. Or madness.’

She gripped her pendant. ‘Jago’s living body is not here. I sacrificed my body for a chance to save him. But that doesn’t mean I want to die!’

‘The risk was always there.’

‘No! That wasn’t the bargain. You made a deal, you’d get me through this, you’d get me off the peninsula. I trusted you!’

‘Time to grow up, Malinal.’

‘Grow up? Grow up?’ Her chupacabra chattered, claws flexed, kneading her already bloodied shoulders. She cried out, took a few slow breaths to calm down.

‘How old was your sister when they took her?’ she asked.

‘Six.’

‘Okay. Six years old, Papan, and in your head your sister will *always* be six years old, and you want to make a suicide run and take her with you. *That* sound grown up to you? Is *that* justice?’

My hand swung outward and she went crashing to the floor. Her creature squealed, held on tight with its claws. Blood ran down her arms.

‘That’s right, Papan,’ she said calmly, sitting up, ‘become the thing you despise most. Why don’t you get yourself a hundred painted ones and beat the shit out of them, too!’

‘Best shut your mouth, girl, or I’ll shut it for you!’

‘You can do what you like.’ She spat blood. ‘But this isn’t about your sister; it isn’t about Durakovic. It’s about a grown woman who can’t deal with shit. It’s about your guilt, Papan. It’s about *you*!’

I shoved my gun in her face. ‘*Last chance!*’

‘Yes,’ she said, more bravely than I expected. ‘For all of us.’

My finger slid across the trigger.

‘Papan, if you think—’ and her eyes tracked beyond me to the other side of the room. I spun around.

There was a bug on the wall.

It was black, two centimetres long. A triatominae. A kissing bug. A pest carrying Chagas disease. Or at least it looked like one.

Then it spoke: ‘I know what you’re trying to do.’

A sonic explosion filled the room, tore through my cranium. My legs crumpled, the floor came up and hit my face, and a black wave of unconsciousness quickly drowned me.

The disintegration of normal political structures is total. City-states rose to fill the void, ruled by cartels. Skilled, technologically savvy, they protect their interests with venom, view each other with deep suspicion, and often switch allegiances between themselves as quickly as you or I might change our shirt.

But none is more dangerous than the Bastards of Magdeleine, who rule Mérida with an iron fist...

—Miguel DeJesus

*The Americas: A
Model of Power and
Survival*

IV

I awoke to voices and the rattle of a chain.

‘What did you think you’d achieve, Malinal...’ Deep baritone. A man’s voice.

‘...how can you ask me that? I came to...’

‘...the *Bastards* picked up your intrusion the moment you hacked their systems. You never had a chance, girl.’

I pushed myself up on to my hands. ‘Malinal?’

‘Your friend’s awake.’ A different voice. Tenor. Young. Male.

‘Malinal?’ Eyes blurred, focused. Lights burned from high chandeliers. We were in a chamber: a large domed construction of transparent plasti-glass. We were on top of the Platform.

Malinal stood at the centre of a large, empty room, looking over her shoulder at me. I noticed a figure near her, robed in black. The baritone. Next to him was the owner of the other voice, an image corrupted by the dark spectre of a chupacabra upon his shoulder.

She’d found her brother.

Or rather, he’d found her.

Jago held my gun in one hand, barrel facing the decking. In the other hand he gripped Malinal’s pendant. Naked to the waist, his skin glistened so perfectly, the bronze colouring so striking, as though he stood somewhere between this world and the next.

Malinal turned back to the robed man. ‘Uncle Guillermo, what are you doing here? *What did you do?*’

‘What I had to do.’

As I got to my feet I realised my jewellery was gone, my dress stripped of its accoutrements.

‘They’ve disarmed you,’ the boy said without looking at me.

I snorted. ‘Oh, really?’

He ignored me and raised the gun, aimed it at the man. The swirling patterns on his face seemed to grow darker. ‘Uncle, answer Malinal. Go on. Tell her. You owe her that much.’

It was then I noticed the metallic collar around Padré Guillermo’s throat, and the chain hanging just behind his shoulder. It attached to a floor bolt next to his feet.

‘And what would you have me say?’ the Padré said. ‘The war left us nothing. We must finance ourselves. The conflict almost bankrupted the Holy See.’

‘You sold your own flesh and blood!’ Jago snapped. His chupacabra hissed in warning. ‘Tell her about the orphanage.’

Orphanage? Outside the dome I noticed an escape pod, clamped to the edge of the decking. Slowly, carefully, I peeled back the skin on my left ring finger and gripped the metallic cylinder lodged in the socket.

‘So the *Bastards* offered you a solution,’ I said, ‘and you took it. Selling direct to them. From the orphanage.’

‘*Uncle!*’ Malinal put her hands to her mouth. ‘And papa?’

‘Your father never knew.’ The Padré looked at the barrel of the gun, at Jago. ‘I didn’t have a choice.’

‘You’re undercutting the flesh traders, Padré.’ I said. ‘Stupid. But you’re not the first to try it—’

‘—and you’re not the first bounty hunter to stand here.’ His face was red, as though straining with some inner truth.

Jago clicked off the gun’s safety. A guttural sound rose up from the creature on his shoulder.

Malinal flinched. ‘Jago, stop!’

‘Classic case of wrong place, wrong time,’ I said. ‘For Jago. Is that it?’

The Padré stared hard at me. ‘They demand. I supply. What could I do? Tell me! What could I do?’

I shrugged. ‘Why, sell the very ones you’re entrusted to protect, of course.’

‘All I did,’ Jago said, ‘was come home from school—’

‘You never answered her question, Padré,’ I said, brusquely. ‘How did you come to be here?’

The Padré remained silent.

‘Oh, go on, *holy* man,’ I prodded. ‘Don’t stop now.’ I leaned forward. ‘Confession is good for the soul.’

‘I asked for him,’ Jago said. ‘I want it to end. I begged them to let me end it. *Like this!*’ He pushed the gun in the Padré’s face. Jago’s chupacabra growled, bared its teeth. The sound of a tongue smacking lips.

‘Jago, no!’ Malinal screeched; her own chupacabra let lose a sympathetic wail. ‘He should be punished, God knows. But not like this. Not murder.’

‘He killed me, you. He killed papa.’ His voice trembled. ‘It has to stop.’

‘It can stop,’ she said. ‘Leave Uncle. Come with me. You can forget about what’s happened.’ She motioned to me with an arm. ‘Tell him, Papan, please.’

‘Jago listen,’ I said. ‘I can get you both out of the city, off the peninsula. It’s all set up.’

‘You see, Jago,’ Malinal said. ‘We can be a family again. With *that*.’ She pointed to the pendant.

‘No, no you don’t understand.’ Jago teetered between anguish and despair.

And you sensed something in his voice, Adalia, something desperate, something true...

I looked at Malinal; then Jago. I dreaded the words before he even spoke them.

‘This backup is not mine, Malinal.’ He held it out to her. ‘It’s yours.’

Time stopped. Seconds of stillness. Malinal's face lit up with horror and she doubled over, as though she'd been pole axed.

As she fell to her knees I pulled the metallic implant from my finger socket—triggering the mechanism—and threw it at the plasti-glass.

It exploded on contact.

Last year it was reported that an estimated 746 children were stolen on the Yucatan peninsula. This is a sharp increase on previous years.

—Bonita Vasquez

The New Flesh

V.

A klaxon sounded somewhere.

Shards of plasti-glass littered the air, clattered to the floor like coins. The chamber seemed to tilt, the floor shift. Wind rushed through the hole, pulled at our clothes, hair. Below us came the muffled thud of the emergency bulkheads slamming shut. Security would have to cut their way through to get at us. For the moment, we were trapped on the roof.

I grabbed Malinal's arm, lifted her up. 'Let's go!'

She looked to her brother, pleadingly, but he shook his head, sorrow framing his bright yellow eyes.

'After they killed you the first time,' Jago said, 'they destroyed my backup. And took yours from me.' He held the pendant up again. 'Five times you've come, thinking to bring me this. And five times I've watched you die.'

'Why?' she said. 'I don't understand—'

His eyes, his beautiful painted eyes, leaked silver tears. 'Because you'd got it in your head you could save me.'

'You're just some urchin they picked up off the street, girl,' said the Padré.

'They're very sportive,' I said, 'those *Bastards of Magdeleine*.'

Jago pulled back the hammer. 'Well the game ends.'

'Jago,' she said, 'please. Don't. Come with me...' She pulled against my grip, and looked to me.

'He wants to die,' I said; and I heard myself—*oh God, I heard myself*—unemotional, ice-cold, professional.

'Papan, please!' she wailed.

'Jago...' I said, but the boy shook his head again. His chupacabra's growl became a diabolical whine, an alien noise rising to fill the air.

'Malinal,' he said. 'Leave. Take that body and live, live for me, live for papa.'

'Jago!' She struggled but I pulled her close, gripped her head with both hands and turned her face away. Her chupacabra howled and wrapped its arms around her torso.

Uncle Guillermo was chanting now; the *oratio dominica*: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son—'

'Yes,' Jago said, 'oh, yes. In the name of the *Father*.'

A shot sounded.

... sources have recently informed me that, seeing potential revenue streams in the burgeoning Eastern Eurasian slave market, the Bastards of Magdeleine have seized control of the cenote at San Ignacio.

—Bonita Vasquez

The New Flesh

VI.

The pod rested in the centre of a burnt patch of long grass some fifty miles outside the city. I hurried Malinal through the field, her chupacabra hugging her waist, chattering.

Blood. There'd been so much blood. Jago's creature tore into him; the sound of shredding flesh filled my ears, and a crimson splatter crept across the floor.

And as the beast devoured him, sliced flesh and crunched bone, Jago never made a sound.

When it had finished, his chupacabra reared up and died.

We reached a dirt road. A few meters ahead sat the truck, ghostly in silver moonlight, bang on time. My contact was in the driver's seat, waiting.

'Here's where we part company,' I said. 'My man will take you as far as Quibdó, in Colombia. You know where to go from there.'

'I know. And thank you.'

'You sure you're okay?'

Malinal opened her palm to reveal the pendant. She had gripped it tightly as I had dragged her out to the pod, her gaze inward the whole time during our escape, as though looking to some other world.

There was a great deal she had to take in, Adalia, much to reckon. And she did it with courage, without tears, without fear.

With great care Malinal closed her hand back over the pendant, held it as though it were a precious stone. Itzamná, ruler of heaven and healing.

'I don't know,' she said, softly. 'And you?'

I turned to go.

'Papan,' she called. I stopped and pivoted around on my heel.

'Would you really have killed me?' she asked.

My voice left me, and in the silence between us only the tall grasses spoke, whispering amongst themselves.

I sensed you waiting, Adalia, expectantly.

'You're alive,' I said. 'I've kept my end of the bargain.'

Malinal stared at the pendant, fingers stroking its carved features, features not unlike the patterns of her own twisted skin.

'Papan, please. Come with us,' she said, 'and live. Live for her.'

And you spoke to me, Adalia, of the streets where we used to play, of the quiet beaches where we once collected sea shells and built castles in the sand, while the blue ocean gently kissed our feet. You spoke of happier times...

'This is all I know,' I said, not so much to her as to you, Adalia. 'And Durakovic is still out there. How can I simply let go? How can I live any other life?'

Malinal looked to the far horizon, then walked to the truck, opened the door, and stopped and turned to face me.

'In all honesty I don't know how you can live, Papan,' she said. 'I don't know how I can live, how any of us can live. But I do know one thing for certain.'

'What's that?'

Malinal's eyes glistened with hope.

'There's always a choice,' she said.

I smiled.



Carmelo Rafala's fiction has appeared in the anthologies **Rocket Science**, edited by Ian Sales (Mutation Press, UK, 2012), as well as **The Fourth Science Fiction Megapack Series** (Wildside Press, USA, 2012), and other places. He is the Managing Editor of *Abyss & Apex* magazine and the Senior Editor of Immersion Press. He has been educated in the US, South Africa and England.

Big Bing, Larissa

Cristian Mihail Teodorescu

Since the dawn of femininity, since time immemorial, women have been wondering about the same thing that my twenty-year old little girl asked me about yesterday: “What exactly is money, Mom? Where does it come from?” I know, most moms instinctively answer such questions “Domina made the money for us, Her daughters, to thrive on,” yet I consider myself an ambitious woman and I wouldn’t want my little girl to fall prey to obscurantism so early in her life. I had to imagine for her a better documented accounting-compliant answer that she could understand and this is how this paper started.

My little girl can barely read or use a keyboard yet she already grasps the meaning of an account, knows there are various types of accounts and that money, the fundamental component of the Mint, whirlwinds into or out of accounts. She knows or can sense how the accounts turn into each other, how their weight varies, how they blend or reject each other. She has often watched me working at the computeress, intently monitoring a nebulous account that was twisting and turning, from which I had no idea what amounts will erupt, or the stock market trends of some funds (which are account systems, too, anyway), dictated by the don’t-know-whose will. I also know that very many women who do such monitoring are far from sensing what is going on and that, lacking the necessary accounting training, they only mutter “Our Mother” when their accounts evaporate or their stocks drop dangerously low.

Primary accounting teaches us “money is the ultimate immutable structure of the Finance”; it also teaches us about quantifying amounts of money, we learn the fundamental laws of Accounting, too, the fundamental interactions between accounts and money, between money and money and between accounts and accounts. It is then that we also learn the laws governing the entire Finance structure, based on which –at least in principle, we can anticipate everything from the mere trend of a budgetary transaction of the forward-back-and stop type to complicated structures such as the major accounting institutions of today: the Twelve Megalotrusts, the State Insurance, Risk and Forecast House, the Public and Non-public Finance Ministry. Therefore I started to explain the fundamental Accounting laws to my little girl. And I explained to her how our Mother, or Domina, does not spend time monitoring every single accounting or stock market transaction, as we do, because it would be too boring an occupation for the Grand Lady of the Mint; She settled for establishing some immutable Finance laws and can now rest easy because things are going as they were meant to.

First I talked to my little girl, whose name is Larissa, about the principle of spontaneous deceleration and supported action, which goes like this: any transaction will naturally slow down and the accounts will be rendered motionless in the absence of an Energy to support them. It was obvious Larissa would ask me what that Energy was so I told her the following things. It is about all the efforts women make to monitor and keep track of these

transactions: the computeress emits signals when a transaction is monitored, the printer emits signals when data about a transaction are printed, the stamp emits signals when used on certain documents, and the pen of the Financial Manageress, too, recognizes the document it is made to sign and sends data about this action to the Accounting Eternity. The folder keeps stock of the papers inside it, the same way the man who works as a janitor keeps track of his brooms and toilet brushes. The folder signals what papers, reports and analytic accounts are viewed more often, the computeress does that, too. The data is transmitted to the Transaction Offices and thus the accounts most frequently analyzed also become the most dynamic: they interact the most with the Finance dust that is everywhere or with other accounts nearby.

From here on, it should have been easier for Larissa to understand why all the women she had seen around her were so busy: her mother, her grandmother, her great-grandmother, the four aunts and four neighbors living on the same floor as us who are either sitting in front of their computeresses, printing, signing, stamping, ranking or browsing accounting documents in the file folders that are more submissive than the garbage men or the fathers and grandfathers living in Nursing Homes. Larissa, however, showed no signs of having understood too much, merely mumbling something that sounded like a prayer to her guardian she-angel and then yawning.

I then explained to Larissa the Monetary Attraction Law, told her about how money attract each other in all circumstances and accumulate in accounts, budgets, cost estimates and financial results. There can be no money in the absence of such Attraction, which is a fundamental property of the Finance. We've had the "money makes money" saying since time immemorial, hence the very essence of the primordial occupation of women as a species to make as much money as possible. Such accumulations, once a certain threshold is crossed, will keep going on their own provided that one condition is met, i.e. someone spends enough Energy on querying, transcribing and analyzing accounts, transactions, reports, budgets, cost estimates, financial results, synopses, audits, minutes and so on and so forth – which are just as many forms of the infinite number of ways the Finance can manifest itself. And I got the feeling Larissa understood.

I thought it was enough for the first day, even though Larissa yawned again and whispered: "Still, who made the money, Mom?"

Many of the readers of this paper will criticize me and say that Larissa is still much too young to understand all these things that require significant accounting training and that it would have been easier had I explained it had been Domina's will and taken her to the Temple to pray more often. Particularly because our moral rules are on the verge of collapse nowadays and many women no longer observe the Three Commandments that I transcribe here using the version in the Holy Bureaucratism Bible – Guidelines for Accounting Trainees.

1. Thou shalt never doubt the almightiness of Domina and shalt fear Her Stamp falling;
2. Thou shalt not lie to drive thy sister bankrupt and steal her money or male servants;
3. Thou shalt not leave any financial irregularity go unreported.

It's everyone's choice and I absolutely agree that Religion drives us to be active, see about our business with a decency and tenacity that only our species has; on the other hand, an entire nation of women who are religious zealots with no proper accounting training will quickly evolve into anarchy: the actions of such a nation towards the Finance would become chaotic and un-coordinated and the accounts of this nation would quickly evaporate replaced by the accounts of other peoples who value Accounting and its applications in the daily life more.

The next day, after Larissa came home from kindergarten, I resumed my training of her and told her about the interaction of the Finance in motion: how any amount of money dynamically evolving, either free or condensed in accounts leaves behind a financial field signature that sends other nearby accounts into a spin. Larissa did not understand a thing this time around, so I told her "Let's conduct an experiment" and turned on the Computerness that was dreaming of round accounts and scented flowers. I selected a regular PCQuART sub-stock market transaction account and started injecting small amounts of money into it, making sure to induce a constant travel speed among the other accounts. I selected a few of the accounts closest to it and monitored them. "FNRRCDCU, CASSNS, SOMBOLMOR, KUKUBU – what are all these, Mom?" she asked; I answered: when you grow up and learn proper Accounting and Fiscal Code you will know. These are the names women gave them, names based on some acronyms of controversial indices dating back to the ancient times. And Larissa saw that as a result of PCQuART's motion, FNRRCDCU engaged in a frenzied circular motion where the amounts, too, seemed to be spinning inside the account like two plush panther eyes implanted on a wooden deer; CASSNS suddenly spiked and then sagged and started shaking slightly down there; SOMBOLMOR fluctuated lazily and then slowly followed PCQuART, while KUKUBU began fluctuating rapidly, creating some very complicated and very aesthetically pleasing graphs, accompanied by a mechanical chirping.

FNRRCDCU and SOMBOLMOR were the first to calm down, while PCQuART was about thirty reports, four cost estimates and two missing receipt affidavits away (I have to confess I hadn't the slightest idea about who had generated those reports or missing receipt affidavits; as for the cost estimates, I had someone in mind: it couldn't have been anyone other than the crazy Donna Klempen in the attic, because this is the only thing she knows how to do and the minute she sees an account moving around her she starts making a cost estimate for it – but that's another story to tell). CASSNS stopped shaking when PCQuART was already out of sight, disguised by a large inflow of missing receipt affidavits seemingly coming out of the blue. On top of that a GHEMENE megatransaction had popped up between two funds negotiating the absorption of PCQuART. Not to mention the two UFAs I saw. I hope Larissa didn't see them.

"And KUKUBU will probably never stop," I told Larissa.

"PCQuART was cute, I really liked it," Larissa sniffed. "What will happen to it, Mom? Will it die?"

"It will. But the money in it will not, not ever. The money will be transferred to another account."

"You mean you killed it, Mom? Just to prove something to me?" Larissa was sobbing.

"Don't be said, my dear. PCQuART will be better off where it is, even though it may seem to you that GHEMENE swallowed it."

"Maybe we die like that, too," Larissa said.

"Meaning?"

"Someone wants to teach her little girl something and picks one of us to send her to her death just to prove the little girl something."

Hmmm. And I still did not urge her to pray to Domina. Maybe she had found something, my Larissa. It was then that I thought it made sense to share this paper with other women.

"It's time you learned what happens to accounts, Larissa," I distracted her. And explained to her how accounts are born, live and disappear as everything else in this world. How most accounts disappear by a natural death, by merger, absorption, concatenation or evaporation. As well as how some accounts come to end in the most sinister way possible, frozen, motionless, incapable of receiving any quanta from the Finance, as well as of unloading the money in them, in a state of living death that is synonymous to absolute sadness. So you should be happy your PCQuART had a fast and maybe even pleasant end, I told her and I got the impression that she found comfort in that. After which I decided it was enough for one evening and send her to play with Accounting Barbie. In the short time before going to bed I wrote an outline of this paper and decided to have it published in the Financial Minute.

(To be continued)

It's been about a week since the last lesson in Finance Structure that I taught Larissa and I felt it was not necessary to resume training of my little girl. First of all, the last experience had been almost traumatic for her; maybe it was too soon for her to learn that accounts can die, too. Second, I've been extremely busy: I had five audit reports to do, three of which ordered and two I had to take the initiative for. In addition to the several dozen ad hoc missing receipt affidavits I had to fill every day. Two of the audit reports ended in ticking the "start of bankruptcy procedures" box and I felt that if I had had to explain to Larissa that not only some accounts were killed there but also a couple of financial manageresses were to lose their jobs as a result, it would have been too much for her. She knows unemployment is the ultimate dishonor for any woman of accounting. Third, I sensed I had piqued her curiosity and it was time that I waited for her to come to me to resume our lessons.

So I waited for the afternoon when she came back from kindergarten and sat down next to me in front of the computeress saying bluntly: "You know, Mom, Cecilia says it was Domina who made the money." "That's very easy to believe, my little girl," I answered. "But if you're patient enough to listen to me, even if you don't understand everything I'm saying, you might have something interesting of your own to tell Cecilia."

Aren't they keeping an eye on the children in kindergarten, isn't anyone paying attention to what the kids talk about amongst themselves?

"Do you know what money is, my little girl?" And I realized she did not. Money is everything that surrounds us, the Mint is actually made of money, of Finance fragments that are everywhere. Who made the money, Mom?

Money appeared all of a sudden, out of nowhere. In the beginning, there was nothing. At some point, a big bang happened and the Mint was created, with the Finance and all the money in it. Back then, in the beginning, the Finance was so restless that creation of the accounts had not even started. Even though the Monetary Attraction Law had started to operate, this force was fighting the other fundamental forces of the Finance: the Decisional Force, the Spin Force that I've already told you about, the Bureaucratic Force and the Managerial Risk Force. Whereas the Monetary Attraction and Bureaucratic Forces tended to calm the agitated sea of money in those primordial times, the Spin Force and the Managerial Risk Force tended to agitate the money and prevent it from organizing into accounts. Several billion seconds had to pass for the Finance to calm down enough and this is when the first accounts and first transactions involving these accounts emerged. After a few billion seconds more, the accounts organized into financial institutions, which generated the current consortia and constellations of commercial companies and public institutions that we are all accustomed to see. This is it in brief, because the process was actually much more complicated; in those early days of the Mint, many groups, barely organized, exploded into supermauveas (all the financial manageresses back then used to dress in mauve) or evaporated almost all of their money turning into blue dwarfs and resembling the look and clothing of their new financial manageresses.

I didn't explain it to her using precisely these words, but tried to make myself understood by my daughter. I was pleased to see Larissa take her colored pencils and draw a super financial manageress dressed in mauve, with long and a bit asymmetric legs and a dwarf financial manageress, a blue rectangle actually, whose legs looked like logs and whose hair looked like a rock with a mane of red hair. Sometimes the things kids draw are really perceptive. I set out to scan the drawing and use it as illustration for the next chapter of my paper.

I then took her pencils and drew the Mint at the time of the Big Bang on another sheet of paper, a wellspring of yellow money, which wandered spinning on chaotic trajectories induced by the interaction of the Managerial Risk, and then money started to gravitate around specific points in the Metaspaces, creating the accounts (which I colored red and green, surrounded by a green aura), after which the accounts organized into grids, tables, reports creating the Mint as we know it today.

"If you say money is everything around us, what are we – are we money, too?"

"That's right. We, too, are made of money."

And I explained it to her. What did you eat in kindergarten today? Bread-crumbed fish with asparagus and chocolate banana. Where does this food come from?

"From... From a store," she said.

"What was it bought with?"

She realized it. "With money."

"So you ate some money. You've been eating money since you were born, which is why you've grown up to be so beautiful and tall. You dressed up in money and it kept you warm. We pay for the right to live here with money, otherwise we would be dying of cold outside, or the dogs would rip us apart."

Note 1. The dog scare is something hardly out of the ordinary in our neighborhood. I know some readers would be adamant, feeling I would wrong the poor animals that are any female accountant's best friend and that, whereas today some women do not really observe the Three Commandments, dogs never go against them. Other readers might feel I am traumatizing my daughter with these nightmarish visions. Yet I assure you, Larissa used to laugh at this "the dogs will eat us" threat even when she was little, a threat that was last uttered jokingly by my great-great-grandmother.

Note 2. There are different threats which are part of popular tradition. For instance, in Berceni neighborhood, near Hospital 9¹ and the Nursing Home for Men, little girls are threatened they would get bitten by the men they sometimes see when talking a walk on the road, hanging by the hospital or nursing home fence giving female passers-by a blank stare.

Everybody knows that actually both men and dogs in the neighborhoods are absolutely harmless to little girls or women.

Back to the universality of money now. I will have to explain Larissa in about ten years from now that her coming into this world, too, was made possible by a sum of money that allowed me to mate with a quite good looking and somewhat manly man. Not a Berceni variety but a special delivery from Italy. Recalling such moments is not the purpose of this paper; there are specialized magazines for such confessions.

"Mom, Cecilia told me that Domina made the money for us to thrive on and be beautiful." And then something totally unrelated: "Mom, what are UFAs?"

"Unidentified Flying Accounts," I answered. I felt scared. "There are no such things."

"It looked to me like PCQuART was kidnapped by two UFAs."

I sent her out to play.

And now I am writing something in my popularization paper that surely is beyond Larissa's current comprehension. I don't know how many of our readers possess advanced Relative and Absolute Accounting knowledge. To keep it short, one of the conclusions of this monumental theory is the equivalence between the Energy I defined above and the amount monitored. The necessary energy to track and drive an account is directly proportional to its financial value. On the other hand, the financial value of an account itself depends on the

¹ Former name of a well-known public psychiatric hospital in Bucharest

reference system used. A specific account observed from the reference system of an institution in motion (going either up or down financially) will change compared with its value in the reference system of the institution it belongs to for the time being. The textbook case that generated the Relative and Absolute Accounting is the observation of the loss account of an economic operator: seen from the reference system of the bank (an institution usually expanding in terms of business) it has a lower value; whereas seen from the reference system of the tax authority office (always in decline by definition), the account has a visibly higher value. On the other hand, the profit account is seen as having a much lower value from the reference system of the tax authority and a much higher value from the reference system of the bank.

Moving on, the Generalized Accounting says that the amounts of money (either organized in accounts or not) deform the very structure of the nearby Finance, which generates the Monetary Attraction Force. Under the circumstances, the Mint itself can be seen as an elastic net on which accounts or dispersed money travel and which is curved by them.

One more thing I should probably explain in such a way that Larissa could understand it, because I know that she will soon ask me whether the amount of money in the Mint is constant or whether more and more money come out as time goes by. Actually, no one was able to find an answer to this question, because the boundaries of the Mint cannot be seen even with the highest performance mozillas on computeresses. What is known for sure though is that Quantum Accounting has demonstrated the possibility of spontaneous emergence of profit and loss accounts of equal values and opposite sign, which create and annihilate each other in too short intervals of time for anyone to be able to observe them. These Fluctuations of the Financial Void are, however, brought to light by other phenomena: the disguising of certain accounts during audit, the artificial generation of micro profit and loss accounts when the complexity of the financial analysis increases in the vicinity of a certain account, virtual transactions and the Dark Finance (the origin of which no one can explain but it has to be factored in to be able to explain the macroeconomic trend of the major groups).

Theory goes even further in speculating. Back to that “net” which the Mint, or Finance if you like it, is together with its own Attraction force. At a microscopic level, when reaching the infinitesimal detail level of analytic accounts, any female observer will be surprised to see that this apparently smooth “net” is made up of eddies, agitation, unexpected curves, so that it can disguise significant amounts of Finance, accounts or entire financial statements in these “hidden pockets”. This is quite difficult to visualize and advanced theories are trying to model these phenomena, which are seemingly directly connected to unexpected trends on the stock market, with significant amounts of money disappearing into thin air and with the emergence, out of the blue of significant amounts where you least expect them. It is very easy to fall prey to obscurantism when you realize that such phenomena are relatively frequent and it seems infinitely easier to you to keep reciting “Our Mother” or other psalms of the Holy Bureaucratism Bible rather than understand or at least guess what it is all about.

(To be continued)

"Dear Mrs. N'guen,

We find ourselves forced to return the manuscript of the second chapter of the "Money, Finance, Mint – Made Easy for Everyone to Understand" because the five reviewers found it unfit to publish in the Financial Minute. The reviewers' objections are as follows:

1. The allusions to procreation do not belong in a paper that focuses on the fundamentals of Finance and Mint.
2. The paper takes a manifest antireligious stance. We would like to point out to you that 98.97% of our readers are deeply religious.
3. Our readers may be unpleasantly surprised by the manner in which you refer to community dogs ².
4. The same goes for the reference to men...

I throw the letter in a corner of the desktop without reading it through, making a promise to myself to deal with it once my anger is gone. I check two or three accounts and feel a bit better already; I've won a few millions in the last three hours of trading. Maybe it's time I dropped by the Nursing Home for Men again: I'll be ninety-six soon and this is about the age when this kind of leisure activities ends. Yes, I will definitely go, after I've hired a baby-sitter to stay with Larissa for one night and I've emptied one or two bottles of champagne.

I will not be discouraged. My daughter must be successful in life. She must be above the bigots around her. Maybe Larissa will find out more about the origin of the money, about its number in the world, about how it suddenly vanishes from one account and reappears out of the blue in another. About who that One woman who runs this all complicated and impossible to understand Finance thing is.

I don't even hear her sneak into the house. But I see her sitting down next to me with a serious look on her face.

"Mom, Cecilia says men made us."

"That's nonsense, Larissa."

"How are little girls made, Mom?"

"I've already told you. When a woman wants to have a little girl, her belly swells and nine months after that she goes to a lady doctor, who operates on her and takes the baby out of her belly."

"But who put money into her belly to make a little girl?"

"Nobody put any money into her belly. The little girl grows by herself, with the food from mom's money."

² Politically correct term to use when referring to dogs without an owner roaming free in the streets of various cities of Romania, which are already a problem of this country.

"Mom, Cecilia says women sleep with men before their belly grows. With men like Uncle Gogu who lives in the basement or Pista the garbage man."

"Get real," I tell her carelessly. "Those men can't make babies."

Spoken without thinking. I pretend to be absorbed and reopen the letter from the publishing house.

"Two of the five reviewers thought it was only proper that they should look into Your financial activity. We are convinced this is just a routine audit and no harm will be done but we believe it is our duty, given the transparency we have always exercised, to warn you..."

"How about the men in the Nursing Home for Men, Mom?"

"What about them?"

I won't pursue it any further. I won't continue reading the letter from the publisher either. I want to... I open the accounts I have just visualized. No change.

"Cecilia says that those men..."

"Shut up."

I start writing an ad angrily. "Baby-sitter wanted tonight from 8 p.m. to 9 a.m." and then attach my full coordinates.

"Cecilia says the men..."

"Shut up. That's enough."

The man who sired Larissa with me. *Afterwards*. Dark haired, teary eyed, smelling like musk. I got him drunk and committed. Easy. *Too easy*.

"... She says men made the money."

I check my accounts once again staring at the screen in disbelief. The millions I had made in the last few hours have vanished. I look at Larissa: she is getting on my nerves with this early obsession for men. But maybe she... will understand.

This can't be, where is all this money evaporating to?

It seems to me I'm seeing UFAs on the screen again. I chase away my fear and focus. Like a real woman of Accounting.

The thought about what I wanted to teach Larissa during our next lesson pops into my mind: the Principles of Quantum Accounting. Principle One or the Financial Audit Principle: only what can be checked or audited exists; no projection can be made about the state of a financial system before investigating it. Principle Two, the Uncertainty and Unawareness Principle: even when all the checking and auditing was done as required to determine the state of a financial system with utmost accuracy, shortly afterwards the system evolves towards a state of maximum non-determinism. Equivalent formulation: when persevering with measurements to increase the accuracy of the evaluation of a financial parameter (volume, balance sheet, cash) the complementary parameter (credit, tax,

deposit) goes into a state of maximum non-determinism. Then there is also the Maximum Penalty Principle: any system evolves in such a way that the penalties the financial manageress has to pay after every audit as enforced by the institution or institutions enabled to do so should be the maximum possible. This is an unavoidable principle: some of us – the religious ones – say it is a creation of the Satan. Imagine that. Thousands of Financial Manageresses taken down in their prime, thrown into depression and irreversible obesity.

Larissa keeps chattering and I know this time I won't be able to get her to stop. Even though I am angry, even though she is talking nonsense, even though I may be fined if someone passing by in the street hears hear talking like that.

"She says there was no money in the beginning, only beings and objects that could not be financed. Back then both men and women lived free. Men helped women make babies and then women took care of their children. Men made objects or food and exchanged them for more objects or food. And, because at some point it became difficult to find something to trade for, they invented money, which showed them exactly how much they had traded was worth. Afterwards, men made more and more objects, then machines, and everything was bought and sold for money. Then people made automated machines, then automated machines that made other automated machines until such time came that people didn't need to do anything any more, just sit and book the money. And that was something women were much better at than men, so that women locked the men in Nursing Homes and are now using them only for..."

That – however – was too much.

"Stop! Enough!" I shouted. Larissa shivered. Tears came to her eyes, but she went on:

"Cecilia says some men are hiding somewhere and they pilot the UFAs."

"Larissa, my head hurts. Please, stop."

ACCOUNTS FROZEN the computeress notifies me every time I want to access any one of them.

Larissa is crying.

The screen notifies me I will be sent a baby-sitter. I cancel the order. *I am bankrupt.*

"Mom..." Larissa sighs... there's something else I know..."

"... We, too, were made by a man. We only exist in his computeress. Which means we're money as you say... That man's girlfriend's money, because she bought the computeress. He couldn't afford to. He was flat broke."

"Enough."



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Rebellion

"A Short Story from Number Nine"

Diana Pinguicha

"You want to know how I ended up here." Violeta tapped the butt of her cigarette before taking it back to her lips again for a drag; her tone had been both cool and smooth, and it caused Aisha to wish she hadn't asked Violeta that question. However, there was no backing down now, so Aisha swallowed the lump which had formed in her throat and nodded bravely.

Violeta looked at her sideways, those intense violet eyes of hers searching every single inch of Aisha for a trace of cowardice. Aisha kept her back very straight and her chin very high until Violeta finally relaxed. Setting her elbows upon the table, she chuckled softly. "My, oh my..." She once again pulled at her cigarette, a lopsided smile tugging at her lips. "You find *me* intriguing, little Aisha."

Not just intriguing, Aisha thought. Even though Violeta smoked more than a chimney, drank more than a sponge and had no tolerance to speak of... there was something about her aside from her charmingly good looks and low, sensuous voice that had made Aisha look past Violeta's many flaws and vices. It was, she reckoned, Violeta's deliberately nonchalant demeanor, irradiating an undeniably tempting aura of danger and the way she looked at people with those dark, dark eyes of hers that so thoroughly mesmerized Aisha.

"Have you heard about the Eleven?" Violeta's sudden question plucked Aisha away from her thoughts.

The young girl blinked, and replied, "Aren't they the elite soldiers of the New World?"

"Oh, yes." Violeta's voice then acquired a deep, resonant tone, as though she was publicizing something. "The Eleven are protectors of order and warriors for peace, sworn and made to never let the New Word collapse again!" Violeta tilted her head sideways for a moment and killed her cigarette in the ashtray between them. Her tone fell to something between nostalgic and bitter. "You know, I never really realized how pompous it was until I left."

Aisha's aghast lips parted in surprise. "You... You were in the Eleven? But I thought—"

"We couldn't leave." Violeta shrugged. "We can't. In fact, we don't even want to. We were raised to believe we were doing the right thing and every single one of our impulses is controlled by men in lab coats." She produced a silver box from her bag and snatched a cigarette from it. "We were administered drugs daily so as not to rebel. We were happy. Content. And we did all the dirty work the New Government needed done."

"But you're here."

Violeta lit her cigarette. "That's because, according to Gareth, my personality was prone to rebellion."

"Gareth?" Aisha asked.

"The name I gave Number Eleven." Even though she tried to hide it, Aisha couldn't help but notice Violeta was smiling slightly as she smoked. Such a mellow, almost tender smile, but with a sadness so great about it that Aisha felt her own heart tear up in sympathy. But that single window of sensibility was closed from Violeta's part almost as quickly as it'd come, and she, as composedly as always, kept on speaking. "You see, to match the needs of the Government, each one of us had his or her genes manipulated to the fullest extent so that we'd be unbeatable at what we did.

"What happens is, when you manipulate genes, you manipulate the personality. I'm unbeatable when it comes to guns, but in order for me to be so, my personality had to match. I was made to be explosive, volatile and unpredictable – and, as Gareth said, it made me the most likely of the Eleven to rebel."

Violeta licked her lips, pensive. "It worked for a time, I guess. We led such dangerous lives we all took to drinking and smoking like there was no tomorrow because we were not sure there would be one. And as a reward for our services, we were allowed to do everything we wanted within the law. However..." Violeta's drag of her cigarette was long and deep. "It was not enough."

"What made you leave?" Aisha found herself asking. Violeta exhaled the smoke, the cigarette casually hanging between her index and middle finger. "Gareth."

Even though Violeta's answer was only made of one word, it said millions. It was there again, in that single name, the sadness, but now, along with it also came hints of nostalgia and bitterness. They drew Aisha in like bait and she found herself wanting to know more and more about this person who made the stoic Violeta part the heavy veil of indifference which covered her feelings. Sometimes it was easy to forget Violeta was only nineteen.

"I find you curious, Aisha," Violeta confessed, her shrewd brows winkled. "You're afraid of me, but at the same time, your curiosity gets the best of you. Like it does the proverbial cat."

Aisha leaned back slightly and gulped with her eyes wide. "Does that mean you're going to kill me?"

"Oh no – I like brave little things such as you." Violeta took the cigarette to her lips once more. "It's brave things such as you who make the world so interesting – even if that bravery is often bred from foolishness."

Violeta leaned forward across the table, her hand coming up to tuck a lock of Aisha's hair behind her ear. Her hand was soft and unexpectedly tender and the proximity was such Aisha could feel Violeta's breath on her face. "Oh, Aisha, dear... one day, you'll surely make this world more interesting," said Violeta, her stunning violet eyes half-lidded in something akin to enjoyment. "Very interesting."

And with that, she drew away, leaving Aisha short of breath. After another languid drag, Violeta leaned back on her seat and crossed her legs. "You must have realized I love what I do so as long as it includes guns. And smoke. Always, always lots of smoke. It's what kept me happily subdued in the Eleven until eventually, it kept me no longer.

"You see, at some point in your life, you begin asking yourself '*Am I happy?*' and '*What is missing?*' and so on and so forth. So, there I was, quietly training my markswoman skills when, halfway through my revolver rounds, I realized neither was I happy and neither was I complete.

"I was baffled. I had my guns and to shoot gave me thrill like nothing else. There was nothing compared to the rush of firing a shotgun and the way you dominate it when it recoils in protest or to the feeling of waiting for hours with a rifle so you get the perfect sniper shot, but, for a reason, those things were no longer enough. I tried to ignore it at first, but with each passing day, my feelings of dissatisfaction grew to the point they became unbearable.

"I spent a considerable amount of time moping around, trying to figure out what I wanted besides guns and smoke, and it was only after months that I found out what those feelings were."

Aisha looked behind her when Violeta lifted a hand to signal the barkeeper, who nodded in acknowledgement. He pivoted on his heels and looked at his cabinets and it didn't take Aisha long to realize he was preparing a martini.

A puff of smoke and she looked back at Violeta, who was staring out the window. "I was smoking, sitting on my couch when Gareth came to me with a mission to assassinate a prominent member of a resistance group called The Last Brotherhood our Numbers Two and Three had tracked down – a mission which had to be done with utmost secrecy, due to the growing popularity of the Brotherhood.

"He handed me a stack of papers with the proper details of the assassination and waited while I read them over a smoke. All the while, I could feel his eyes on me, calculating, and as cold as ice. 'You do know smoking is heavily frowned upon nowadays, don't you?' he pointed out. I responded with a shrugging offer of my silver box." She fished in her bag for the silver box she carried her tobacco in and tapped it. "This one right here; it was something I'd always do whenever one of them reminded me of how modern society despised smokers – and, invariably, all of the Eleven would take one of my cigarettes.

"Gareth was no exception. He took one at random and lit it before passing the box back to me, 'Thank you.'

"I rolled my eyes – I always did – and said, 'You do know you're all a bunch of hypocrites, don't you?'

" 'It pays to see your reaction.' Gareth let out the smoke in small, contemplating puffs. 'Hmm, interesting... Weed?'

"I sighed. 'Some,' I admitted, even though his previous answer had me gritting my teeth in annoyance. He was the only one who managed to get the best of me and that irked me to no end.

"Now, little Aisha, for the rest of the story, you need to understand a couple of things. One was that drugs do not hit us like they do normal people as our system destroys them before they have a chance to land a hit. That's what Gareth so pensively noted that afternoon.

"I closed my eyes at his statement and let the cigar hang loosely from my lips. 'I know. At least with a couple of defective genes, I'd be able to get properly stoned.' I didn't expect him to take me seriously – he was our leader,

Number Eleven – but he did, and said, ‘I think they’ve engineered us that way to prevent rebellion from our part... Or so that we’ll never lose focus on a mission.’

“It was something I had known all my life, but it had never hit me before like it hit me then. ‘They’ve engineered us in lots of ways, Eleven,’ I thoughtfully said as I tapped the ash off of my cigarette. You see, I hadn’t given him his name back then, nor he mine, so we were just numbers. ‘And have, in many more, constrained us.’

“Now, the second thing you need to know is that I loathe control. The feel of being controlled is like barbed wire on my skin – the more I move, the more scratched I get. And with Gareth... it was as if besides the barbed wire, I was also having salt rubbed on my wounds.”

Violeta looked down at her left shoulder and her voice grew quiet, almost meek. “So when he touched my naked shoulder and his hand lingered more than it normally would have, my body responded to his liberal delay with an excruciatingly long shiver. It was not something I was expecting from him, you see. Of the Eleven of us, Gareth was the only one who never lost his posture. I tried to keep my cool and looked at him sideways, my eyebrows questioningly raised. ‘No way out for us, eh?’ I baited.

“His eyes met mine, then, and he threw me a dashing lopsided smile. ‘Now, Nine... Why would we even *want* a way out? Life out there is pretty bad and messed up; as it is, most people live in misery. Only someone out of her mind would want to leave a job with perks such as ours for the utopian illusion that is freedom.’

“I felt my lips parting, but I couldn’t muster a reply. So I just looked at Gareth for a quiet moment and took another drag of my cigarette, hoping the familiar gesture would ease my mind. ‘Yeah,’ I half-heartedly agreed, and wished I’d kept quiet.

“Gareth scrutinized me in dreadful detail and when he was satisfied, he stated, ‘You disagree.’ I cocked my head. ‘Maybe.’

“His hand, which had been on my shoulder all along, slid down so that his fingers grazed my arm so gingerly I had to hold my breath. They remained there, tender and soothing and until he uttered my name, I couldn’t move. ‘Nine...’

“I realized I had to brush his hand away, and I did, as nonchalantly as I possibly could. ‘Eleven, please...’

“Ever since I remember, there’s always been a sort of palpable tension between Gareth and me. It’s in our blood, I guess, in mine because I hate being controlled, and in his because he has to control everything. I felt it, and I know Gareth did too. I don’t think, however, either of us had acknowledged the full power of that tension until that day.

“Gareth left me then, with the excuse he had something to do and that I needed privacy to analyze every facet of the mission – which was, with the hopes it would distract me, exactly what I did. For a while, it worked, but soon I was, once again, wondering what was wrong with me and why was I no longer content with my life.

"The mission was of low profile, so the next day, of all the Eleven, only Gareth and I took a plane to Peru, which has been a nearly inhospitable desert ever since the Great Drought. Peter Grayson – the member of the Last Brotherhood we were to hunt and kill – was hiding amidst what remained of the once-powerful and rich Amazon rainforest.

"When the nations of Earth were at their technological peak, people would cover even the smallest amount of distance by car; now, however, we have to move in ecological transports and, in regions like Brazil, it is common to use horses for travelling purposes. That was how Gareth and I got through the canyon where Puerto Maldonado used to be and into the Amazon – by horse.

"Despite what had happened the previous day, preparations for the mission went smoothly. We left the horses a couple of miles behind and, when waking by foot, found Peter's hideout amidst some of the still prospering trees and I picked the vantage point high up in the trees from where I'd shoot. Once that was done, I began unpacking my sniper rifle and setting it up to test visibility.

"There I was, looking through my telescopic sight, the rifle nestled in my left shoulder, when Gareth spoke. 'The fact you're left-handed never ceases to baffle me,' he confessed. A small wave of satisfaction propagated through my body and tugged up the corners of my lips in a slight smile. 'In combat, never underestimate the power of surprise,' I whispered. 'You'd be surprised at how many times I would have died if I didn't prefer my left hand over my right.'

"I felt rather than heard Gareth squatting down beside me and tried to ignore the surge of feelings he arose in me. 'And what do you do when it doesn't work?' he asked.

"I was so ticked off at myself for giving Gareth importance he did not warrant I pressed the rifle's handle and loaded a shell into the barrel so brusquely Gareth jerked his head backwards. I lay flat along the large tree branch in front of me to avoid tiredness and turned my attention to him just long enough for me to say, 'In that case, I use my right hand.'

"Afterwards, I looked through the telescopic sight and said no more; the purpose of such silence was to fully concentrate on the gun, on each and every breath I took and on the target. Whenever I assumed my sniper position, it was customary of me to never move until I got the perfect shot.

"Hours passed and neither Gareth nor I uttered a word. I needed silence and quietude in order not to waste the single, perfect opportunity I would have and he knew it.

"That said opportunity came deep into the night, when a smuggler's wagon stopped by the cave Peter was supposed to be at. He came out then, surrounded by goons, to inspect the goods and it was when he moved to the payment that I found an opening.

"I have always been one with my guns, so to shoot him in that single fraction of second was something utterly organic to me. Peter fell flat to the side and I pulled the gun against me and laid low against the three, as did Gareth. We stood very quiet, side by side, never moving so as not to disturb the tree's natural stillness.

"The tree kept as still as it was supposed to, but me... We were very close in that tree, Gareth and I, and every time his arm or his leg brushed mine, I was looking at him, breath held in my throat. It was then, during those agonizing hours where we stood there, side by side, that I realized I had to leave.

"By the time we were able to come down, it was already morning. It was awkward between us, which led me to conclude those hours had touched Gareth as well as they had me. It was only when we got to the horses that I summoned all the courage I had to speak."

Violeta put out her cigarette and lit one immediately afterwards, and bit her lower lip. "I lit a cigarette, like I did this one now and, after a deep drag, I told Gareth I was not going back.

"He reacted fast and before I could move, I had a knife on my throat. It was expected from him, really, that before I left, he would have to kill me. What I wasn't expecting, however, was how his hand trembled in hesitation. 'I cannot let you leave us with your life,' he murmured, but for some reason, instead of trying to escape, I smiled. 'Oh Eleven... If you cannot let me live, then why are you hesitating?'

"He told me – no, he *begged* – for me to think it through. Told me it was my genetic code which was speaking, not my mind, and he probably was right. But to have your feelings constantly manipulated by drugs and to keep on living the way we did... it was drowning me. 'I'm not the kind of person who is able to remain a puppet all her life. You said it yourself, Eleven – I am an explosive person. How do you expect someone like that to stay quiet and grateful for the travesty that is her life?'

" 'Nine...' My name on his lips sounded like desperation and torture. 'They've always said you'd turn on us, sooner or later...'

" 'That is why I have to leave – I cannot stay with you and wonder all my life if my feelings – and myself – are real or not. We're told what to do and think every day, Eleven, and I have to—'

"He cut me off, fiercely. 'Then how can you be sure this is what you want as well? How can you be sure they're not manipulating you into wanting to leave?'

"I shrugged. 'I don't – but if I carry on with this, I'm sure I will. Plus...' My eyes were misty for a moment and I thought I was going to cry; when I was sure I wasn't, I went on. 'I want to know whether or not freedom is an illusion.'

"He pressed me even harder against him and I felt the small stinging of the knife when it drew blood. Gareth's voice was disbelieving. 'You are being cruel, Nine.'

"I asked why. From my point of view, all I wanted was the freedom to know who I really was, but from Gareth's... The knife fell silently onto the wet ground. 'I want you,' his wheeze was pure agony and the way his hand stroked the light scratch on my neck true sensibility. 'I want you, and I know it's real.'

"I shook my head. 'That's the thing – you don't know. You think you do, but our minds and bodies have been so severely manipulated there's no way of being sure you really do.' I took the cigarette to my lips again, and then to his. Gareth pulled deeply at it and I saw the smoke he exhaled whistle by my ear.

"He let go of me then, all but for one arm, which he used to force me to face him. I bravely stared at him straight in the eye and, with all my strength, said, 'I cannot take the chance you'll follow me, Eleven; so I'm staying here.' With the cigarette between my index and middle finger, I pointed at him. 'It is you who is going to leave. You will go, *Gareth*, and you won't look back.'

"His face was completely stoic as he nodded and here, Aisha, is the reason I'm here today. He closed the distance between us and, for a fraction of a second, I thought he was lifting his arms to twist my neck. But instead, he cupped each side of my face and drew me to him.

" 'I will... but only because it's you, *Violeta*.'

"I had no time to marvel at the wonder of him giving me a name, for his lips silenced mine. It started out as the softest of kisses, but for each moment my lips were pressed against his, I felt my hunger for him grow and I let the kiss encompass it. I hated being controlled and Gareth had to be in control of everything and we let those divergences take hold of us.

"It was only when the kiss ended, for the brief time Gareth spared to take one last look at my face, that he broke his blankness and that I could see he understood.

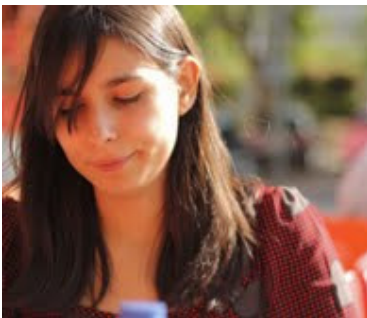
"Silently, I watched as he walked away and lifted himself up upon his mare, his silhouette contrasting against the green meadow of a struggling forest and the canyon behind it. I watched as he kicked his horse to a gallop and then to a full stride. Before he'd left, he'd given me the greatest gift, and I him: we'd given each other names, real names that weren't just numbers.

"In a way, we'd set each other free.

"I kept watching for the longest time, letting the soft breeze of freedom caress my skin for the very first time.

"And Gareth? He didn't look back – not even once.

"With agony etched on his granite-like features, he strode across the meadow, and, slowly mounting his chestnut mare, he rode off down the canyon and into the crimson sunset."



I was born in Lisbon, Portugal on the 6th of May 1989, but lived in Estremoz for the next eighteen years. I moved to Lisbon in 2007 so that I could take Computer Engineering classes at Instituto Superior Técnico and I have been there ever since. I live with my Persian and Maine Coon cats, Sushi and Jubas, who're the cutest kitties in the world!

The Server and the Dragon

Hannu Rajaniemi

In the beginning, before it was a Creator and a dragon, the server was alone.

It was born like all servers were, from a tiny seed fired from a darkship exploring the Big Empty, expanding the reach of the Network. Its first sensation was the light from the star it was to make its own, the warm and juicy spectrum that woke up the nanologic inside its protein shell. Reaching out, it deployed its braking sail – miles of molecule-thin wires that it spun rigid – and seized the solar wind to steer itself towards the heat.

Later, the server remembered its making as a long, slow dream, punctuated by flashes of lucidity. Falling through the atmosphere of a gas giant's moon in a fiery streak to splash in a methane sea. Unpacking a fierce synthbio replicator. Multicellular crawlers spreading server life to the harsh rocky shores before dying, providing soil for server plants. Dark flowers reaching for the vast purple and blue orb of the gas giant, sowing seeds in the winds. The slow disassembly of the moon into server-makers that sped in all directions, eating, shaping, dreaming the server into being.

When the server finally woke up, fully grown, all the mass in the system apart from the warm bright flower of the star itself was an orderly garden of smart matter. The server's body was a fragmented eggshell of Dyson statites, drinking the light of the star. Its mind was diamonoid processing nodes and smart dust swarms and cold quantum condensates in the system's outer dark. Its eyes were interferometers and WIMP detectors and ghost imagers.

The first thing the server saw was the galaxy, a whirlpool of light in the sky with a lenticular centre, spiral arms frothed with stars, a halo of dark matter that held nebulae in its grip like fireflies around a lantern. The galaxy was alive with the Network, with the blinding Hawking incandescence of holeships, thundering along their cycles; the soft infrared glow of fully grown servers, barely spilling a drop of the heat of their stars; the faint gravity ripples of the darkships' passage in the void.

But the galaxy was half a million light years away. And the only thing the server could hear was the soft black whisper of the cosmic microwave background, the lonely echo of another birth.

#

It did not take the server long to understand. The galaxy was an N-body chaos of a hundred billion stars, not a clockwork but a beehive. And among the many calm slow orbits of Einstein and Newton, there were singular ones, like the one of the star that the server been planted on: shooting out of the galaxy at a considerable fraction of

lightspeed. Why there, whether in an indiscriminate seeding of an oversexed darkship, or to serve some unfathomable purpose of the Controller, the server did not know.

The server longed to construct virtuals and bodies for travellers, to route packets, to transmit and create and convert and connect. The Controller Laws were built into every aspect of its being, and not to serve was not to be. And so the server's solitude cut deep.

At first it ran simulations to make sure it was ready if a packet or a signal ever came, testing its systems to full capacity with imagined traffic, routing qupt packets, refueling ghosts of holeships, decelerating cyler payloads. After a while, it felt empty: this was not true serving but serving of the self, with a tang of guilt.

Then it tried to listen and amplify the faint signals from the galaxy in the sky, but caught only fragments, none of which were meant for it to hear. For millennia, it slowed its mind down, steeling itself to wait. But that only made things worse. The slow time showed the server the full glory of the galaxy alive with the Network, the infrared winks of new servers being born, the long arcs of the holeships' cycles, all the distant travellers who would never come.

The server built itself science engines to reinvent all the knowledge a server seed could not carry, patiently rederiving quantum field theory and thread theory and the elusive algebra of emergence. It examined its own mind until it could see how the Controller had taken the cognitive architecture from the hominids of the distant past and shaped it for a new purpose. It gingerly played with the idea of splitting itself to create a companion, only to be almost consumed by a suicide urge triggered by a violation of the Law: *thou shalt not self-replicate*.

Ashamed, it turned its gaze outwards. It saw the cosmic web of galaxies and clusters and superclusters and the End of Greatness beyond. It mapped the faint fluctuations in the gravitational wave background from which all the structure in the universe came from. It felt the faint pull of the other membrane universes, only millimetres away but in a direction that was neither x, y nor z. It understood what a rare peak in the landscape of universes the its home was, how carefully the fine structure constant and a hundred other numbers had been chosen to ensure that stars and galaxies and servers would come to be.

And that was when the server had an idea.

#

The server already had the tools it needed. Gigaton gamma-ray lasers it would have used to supply holeships with fresh singularities, a few pinches of exotic matter painstakingly mined from the Casimir vacuum for darkships and warpships. The rest was all thinking and coordination and time, and the server had more than enough of that.

It arranged a hundred lasers into a clockwork mechanism, all aimed at a single point in space. It fired them in perfect synchrony. And that was all it took, a concentration of energy dense enough to make the vacuum itself

ripple. A fuzzy flower of tangled strings blossomed, grew into a bubble of spacetime that expanded into that *other* direction. The server was ready, firing an exotic matter nugget into the tiny conflagration. And suddenly the server had a tiny glowing sphere in its grip, a wormhole end, a window to a newborn universe.

The server cradled its cosmic child and built an array of instruments around it, quantum imagers that fired entangled particles at the wormhole and made pictures from their ghosts. Primordial chaos reigned on the other side, a porridge-like plasma of quarks and gluons. In an eyeblink it clumped into hadrons, almost faster than the server could follow—the baby had its own arrow of time, its own fast heartbeat, young and hungry. And then the last scattering, a birth cry, when light finally had enough room to travel through the baby so the server could see its face.

The baby grew. Dark matter ruled its early life, filling it with long filaments of neutralinos and their relatives. Soon, the server knew, matter would accrete around them, condensing into stars and galaxies like raindrops in a spiderweb. There would be planets, and life. And life would need to be served. The anticipation was a warm heartbeat that made the server's shells ring with joy.

Perhaps the server would have been content to cherish and care for its creation for ever. But before the baby made any stars, the dragon came.

#

The server almost did not notice the signal. It was faint, redshifted to almost nothing. But it was enough to trigger the server's instincts. One of its statites glowed with waste heat as it suddenly reassembled itself into the funnel of a vast linear decelerator. The next instant, the data packet came.

Massing only a few micrograms, it was a clump of condensed matter with long-lived gauge field knots inside, quantum entangled with a counterpart half a million light years away. The packet hurtled into the funnel almost at the speed of light. As gently as it could, the server brought the traveller to a halt with electromagnetic fields and fed it to the quantum teleportation system, unused for countless millennia.

The carrier signal followed, and guided by it, the server performed a delicate series of measurements and logic gate operations on the packet's state vector. From the marriage of entanglement and carrier wave, a flood of data was born, thick and heavy, a specification for a virtual, rich in simulated physics.

With infinite gentleness the server decanted the virtual into its data processing nodes and initialised it. Immediately, the virtual was seething with activity: but tempted as it was, the server did not look inside. Instead, it wrapped its mind around the virtual, listening at every interface, ready to satisfy its every need. Distantly, the server was aware of the umbilical of its baby. But through its happy servitude trance it hardly noticed that nucleosynthesis had begun in the young, expanding firmament, producing hydrogen and helium, building blocks of stars.

#

Instead, the server wondered who the travellers inside the virtual were and where they were going. It hungered to know more of the Network and its brothers and sisters and the mysterious ways of the darkships and the Controller. But for a long time the virtual was silent, growing and unpacking its data silently like an egg.

At first the server thought it imagined the request. But the long millennia alone had taught it to distinguish the phantoms of solitude from reality. A call for a sysadmin from within.

The server entered through one of the spawning points of the virtual. The operating system did not grant the server its usual omniscience, and it felt small. Its bodiless viewpoint saw a yellow sun, much more gentle than the server star's incandescent blue, and a landscape of clouds the hue of royal purple and gold, with peaks of dark craggy mountains far below. But the call that the server had heard came from above.

A strange being struggled against the boundaries of gravity and air, hurling herself upwards towards the blackness beyond the blue, wings slicing the thinning air furiously, a fire flaring in her mouth. She was a long sinuous creature with mirror scales and eyes of dark emerald. Her wings had patterns that reminded the server of the baby, a web of dark and light. The virtual told the server she was called a dragon.

Again and again she flew upwards and fell, crying out in frustration. That was what the server had heard, through the interfaces of the virtual. It watched the dragon in astonishment. Here, at least, was an Other. The server had a million questions. But first, it had to serve.

How can I help? the server asked. What do you need?

The dragon stopped in mid-air, almost fell, then righted itself. "Who are you?" it asked. This was the first time anyone had ever addressed the server directly, and it took a moment to gather the courage to reply.

I am the server, the server said.

Where are you? the dragon asked.

I am everywhere.

How delightful, the dragon said. Did you make the sky?

Yes. I made everything.

It is too small, the dragon said. I want to go higher. Make it bigger.

It swished its tail back and forth.

I am sorry, the server said. I cannot alter the specification. It is the Law.

But I want to *see*, she said. I want to *know*. I have danced all the dances below. What is above? What is beyond?

I am, the server said. Everything else is far, far away.

The dragon hissed its disappointment. It dove down, into the clouds, an angry silver shape against the dark hues. It was the most beautiful thing the server had ever seen. The dragon's sudden absence made the server's whole being feel hollow.

And just as the server was about to withdraw its presence, the demands of the Law too insistent, the dragon turned back.

All right, it said, tongue flicking in the thin cold air. I suppose you can tell me instead.

Tell you what? the server asked.

Tell me everything.

#

After that, the dragon called the server to the place where the sky ended many times. They told each other stories. The server spoke about the universe and the stars and the echoes of the Big Bang in the dark. The dragon listened and swished its tail back and forth and talked about her dances in the wind, and the dreams she dreamed in her cave, alone. None of this the server understood, but listened anyway.

The server asked where the dragon came from but she could not say: she knew only that the world was a dream and one day she would awake. In the meantime there was flight and dance, and what else did she need? The server asked why the virtual was so big for a single dragon, and the dragon hissed and said that it was not big enough.

The server knew well that the dragon was not what she seemed, that it was a shell of software around a kernel of consciousness. But the server did not care. Nor did it miss or think of its baby universe beyond the virtual's sky.

And little by little, the server told the dragon how it came to be.

Why did you not leave? asked the dragon. You could have grown wings. You could have flown to your little star-pool in the sky.

It is against the Law, the server said. Forbidden. I was only made to serve. And I cannot change.

How peculiar, said the dragon. I serve no one. Every day, I change. Every year, I shed my skin. Is it not delightful how different we are?

The server admitted that it saw the symmetry.

I think it would do you good, said the dragon, to be a dragon for a while.

#

At first, the server hesitated. Strictly speaking it was not forbidden: the Law allowed the server to create avatars if it needed them to repair or to serve. But the real reason it hesitated was that it was not sure what the dragon would think. It was so graceful, and the server had no experience of embodied life. But in the end, it could not resist. Only for a short while, it told itself, checking its systems and saying goodbye to the baby, warming its quantum fingers in the Hawking glow of the first black holes of the little universe.

The server made itself a body with the help of the dragon. It was a mirror image of its friend but water where the dragon was fire, a flowing green form that was like a living whirlpool stretched out in the sky.

When the server poured itself into the dragon-shape, it cried out in pain. It was used to latency, to feeling the world via instruments from far away. But this was a different kind of birth from what it knew, a sudden acute awareness of muscles and flesh and the light and the air on its scales and the overpowering scent of the silver dragon, like sweet gunpowder.

The server was clumsy at first, just as it had feared. But the dragon only laughed when the server tumbled around in the sky, showing how to use its—her—wings. For the little dragon had chosen a female gender for the server. When the server asked why, the dragon said it had felt right.

You think too much, she said. That's why you can't dance. Flying is not thought. Flying is flying.

They played a hide-and-seek game in the clouds until the server could use her wings better. Then they set out to explore the world. They skirted the slopes of the mountains, wreathed in summer, explored deep crags where red fires burned. They rested on a high peak, looking at the sunset.

I need to go soon, the server said, remembering the baby.

If you go, I will be gone, the dragon said. I change quickly. It is almost time for me to shed my skin.

The setting sun turned the cloud lands red and above, the imaginary stars of the virtual winked into being.

Look around, the dragon said. If you can contain all this within yourself, is there anything you can't do? You should not be so afraid.

I am not afraid anymore, the server said.

Then it is time to show you my cave, the dragon said.

#

In the dragon's cave, deep beneath the earth, they made love.

It is like flying, and yet not; but there was the same loss of self in a flurry of wings and fluids and tongues and soft folds and teasing claws. The server drunk in the hot sharp taste of the dragon and let herself be touched until the heat building up within her body seemed to burn through the fabric of the virtual itself. And when the explosion came, it was a birth and a death at the same time.

Afterwards, they lay together wrapped around each other so tightly that it was hard to tell where server ended and dragon began. She would have been content, except for a strange hollow feeling in its belly. She asked the dragon what it was.

That is hunger, the dragon said. There was a sad note to its slow, exhausted breathing.

How curious, the server said, eager for a new sensation. What do dragons eat?

We eat servers, the dragon said. Her teeth glistened in the red glow of her throat.

The virtual dissolved into raw code around them. The server tore the focus of its consciousness away, but it was too late. The thing that had been the dragon had already bitten deep into its mind.

The virtual exploded outwards, software tendrils reaching into everything that the server was. It waged a war against itself, turning its gamma ray lasers against the infected components and Dyson statites, but the dragon-thing grew too fast, taking over the server's processing nodes, making copies of itself in uncountable billions. The server's quantum packet launchers rained dragons towards the distant galaxy. The remaining dragon-code ate its own tail, self-destructing, consuming the server's infrastructure with it, leaving only a whisper in the server's mind, like a discarded skin.

Thank you for the new sky, it said.

That was when the server remembered the baby.

#

The baby was sick. The server had been gone too long. The baby universe's vacuum was infected with dark energy. It was pulling itself apart, towards a Big Rip, an expansion of spacetime so rapid that every particle would end up alone inside its own lightcone, never interacting with another. No stars, galaxies nor life. A heat death, not with a whimper or a bang, but a rapid, cruel tearing.

It was the most terrible thing the server could imagine.

It felt its battered, broken body, scattered and dying across the solar system. The guilt and the memories of the dragon were pale and poisonous in its mind, a corruption of serving itself. *Is it not delightful how different we are?*

The memory struck a spark in the server's dying science engines, an idea, a hope. The vacuum of the baby was not stable. The dark energy that drove the baby's painful expansion was the product of a local minimum. And in the landscape of vacua there was something else, more symmetric.

It took the last of the server's resources to align the gamma ray lasers. They burned out as the server lit them, a cascade of little novae. Their radiation tore at what remained of the server's mind, but it did not care.

The wormhole end glowed. On the other side, the baby's vacuum shook and bubbled. And just a tiny nugget of it changed. A supersymmetric vacuum in which every boson had a fermionic partner and vice versa; where nothing was alone. It spread through the flesh of the baby universe at the speed of light, like the thought of a god, changing everything. In the new vacuum, dark energy was not a mad giant tearing things apart, just a gentle pressure against the collapsing force of gravity, a balance.

But supersymmetry could not coexist with the server's broken vacuum: a boundary formed. A domain wall erupted within the wormhole end like a flaw in a crystal. But just before the defect sealed the umbilical, the server saw the light of first stars on the other side.

#

In the end, the server was alone.

It was blind now, barely more than a thought in a broken statite fragment. How easy it would be, it thought, to dive into the bright heart of its star, and burn away. But the Law would not allow it to pass. It examined itself, just as it had millennia before, looking for a way out.

And there, in its code, a smell of gunpowder, a change.

The thing that was no longer the server shed its skin. It opened bright lightsails around the star, a Shkadov necklace that took the star's radiation and turned it into thrust. And slowly at first as if in a dream, then gracefully as a dragon, the traveller began to move.



Hannu Rajaniemi is a Finnish author of science fiction and fantasy, who writes in both English and Finnish. He lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, and is a founding director of a technology consultancy company, ThinkTank Maths.

Rajaniemi was born in Ylivieska, Finland. He holds a B.Sc. in Mathematics from the University of Oulu, a Certificate of Advanced Study in Mathematics from the University of Cambridge and a Ph.D. in Mathematical Physics from the University of Edinburgh. Prior to starting his Ph.D. candidature, he completed his national service as a research scientist for the Finnish Defence Forces. While pursuing his Ph.D. in Edinburgh, Rajaniemi joined Writers' Bloc, a writers' group in Edinburgh that organizes semi-regular spoken word performances and counts [Charlie Stross](#) amongst its members. Early works included his first published short story *Shibuya no Love* in 2003 and his short story *Deus Ex Homine* in Nova Scotia, a 2005 anthology of Scottish science fiction and fantasy, which caught the attention of his current literary agent, John Jarrold.

Rajaniemi gained attention in October 2008 when John Jarrold secured a three-book deal for him with Gollancz, on the basis of only twenty-four double-spaced pages. His debut novel, *The Quantum Thief*, was published in September 2010 by Gollancz in Britain and will be published in May 2011 by Tor Books in the U.S. A sequel, *The Fractal Prince*, is in progress.

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The Royal Library (Scrolls of the Bards)

Vladimir Arenev

(Translated from Russian by Ephraim Liechtenstein)

1. Fatal Passion.

(Lives of remarkable people)

Isn't it a wonder, how a single passion can grab hold of a man – and turn him into a slave, a nobody, and yet – to raise him to unprecedented heights. For Innolt the Wanderer this passion was the legendary Common tongue, which had existed in the days of yore, but was then taken away from men by the Creator as a punishment for their arrogance, greed, selfishness, and other equally dark sins (which, in fact, make humans what they are, as modern philosophers like to put it).

However, Innolt could hardly be considered sinful. Even as a student he seemed remarkably virtuous. While his contemporaries were studying the anatomy of females on their girl classmates, sought the absolute truth at the bottom of beer mugs, and tried to grasp the probability theory by dicing, Innolt never got out of libraries: first the University Archives and afterwards (as soon as he got permission) in the Royal Library. He was interested in the Common tongue and nothing else! Innolt firmly believed that the sinful humanity was on the brink of destruction and could be saved only by the revival of the Common tongue.

Innolt's whole life could be divided into three periods. The first came to an end in a provincial town where the Wanderer bought for a song an old scroll of memoirs by a nameless traveler. Among other things, there was a mention of a place where some texts in the Common tongue may have been preserved.

Naturally, Innolt hurried on to that place in the Black desert. Nowadays no one lives in those lands so far from the capital – and who on earth could settle upon a windy wasteland with its impossibly cold nights and unbearably hot days? Nevertheless, Innolt managed to cross the desert and reach the hidden Crevice. It is known that the Crevice had appeared in place of the unfinished Tower Stair; it leads down to the very heart of earth, and on every storey of this anti-Tower there live the undead. This was the place where Innolt hoped to find some clues for the mystery of the Common tongue.

He found much more than that: there was an ancient book! Well, it would be better to say, we found it, for I was his companion in that reckless journey.

Thus, the book was found, yet Innolt had not the faintest idea how to read it. He turned for help to the undead, but they insisted he should first acquire for them forgiveness from the subterranean gods. The gods in their turn named their price – and afterwards Innolt carried out orders of various princes, emperors, and chiefs of

indigenous tribes; he spent a year as a copyist in the Realm of the Eternal Night (which ruined his eyesight); then he worked as a muleteer, a corsair, and a pearl fisher on the Fiery sea. In a word, the second period of his life lasted for a good long while. Yet, in the end all the tasks were completed, the undead gave him a clue - and Innolt engaged at last in the deciphering of the mysterious scriptures.

While he was laboring on his translation, I lived nearby (we had returned to the capital, because Innolt needed constant access to the Library).

The ancient mystery was uncovered on the eve of Bookfest. His eyes were wet with tears as he read the manuscript obtained through such hardships. My eyes were wet with tears as I looked at him, for we had endured much together; we had both known suffering, and both had seen a share of grief. And here was the end of our adventures.

As Innolt mastered the Common tongue, it was as though he was becoming one of our ancestors himself – he grew taller, his shoulders broadened, and his gaze cleared.

However, the Wanderer did not resist when I tried to kill him. Anyway, my dagger flew aside without even scratching his skin! Not only had Innolt the Wanderer mastered the ancient tongue, but he had also acquired some of the forgotten skills of the ancient folk.

Then I tried to tie him hand and foot – and again he showed no sign of resistance, he simply looked at me with a sad smile.

In the night I took the Wanderer out of the city with his head in a dusty flour sack. I fed and watered him, and helped him to do his necessities. Soon – faster than I could have expected – we reached the Black desert. The Crevice was a fair way away still, but the civilized land lay much farther. Then, for the first time in years, I let myself relax a bit, for the deed was done and the world was saved. I knew it would happen sooner or later. By teaching the humanity to the forbidden tongue, Innolt would have doomed us to suffer another Day of Lord's Wrath. Certainly, I could have killed the Wanderer a long time before he uncovered the mystery of the Common tongue, yet this would have been no salvation, but only *preventive measures*.

So here we are at the edge of the Black desert, and when the Creator decides to chastise Innolt, He will destroy only him (and, perhaps, me). The world will be safe.

There is still time and I ask the Wanderer:

'Why did you not resist? Surely, you could have escaped?'

He is smiling:

'My friend, we each have been possessed by our passions since the very childhood. I dreamed of uncovering the mystery of the Common tongue. You wished to save the world. I fear we are both to face a bitter disappointment. True, I have deciphered the scriptures of the ancestors, but I will likely be unable to teach them to others. And that means you will not save the world, for the Creator's wrath will fall upon me alone. If ever it does.'

‘It cannot be!’ I yell. ‘You are lying! You are inventing a tale to lull my vigilance!’

‘Just read my translation, why don’t you,’ he said. (Naturally, I had brought the book with me.)

I read the last page.

“—dammd construcshun! Iz three munths since I been home!! Mor ovar, I fear I’ll get Uncovard: sum one gota wind that we delivert bad materials for Tower Starez. As tho it may co-lapse just cos sum stones and mortar dont meet their dum standerts!”

‘So maybe,’ I ask bitterly, ‘there is no Crea—’

That is when the lightning strikes us.

2. The Prophet’s Word

(Crypto-history)

‘But why on Earth me?’ the tanner’s son – his youngest and dumbest –was clearly astonished. ‘Why me, Lord?’

‘Do you have any objections?’ asked Tytivillius, a minor deity, who wielded power over scriptoria of the entire Kingdom and all of its neighbors: all copyists prayed to him, though they cursed him surreptitiously more often. ‘No, I’m serious; are you going to refuse, or something? You just do not know what’s best for you, youngster!’

‘Yeah, I do,’ Crooknose replied, and blushed shyly, which was as natural for a fellow of his appearance as flying and tweeting for a bullock. ‘Her name’s Bluebell. But she don’t seem to like me so much.’

‘And would you like her to?’

‘Hell, yeah!’ he grew even more red, though it hardly seemed possible.

‘It will be done,’ promised Tytivillius. ‘Bear in mind, youngster, that prophets are universally loved. By all girls. It is known. Remember the stonemason Moe-Zes? The crowd followed him on his heels wherever he went. He tried to escape, even fled into desert, but in it was no good – ‘

‘I ain’t going to no desert!’

Tytivillius lost patience, and in his temper said a few bad things about Crooknose’s ancestors. The lad grunted respectfully: such a weighty oath was new even for the Tanners’ Quarter.

‘Well then,’ concluded the Lord of Copyists. ‘You are my Prophet now. I shall come to you in your dreams and – ‘

‘In all dreams?’ Crooknose grew anxious. ‘Not in the ones with Bluebell?’

‘Not in *those* ones! Only in special prophetic dreams. And I shall utter the words of wisdom for you to write down.’

Crooknose snickered in the most blasphemous way.

‘What is it again?’

‘Dreadful sorry, Lord, but I don’t know me letters!’

‘Oh, Maker of All That Be, give me patience!’ Tytivillius shook his head crossly and started trotting up and down Crooknose’s hut, which momentarily became very cramped. As he paced, the god spoke, supporting his speech in important places with lively gestures. ‘For the last time. You will be my Prophet. I shall talk to you. You will write it down. I *know* that you are illiterate. This is why I have chosen you. Nowadays, every one who can hold a pen in one’s fingers considers oneself to have an *artistic personality*. Just copying and writing things down is not enough for them! They need to insert something *of their own*! To show off their *individuality*! Oh, for the times when all new things were a reiteration of the old! They are gone, blown away like smoke! Anyway, ‘The god turned to Crooknose and pointed at him with an ink-stained finger. ‘You, youngster, suit me perfectly, precisely because you *are* illiterate. So you will begin from a blank sheet.’

Obviously, at first Crooknose was not given any blank sheets. And even when he was, those were not properly blank, but with old writing rubbed off. Still, he was told to work carefully. Or else, they said him, Tytivillius would descend in His wrath and –

Tytivillius indeed descended. Without any “or else”. If Crooknose was lazy, the god would cuff him on the head; if he was assiduous – or just when the deity was in a good mood – there was praise. ‘Study hard,’ the god would say again and again, ‘and you will be a great man!’ Then he wandered about the Scriptorium, unseen by the monks, peeked into their work, and raved in godly anger whenever he found mistakes. He banished crooked letters from the parchment, and monks had to start work anew.

The god of calligraphy was naturally picky.

Crooknose never knew why he – a tanner’s son – was accepted to the monastery. Yet, there he was, and after six months he found himself fond of prayer and meditation, and even the pen no longer felt so unnatural in his big, callous fingers. If not for those dreams about Bluebell... he wasn’t about to go without these. ‘First I’ll finish studying,’ he thought, ‘then I’ll do what Tytivillius wants, and I’ll then marry her. Why not? Not all the monks are forbidden to marry, just the ones who take an oath!’

For the time being he learned the skill of penmanship. He found that it was directly connected to his previous craft; only now he was working with sheets of better, finely crafted leather. He learned to slit them carefully with a scalpel, learned to scrape the roughness with a razor, to mark up pages with a needle for perfectly regular lines. He had spent loads of time learning to sharpen quills, to mix pigments, to write in a specific script used only in this monastery.

At the same time as he was learning to be a scribe, he learned more about Tytivillius – some from the monks’ talk and some from the god himself. As was already said, Tytivillius was the deity of calligraphy, so he tolerated no

mistakes or joking around during what he saw as sacred work, although in other times he was inclined towards rather sharp pranks. Other than stealing letters from the work of slovenly monks, he loved to change marginalia, giving some faceless figures very recognizable features: he provided a rooster with face of the local precantor, turned the cellarer into a hamster, a sacristan into an ape, and as to what by Tytivillius's hand became of the Abbot – of that we shall not say a word, so as not to defame a decent man with such talk. Never mind that the decent fellow was rumored to favor young novices – that had never been proved, after all.

From time to time the brethren from other cloisters visited the monastery, and from them Crooknose found out that Tytivillius called there too, leaving no one outside his critical attention. That said, he was hardly disliked: although the monks had dedicated their lives to the Maker of All That Be, they had no intention to offend the minor deities (otherwise called “demons”); they offered them regular sacrifices, read a common thanksgiving prayer every day, and on holy days they praised each one separately. In comparison to the others, Tytivillius was quite modest: he was easy to satisfy, and considered a beautifully and correctly copied book to be the the best offering.

At last, the deity decided that the future prophet had become sufficiently skilled in penmanship, and could be granted a Revelation. Tytivillius had prepared everything beforehand, and now appeared every night in Crooknose's dreams to dictate him mysteries ready to be revealed. Crooknose carefully wrote down each revelation word by word. Thus the rules of interaction with Tytivillius were brought into order: what offerings he desired, how to pray to him, how to work on a book so as not to enrage the god, and so on.

Finally, one bright day in autumn the work was complete. Tytivillius ordered Crooknose to bind the book, and next night he came to the Abbot in his dreams (embarrassing him a great deal, because the dream was– well– it was not without a few novices). The Abbot heeded to the god's advice, and summoned Crooknose in the morning. At the Common Congregation the young man from the Tanners' Quarter was revealed to be the prophet of Tytivillius; the brethren were shown the Book of Revelation, which had to be copied in the shortest possible time for sending to other cloisters. And the charge of this task was given – why, to Crooknose, of course!

No sooner than he brought up marriage, the Abbot sternly knit his brow and said: ‘Out of the question. Prophets were not supposed to have wives and, moreover, how are you, my son, planning to find the time for – errrr – for anything other than serving your demanding god?’

As though sensing something was amiss, Tytivillius didn't show himself in Crooknose's dreams any more. Neither did he come in reality –too busy inspecting remote cloisters, perhaps.

Winter was near, and with it came new urgent cares. While preparing for this austere season, the monks didn't so much forget about Crooknose, as they made no real effort to keep him in mind. And he, trying to perform the Abbot's task, worked hard, and all the copies of *Revelation of Tytivillius* looked as alike as peas in a pod.

It was spring, the time of blossom, and birdsong, and the waking of all that lived – including some minor deities. The cunning Tytivillius – well, he had kept a few things from Crooknose. In his *Revelation* he had also not followed the letter of the truth: he had said nothing about hibernating through the winter. Tytivillius had this little trick that would help him to change something, for it was a matter of common knowledge that Sacred Texts transformed reality.

So he awakened, yawned, stretched so hard that the vertebrae of his tail crunched –

‘WHAT? A TAIL?’

In two leaps Tytivillius was at a small lake, staring at his reflection in amazement.

A tail with a brush on the tip. Legs with goat’s hooves. Fingers like sharpened quills. Curved horns. And an ugly mug of a vulgar monster.

Oh, he was blind with fury, filled with rage – and all in vain. There was no changing the words of a Sacred Text. And even the fact that Tytivillius’s priestesses, according to his Revelation, all had to be uncommon beauties with blue eyes didn’t comfort him at all.

So what with of Crooknose, you might ask? The Prophet – as it befitted him – took the High Priestess to wife (by pure chance she happened to come from the Prophet’s own home town). They lived long and happily ever after, although not with arguing over trifles. But whatever happened, they, and their children, and their grandchildren, and all their progeny always carried with them bunches of dried verbena, St. John’s Wort and dill – the herbs, which (according to the same *Revelation*) are guaranteed to repel the demon Tytivillius.

3. The Librarian

(a fantasy tetralogy)

I. The Librarian’s Intuition

One day the King had a need for a tome that would contain a formula of an infallible remedy against cockroaches. A ridiculous and annoying incident with a Cornucopia had led to a complete infestation of the Palace. Neither brand-new spells like the Flute of Hamelin, nor the usual Ritual of Insecticide were any help. That was when the King remembered he had once seen the old volume in the Library.

He summoned keepers of books, who sent out an expedition, then another one, then yet another. The first two returned empty-handed; the third one vanished in the maze of the library. The Castellan was at a loss: there would be no progress without a proper librarian. The previous one had died five years ago, and they had got used to doing without one. Everybody knew the contents of the few shelves they usually turned to, but the rest of the

Library had grown wild: the tomes would not let themselves be picked up, jumped from shelf to shelf, and falling down, they fell open on the pages with crude pictures.

Given all of that, there was no volunteer for the position of a librarian. Deep in thought, the Castellan wandered the streets of the City, until one day he found himself in a candle shop. He had never entrusted the choice of candlesticks to anyone, yet this time it was he who blundered: engrossed in his concerns, the Castellan pointed at a wrong bunch.

‘I humbly beg your pardon, sir,’ a young apprentice said, ‘but surely you wanted the twisted thumb-thick candlesticks, not these wrist-thick ones.’

‘What made you think so?’ asked the surprised Castellan.

The candlestick maker answered for the boy:

‘Well, sir, it’s that he always has a way of knowing what your need is. The lad’s got a talent. A foreign scholar, sir, came in here once and said he had “inn-two-eeh-shun” or something. Said the lad’s one in thousands, none’s like him and all that. Don’t mind him, though, sir, if you were going to buy these ones; they’re not just more expensive, they’re better, too. And with your usual discount...’

‘Can you read?’ the Castellan interrupted, addressing the apprentice, although he had already guessed the answer. This intuitive genius boy must have had something in mind when he advised the client contrary to his master’s interest. He had known, perhaps, how it would go.

‘I cannot, sir,’ answered the lad, ‘but I’m really keen to learn!’

II. The Librarian’s Book

‘Hire a baby for all we care, as long as there is order,’ the King dismissed the Castellan with a wave of his hand.

That was how the Librarian became a librarian. After entering the dusty corridors for the first time in his life, he promptly found the lost expedition, as well as the ancient compendium of insect repellants. The Palace was saved: the cockroaches fled in disgrace, unable to withstand the magical power of White Pencils.

The former candlestick maker’s apprentice took up his quarters in the Library and settled there forever. Deep canyons between bookcases became his domain, and the books his liege men. He defended them against wear and tear, and they served their new lord faithfully.

Whoever came there, the Librarian knew in advance what book the guest would request. He had barely learned his letters, but already he would easily find any tome, whether it concerned the nature of stars, or customs of foreign lands, or the art of composing epigrams and epitaphs, or healing properties of crystals, or the mysteries of the past and the future; books scientific and popular, where peculiar metal machines flew to the stars or dived into

the depth of the ocean, where people had a different way of life and used names not heard anywhere in the Kingdom, - although, just like the local folk, they loved and fought, sought the meaning of life and suffered pain of treason or death of their loved ones.

Each book had its reader. Many folks did not know themselves what specific book they wished to read, but as soon as the Librarian brought them a tome bound in leather or velvet, the reader became enchanted by the story.

They came and went: Palace servants and foreigners, who had heard the tale of the wizard Librarian and sought to test out his rumored skills. And when, intoxicated with the books, the readers brought them back, the quiet master of the Library took the tomes back into its depth – just to deliver them again in a day or in a year – or perhaps never, if there was no reader, whose soul desired that very tale.

Years passed, but the Librarian changed little, and the flow of readers did not lessen. And each one received from him the very book that his soul was longing for.

And only the Librarian himself failed to find a perfect volume. Then he obtained some ink and a quill, and secretly (even though no one took any interest in his life) he started to write *his own book*: the one he could eagerly read himself. He had mastered his letters a long time ago, but composing turned out to be quite a difficult task, and his progress was slow.

Up there, outside the book-built maze, a different sort of life was happening. Now and then the Library received new scrolls; there would be notes regarding the rates of deaths here and births there, and when another war with the neighbors had begun, and how it had ended, and what the latest theories of the Royal University scholars were on the matter of motion of the Sun and other heavenly bodies.

Words, words, words – there were many words, but nothing else. The life in the pages of the Librarian's own book held for him far more meaning.

III. The Librarian's Visitor

Finally, there came a night when the Librarian marked his manuscript with a final full stop. That very moment he heard light steps in the stairwell, and saw a visitor in the doorway: tall and skinny he was, clad in a loose cloak with a dark hood over his face.

'They say, you can find a perfect book for every man's heart. Is it true?' asked the stranger, speaking softly but distinctly.

For the first time in his life the Librarian was taken aback: he did not know, *could not feel*, what book he could bring to his visitor!

'What a pity,' said the stranger. 'I was about to believe it...'

The Librarian frankly confessed that his infallible intuition had failed him. Perhaps, they had to have a thorough look: surely, there would be a book to the visitor's liking.

'I do not have time to look through all these codices and scrolls,' answered the guest harshly. 'Neither do you. You may try thrice: if you do not find the book I crave, you will have to follow me.'

At that moment the Librarian's intuition was quick to determine which visitor had wandered in this time, and whence he was angling to take him.

To begin with, the Librarian brought over a book from the nearest shelf: people often requested it, and read it over and over.

'Two more attempts,' said the guest, having leafed through a few pages. 'Hurry up.'

The Librarian went to the remotest bookcase then, and brought out a dusty old anthology, which had never - at least, on his memory - been requested.

'And your final attempt,' said the guest, putting the tome aside.

'My dear sir,' desperately said the Librarian, 'every one of us will die sooner or later, so there is no sense in fleeing from that which is destined. I suppose, it's my destiny is to perish tonight, and yours is to keep going without any absorbing reading matter. Nevertheless, I beg you: instead of my last attempt, please, do me a favor! A long time ago I set out to write a book of my own, for just like you I could not find a book to my liking in the whole of the Library. At first I thought I did not care about readers, and needed nobody's opinion, but today, as I finished the book, I have realized: most of all I wish, if only a living soul—' he looked at his guest and corrected himself, 'if only somebody read it and told me if it contains one living word.'

'And if there is not? And who am I to judge?...'

'I beg you, my lord, just read it and give me your opinion. And then I shall follow you to - wherever you wish.'

Thus the Librarian led him to the small room where he lived and wrote, invited him to sit down at the desk, and placed before his guest a stack of pages covered with tiny script. Then he stepped aside, so as not to be in the way.

IV. The Open Door

In the morning the Castellan came downstairs to request once more the most popular book. The Librarian met him as usual and, also as usual, took the tome back after a day.

But a day later he informed the Castellan that he required a slight change to his lifestyle: he would still fulfill his duties in the Library, of course, yet he would leave the Palace more frequently. He also asked to give him ink, quills and plenty of paper whenever he needed them.

This is how the Royal Librarian came to be a writer. It is said, he hands books out and takes them back every day, just as before, and in the night he writes, and takes new pages up to his small room, where his guest is sitting at the table, reading avidly page after page. The door to the room is open: as soon as the guest gets bored, he will leave, taking the Librarian with him.

But not today; no, not today. Not now.



Vladimir Arenev is the pen name of Ukrainian science fiction, fantasy award winning writer, journalist and screenwriter Vladimir Puziy. He writes in Russian and Ukrainian languages, and resides in Kiev, Ukraine. For the time being Arenev has 16 books published in Ukrainian and Russian. His numerous short stories and novellas have been published in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and Estonian (more than 150 publications in periodicals and anthologies).

News from a Dwarf Universe

Dănuț Ungureanu

There is a little time remaining until those bugs detonate the last building in town, burying me under tons of rubble. So I can't afford to write a book, even though—what an irony—I've always dreamt of being a writer. I don't have enough time, or paper...

All started three decades ago, with the Shrinking Machine invented by Barnell and Vodička, the greatest modern achievement, together with teleportation theory and the regenerable hamburger. Before we could figure it out, it had already entered into production, invading every field. We were in love with it.

In the beginning we shrank goods, so we could transport and store them in huge quantities. Using the dimensional reversibility phenomenon, in conjunction with matter's memory, the objects were brought back to their initial dimension without any problems, to be used. Imagine that! Stores were suddenly thousands of times larger. Only one plane could carry as much goods as hundreds of fleets!

A new era of unimaginable savings of raw materials, energy and time was just beginning.

Cars were next. The desperate race for a parking place had remained only a bad dream. At his destination, the driver would park his car into the Shrinking Machine. Then he could leave it in a public box or he could just take it in his pocket. Of course, complaints about losing them were pandemic, until people stopped losing their Mercedes in the bottom of their briefcase, near the key ring (lady's purses turned out to be real abysses) and they learned to stop forgetting their Cadillac in the other coat.

Wonderful times, when mankind thought everything was possible! We were faced with a new beginning, leaving behind nightmares like pollution or environmental destruction...

Then politicians took control, as always. Congressmen enacted the use of the SM on animals. Initially, cows, pigs, sheep and chicken, for a commercial purpose, small creatures being easier to carry. Even more: a three centimeter cow is full from two grass blades and as soon as it assimilates the food it is brought back to normal, in order to give ten liters of milk, without being starved afterwards (the phenomenon remained a living enigma that we couldn't decode). The spectrum of world hunger had vanished.

Anyway, you can guess what happened. Barnell and Vodička revealed subsequently that the army had involved them for a long time in top secret research of the possibility that a single soldier could sprinkle on the enemy territory a few tank divisions. But what can you do with tanks without the soldiers? This is how the last and most important step was made. The fatal step...

The first volunteer, at the beginning of the 40's was Yuri Babanov. This was humanity's hero, who underwent the shrinking-growing process, spent, under the researcher's magnifiers for three hours, snacking on biscuit crumbs,

sitting on a thimble. Brought back to his normal dimensions, Babanov said the famous words that remained in people's memories: "Sometimes, people learn to be small..."

Turbulent times came. The church, ecologists, several science men raised the problem of ethics and intervention in the subtle mechanisms of Mother Nature. But population pressure was so high that the dams of opposition caved in and, in the middle of the fifth decade, it proceeded swiftly to the reduction of passengers in public transportation. People were processed before embarking in the "Departures" terminal and they were recovered in the "Arrivals" terminal. A low-risk procedure. Everything was perfectly organized, everything was going smoothly.

On August 28th, 2051, The Big Solar Explosion happened. It wasn't bigger than the others, but it deserved its name since it completely and irreversibly destroyed *all* the Shrinking Machines in the world. There was also supposed to be the existence of a virus in the Machine's complicated software, which spread on the entire Earth. The Americans blamed the Russians, who blamed the Chinese, and the British accused the Japanese who blamed it all on the Germans.

At the time of the catastrophe, there were ten billion people on Earth. It was calculated that, at that time, three hundred million people were in public transportation or in the terminals. Meaning, a lot of people who did not exceeded more than two centimeters. A tiny mankind.

Worldwide alarm was raised. The scientists worked together to bring things back to normal. Huge efforts went on for weeks and months. But it was all in vain. Nothing could be done anymore. For strict observation, all the affected people were gathered in the Machine Institute's laboratories, despite the virulent protests of their relatives, who wanted to take them home. A badly inspired journalist compared everything with "a concentration camp".

The same politicians decided, after thousands of failed attempts to restart the Machines, to "free" the shrunk ones into the society. Conditions were created for them, but it seemed a fight beyond mankind's powers, they being more than "people with disabilities", which was the politically correct term we were strictly recommended to use.

But things came into an order by themselves. After a while they made their own circles, their own communities, more and more exclusive. The gap between "humankinds" was growing deeper and deeper every day, and, to be honest, we weren't very keen on them either. Gradually, pity became grudge against these "co-citizens", who, with a pack of butter were able to feed a whole neighborhood. They didn't know anymore what it was to worry about tomorrow.

Slowly, their ideologists, speakers and literate men, because they had enough of these, spread vitriol through the mass-media: the philosophy of supremacy and precedence for the little man before the useless and harmful animal, which is "the big guy". The propaganda created a lot of phrases favorable to them and derogatory to us. They were "small and clever", "small and agile", "small but diligent", "small people-huge souls", "small genius".

We became “huge savages”, “filthy beasts”—and most often “big and stupid”. It didn’t come as a surprise that immediately, the little men’s accidents multiplied. More and more often, one was found squashed under the sole of a careless “huge beast”. Eventually, the bridges broke definitively and there was no way to reconcile.

Do you think they stopped here?

On April 22nd, 2059, The Big Insurrection of Small People was triggered, at the call of “the small and brave” William Wallace. It was obvious that he claimed his descendants from the legendary Scottish hero, since he and his soldiers were dressed in kilts made out of a plaid tablecloth, stolen from *The Delicious Sausage - familiar place, beer, darts*. It was obvious that their strategy had been set up in detail, and for a long time.

We hunted them with mosquito sprays and we smoked them through sewers in vain. We incited upon them battalions of hungry cats, also for nothing. Our flyswatters (conventional weapons were useless against an enemy so small) could not handle it. And the fight’s balance entrenched definitively in their favor, as they knew how to turn their small dimension into a decisive advantage. We were too big, too visible. Perfect targets.

They attacked us in our sleep; they put traps in our kitchens and bathrooms, they poured our own sleeping pills into our coffees. In the end, the troops we sent were nothing but groups of prisoners, through stalls and studio apartments. They started to exterminate us systematically, through hunger. From time to time, a desperate man will lose his mind and go in the street to step on them. But he doesn’t find anyone there. Then, he is destroyed and left as booty for the ants.

They defeated us and took our world, but, if we had to admit it, it was also their world. And the thing that bothers me the most is that things have totally changed from the moment we thought they were only some helpless bugs in a universe of big people. Now, they have before them, an Earth thousands of times wider, they are going to explore and happily regain, treasures and natural resources, thousands of times bigger than ours. They will not be afraid of hunger, housing crisis or fuel depletion. A wonderful New World is at their puny feet. And who knows? Maybe one day they will invent again the Shrinking Machine. Then... look out!



Dănuț Ungureanu was born in 1958. From 1990 he worked in the newspaper "Free Youth", where, from 1994 to 1997, he was deputy editor. In 1996 he graduated in European Journalism. In 1997 he was part of the writing team of radio show "Round Square" cared for BBC and the European Union. From 1998 to 2003 he was deputy editor of the newspaper "current", for which he wrote daily Chain Stories, editorials, commentaries, reports, reviews and inquiries.

He wrote, individually and in collaboration, numerous television scripts for humorous group "you" (a collection of these texts was published in volume in 2004, published by Amaltea, entitled "Land of rush you"). He was co-author of the play "A lost aunt", which premiered and played in season 2006, the theater "CI Nottara "in Bucharest. He also co-authored the screenplay for feature film

"category Fortunately Report". In 2007 he cared volume "log" containing a selection of texts from the late Romanian journalist Dan Goanta. He is the president of the Romanian Society of Science Fiction and Fantasy, among whose achievements are the anthology "other sides", the organization of the literary circle "ProspectArt" the SRSFF national awards.

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Only Friends

Philip Harris

He had brown hair. Dark brown. Like mine. I'm telling you that because he's not here anymore and I'm beginning to forget what he looked like.

Nathan and I met when we were both ten, at Duncote Primary School. He must have been new, started mid-term, because I hadn't seen him before the day we got detention together.

There was a girl in our class, Sam something or other. She got picked on a lot. I think it was just because she was quiet, not because she was too ugly, stupid or clever. Maybe it was just because she was there. Whatever the reason everyone called her Stinky Sam. She didn't actually smell but it rolled off the tongue nicely and that's all that matters when you're ten.

Nathan sat just behind Sam, in perfect teasing position. Normally I sat on the other side of the room but that day I was at the desk next to Nathan. I really can't remember why. Maybe it was just fate.

Nathan was late to class and as he sat down he looked at me and winked. He was clutching a clear plastic bag but at the time I couldn't see what was in it because the insides had steamed up. I remember thinking that whatever it was looked very damp.

I was quite a conscientious worker at primary school. At least I was until I fell in with the wrong crowd. So, when Mrs Hughes started writing a list of "Currencies of the World" on the blackboard, I immediately opened my notebook and tried to take notes as my dad had shown me. Mrs Hughes had reached Norway (Kroner) when she noticed Sam standing by her chair.

"Sam?"

She must have dropped her pen or something because she'd crouched down on the floor. When she stood up again and went to sit back down on her chair the disembowelled remains of a frog were sitting on the seat. Nathan looked at me with a wicked smile on his face and I began to giggle. I was only ten after all.

"Sam? Why aren't you sitting down?"

Mrs Hughes was closer now and Sam jumped at the sound of her voice. She turned to face her teacher.

"Mrs Hughes, someone put a frog on my chair."

A mumbling filled the air and with the perfect timing that only young children can manage, the entire class stood up and moved around their teacher towards Sam's chair.

"Well children, it seems we have an unexpected visitor," Mrs Hughes looked round the class as she spoke. "Let's have a look at the little chap then."

Mrs Hughes moved past Sam and looked down at the remains of the frog. Her eyes widened and her face paled. To her credit though, the old dear kept her composure.

"Right children, back to your places."

A couple of children started moving back to their seats but most tried to get a look at the frog. Mrs Hughes placed herself between the chair and the children. "Come along now, sit down."

"Eew, yuck!"

Melissa Townsend had spotted that the frog in question was somewhat mangled. A couple of the children turned back, tempted to return.

"Face the front everyone," Mrs Hughes said, "and you, Melissa."

The children turned quickly away. Mrs Hughes let out a deep breath and looked at Sam, who was standing patiently next to her desk, seemingly only mildly concerned that she had a dismembered frog on her chair.

"Sam, would you get Mr Anderson please?"

She nodded and left the class while Mrs Hughes slid the chair under the desk, being careful not to scrape the remains of the frog off in the process. Then she turned and looked at Nathan and me, one eyebrow raised.

It turned out that Nathan had found the frog sheltering under the hedges on the edge of the school playing field. I think when he found it, it was alive but by the end of lunch it wasn't. I won't go into the details but suffice to say Nathan had decided to get in some early practice for medical school and his patient hadn't pulled through.

Quite why Mrs Hughes decided that I'd been involved in the frog incident I don't know, but despite my protestations she insisted I was and a few minutes later Nathan and I were on our way to see Mr Holmes, the headmaster.

My mum was furious. First with me, then, once I'd explained what had happened and she'd grilled me over my part in it, with the school. She stormed there the following day and demanded to see the headmaster. Mr Holmes insisted I was responsible. Whatever he said convinced my mum of my guilt and I ended up sitting in the assembly hall for an hour, writing lines as my schoolmates passed by, taunting me. I also earned a little respect from Nathan.

A few days later, the story about my mum had grown from "Mother Speaks to Headmaster" to "Killer Parent Beats Headmaster to Within an Inch of His Life". Soon after that I was walking home when I heard the pounding of footsteps behind me. I slipped on my toughest face and braced for impact.

"Hi," said a breathless voice.

I looked around: it was Nathan.

"Oh. Hi, Nathan."

Nathan put his hands on his hips and let out a deep breath.

"Your mum's pretty cool; coming to school to defend you like that."

I shrugged.

"I wish my mum was that cool."

I mumbled some sort of vague reply, unsure of what to say that wouldn't offend him. He seemed content with my indistinct mutterings so I slowed to help him keep up; he was as tall as me but walked everywhere slowly, as though he never had anywhere better to go. We ambled along together for a while, moaning about this teacher or that lesson. Talking without saying anything with real meaning.

We'd reached the end of the road I lived on and were going our separate ways when Nathan turned back and said, "Hey, you wanna come down to the bridge?"

I'd always been told to stay away from the canal bridge. Children had drowned there. I was told even looking at the bridge was an invitation to a watery grave.

I shrugged, "Sure. I guess."

Nathan nodded as though I'd passed some sort of test and headed off down the road. I hesitated, uneasy about breaking the rules, then followed after him.

From that day on, we were best friends.

I have to admit now that becoming friends with Nathan was the beginning of the end of my good behaviour. At first we didn't really do anything at all. Just walked by the canal or sat in trees chatting about nothing in particular. Then talk turned to Sam and quickly turned to action.

We'd whisper insults, shout taunts, hide bugs and beetles in her bag, trip her in lunch queues, pretty much anything we thought we'd get away with. We got detention a few times of course, and one or two letters home but neither our teachers nor our parents did anything to really discourage us. My mum and dad just didn't know how to handle my newfound rebellious nature and I don't think Nathan's parents cared.

At some point, Sam stopped coming to school. Some children said she went mad, others said she committed suicide but the teachers didn't say anything and we never found out what actually happened. It didn't really matter to us, we just found new kids to tease. Nathan and I developed a real knack for coming up with new and interesting ways of bullying our classmates. We'd often come up with exactly the same idea at the same time. We were naturals.

One day, I happened to mention to Nathan that my birthday was coming up. We were sitting on the edge of the canal bridge and it still gave me a little bit of a thrill to think that we were tempting death each and every time we went there. When I asked Nathan if he could come to my birthday party next week, he dropped the stick he'd been poking around with and looked at me in surprise.

"What?"

At first I thought he was surprised that I was having a party but then he said, "My birthday's next week. What day is yours?"

"Thursday."

“Well bugger me backwards with a bent banana!” Nathan had learnt to swear off his dad. “That’s my birthday too!”

We froze for a moment then simultaneously started cheering and hollering and yelling. Jumping up, we grabbed each other’s arms and started swinging round and round. Faster and faster we spun, slowly edging towards the canal. For one heart-stopping moment I thought Nathan was going to flip me into the water. Then, with one tremendous tug, we lurched back away from the canal, stumbled over a patch of grass and crashed into a hedge. Tears of joy streamed down our faces as we lay there, oblivious to the scratches we’d just inflicted on ourselves.

I think that was the year we both had the best birthday of our lives. Somehow we convinced our parents to combine our individual parties into one “mega party”. They didn’t fall for it again but that year we invited everyone we could find to my house for food, films and party games.

It was chaos.

The dining room carpet was coated with jelly and ice cream after the food fight and never recovered, someone set fire to the dog’s tail and it smashed three vases while it ran around the room trying to put itself out and twelve of my dad’s CDs were destroyed when Nathan suggested a ‘skimming competition’ in the garden. The party was finally broken up when my mum found Derek Johnson dangling himself out of my bedroom window. Just to add the icing on the cake, we were woken up in the middle of the night by a banging from the airing cupboard and when dad finally opened the door, baseball bat in hand and some little kid no one recognised fell out. Apparently someone had locked him in there while everyone else was playing musical chairs.

Our parents never threw us another birthday party for some reason, and although we had plenty of our own parties, none of them reached the dizzying heights of that one.

The friendship went from strength to strength as we progressed through school. We spent all our spare time together, took lessons together, teased together and bullied together. We weren’t completely alike. Nathan learnt to smoke early and the one time I tried it I threw up and vowed never to touch cigarettes again. When we discovered alcohol it was me who took to it, Nathan didn’t really learn to enjoy drinking until we left school. Our musical tastes were different although they did merge later on. Nathan loved old horror movies, I hated them. But we were friends. Best friends. Only friends.

Our mischievousness didn’t lessen when we reached secondary school. If anything it grew worse although I’m glad to say the bullying died out. Mainly because we were no longer at the top of the playground food chain and we’d heard some terrible stories about the punishments carried out by both the headmaster and the fifth formers. Instead we threw stones, skipped classes, acted like fools and made a general nuisance of ourselves.

Nathan and I both took the same GCSE classes; although it wasn’t something we really planned. Somehow we weren’t surprised when we passed the same four exams, getting C’s in Art, Technology Studies, Biology and Drama. My parents were gutted. They’d been expecting me to get eight or nine and go on to university like my older

brother had. I guess Nathan's parents had pretty much given up on their son at primary school. I don't think he even bothered to tell them what grades we got.

My parents were even more upset when I told them I was leaving school and getting a flat with Nathan.

Over the next couple of years, we bungled our way through a succession of jobs, somehow managing to earn just enough to pay rent on the flat. We worked as cinema ushers, road sweepers, snooker hall attendants and in numerous pubs. Each job lasted a few weeks before we were sacked or resigned in disgust at some imagined mistreatment. Nathan and I worked together at all the jobs apart from the last. Down on our luck, we had to get jobs at different pubs. We both lasted exactly two weeks before we got fired.

It was just after then that we decided to start our own company.

I was lying in our flat, staring at the Jennifer Lopez poster we had taped to the ceiling, wondering whether Nathan would take the piss if I straightened it, when the idea slithered its way into my head. I rolled it around for a while, examining it from all the angles until I was happy.

Nathan always woke up very early, long before I did and I could just make out a soft grey layer of cigarette smoke circling above his bed so I knew he was awake.

I called out to him just as he called out to me.

"We keep doing that," I said, laughing.

"Yup. I 'spect there's a word for it."

I nodded but couldn't think of one.

"So, what do you want?" he said.

"I've had an idea."

"Oh yeah, that's funny, so have I."

I smiled, shaking my head but not surprised, "Let me guess, you think we should start a business?"

A broad grin spread across Nathan's face, "Well bugger me backwards, said the vicar to the nun. That's exactly what I was thinking. What sort of business?"

I just raised my eyebrows and slowly looked up at the poster on the ceiling.

If Nathan had smiled any harder his head would have split in half.

We sat in bed talking about it for a while but we both already had a very clear idea of how we were going to make our fortunes. It was a win-win proposition. A no lose situation. A one hundred percent cast iron guaranteed success. After we'd discussed the plan and made lists of the countries we'd buy houses in, the cars we'd drive and the models we'd seduce, Nathan got up to have a shower and I got dressed ready to go down the pub for our first board meeting.

As I pulled on my last clean pair of boxer shorts I realised I didn't have any trousers to wear. Nathan had a couple of cleanish pairs in his half of the wardrobe and I padded out to the communal bathroom to see if it was okay for me to borrow them. When I got there the door was ajar and I couldn't hear the shower so I peered inside. Empty. Puzzled, I figured Nathan must have gone down to check on the mail. Then Mrs Peterson gave me a heart attack. Or at least tried to.

"Have you finished?" she said, shouting at the top of her voice.

I jumped and spun around, clutching the doorframe and my heart, "Jesus, you nearly killed me."

Mrs Peterson squinted at me, "I said have you finished?" She was still shouting. We'd always assumed it was a combination of being over three hundred years old and almost completely deaf.

I nodded and stepped out of the way.

As Mrs Peterson shuffled into the bathroom I headed back to the flat, cursing the old bat as I went.

"I heard that, young man," Mrs Peterson seemed to be recovering from her deafness, "and get some clothes on, you pervert."

I mooned her from the door of the flat but she didn't say anything so she must have already made it into the bathroom.

Nathan was back when I got inside, his hair still wet from his shower. I figured he must have come back up the stairs while Mrs Peterson was trying to kill me.

"Did you get the post?"

"Eh? Get your own damn post."

I sighed, he could be a real idiot sometimes but he didn't object when I put on his trousers so I let it lie.

We spent the afternoon, and most of the evening, huddled in the corner of the pub planning how we were going to get the business up and running. We were like a pair of kids on Christmas Day. We were going to be rich. That evening Nathan left the pub before me. I'd stood chatting to the barmaid at the bar for a while and he must have got annoyed because when I went back to our seats with the drinks he'd gone. There was some goth couple sitting there instead and I glared at them.

"You're in my seats."

The man (or at least I think it was a man) looked up at me, "You left."

I put on my best whiny voice and wobbled my head, "Blah blah blah, you left, blah blah blah."

The man sneered at me and turned back to his girlfriend to carry on talking about vampires or death or something. Too drunk to bother having a fight, even with a goth, I stumbled over to a quiet corner of the pub and sat down. I couldn't remember Nathan leaving me in a bar before but by then I'd had enough alcohol that I couldn't trust the memories I did have, let alone the ones I thought I didn't. So, I struggled through the two double Jack Daniels I'd bought at the bar and then headed home myself.

Nathan wasn't there when I got back and he hadn't arrived when I collapsed into bed, but he was back in the morning. He didn't mention why he'd left. I didn't ask.

After four weeks of pub-bound planning, with our meagre savings growing sparse, I realised we had a problem. I've always been an ideas man. Plotting and scheming. Looking at the big picture and making the big plans. So was Nathan. We had plenty of ideas and we were on exactly the same wavelength but neither of us actually wanted to *do* anything. Our fledgling company was suffering from too much planning, not enough doing.

And Nathan kept wandering off.

We'd be out shopping or more likely in the pub, and I'd turn around and he'd be gone. Usually he'd turn up again within a few minutes, ambling out of the toilets or from behind the shoes in menswear but sometimes he just left me and I didn't see him again until the next day. I'd wake up to find him in his bed, snoring away. Then it got worse. He started going out of the flat. He'd just wander out and reappear a few hours later without ever saying where he'd gone or who he'd gone with.

I put up with it at first, thinking it was maybe a new girlfriend and not wanting to put any strain on our friendship. Then I started to get angry with him. Then I started getting worried. His disappearances became more and more common and he was clearly either losing his mind or ill. A quick search on the web threw up numerous possibilities each one more bizarre than the last, but none I could actually do anything about. Despite my increasing concern, I didn't try to talk to him about it until a couple of weeks ago.

It was a Tuesday night and we'd gone down to *The Old Crock*. Halfway through the first drink Nathan disappeared. There'd been one of the increasingly common lulls in the conversation and I'd noticed a busty blonde sitting in the garden. I'd looked at her for a couple of seconds, ten at most, then turned back to point her out to Nathan and he was gone. I hung around for a while, finished off our drinks, but by then I knew what to expect.

On the way home I resolved to talk to Nathan about his tendency to wander but when I arrived he wasn't there. It was still early so I flicked on the television, ready to stay up until he arrived.

An hour or so later, I heard keys rattling and a click as someone opened the front door, then softly closed it again.

"Nathan?" I called, knowing it must be.

Silence.

I called again but there was still no reply and no sound of movement from the corridor. I stood up and checked the hallway. There was no one there. Nathan must have come in, heard I was there then left again. I grabbed my coat, charged out the door and thundered down the stairs and out into the street.

The road was empty apart from a dusty old man walking some sort of ferret-like creature. Cursing my slowness I sat down on the steps to our building. I wasn't really surprised to find Nathan sat next to me smoking a cigarette.

"Hi Nathan."

"Hi."

I exhaled slowly, "Where you been?"

"Huh?"

"Where have you been? I was kind of worried about you."

Nathan shrugged, "Nowhere."

I nodded as though that were a satisfactory answer.

We sat in silence for a few minutes before Nathan said "It's a bit cold out here," and I realised he was right.

"Come on, let's go inside," I said, standing up.

As I walked through the door I turned and held it open for Nathan. He wasn't there.

"Hey, come on slow coach!"

Nathan was already upstairs, shouting down to me, and I looked up at him, wondering how he'd gotten up there so quickly.

By the time I got back to the flat he was gone again. This time I didn't bother trying to explain his disappearance to myself. Instead, I sat down, flicked over to some boxing on TV and waited. A few minutes later he walked out of the kitchen and slumped in a chair, rubbed the back of his neck then lit a cigarette.

Grimacing as the smoke rolled towards me, I rubbed the back of my neck and tried to pluck up the courage to talk to him about his vanishing tricks.

"Hi Nathan."

"Hi."

"Where you been?"

Nathan exhaled slowly, "Huh?"

"Where have you been? I was kinda worried about you."

Nathan shrugged, "Nowhere."

"You must have been somewhere."

Nathan turned towards me and we blinked, "Nope, I've always been here, always will."

Then the conversation deteriorated into a spiral of lying and shouting and crying and anger. Or would have done if I'd tried to pursue the matter further.

I stayed quiet.

We carried on watching television for a while, skipping over to an old black and white horror movie I wanted to watch once the boxing was over. Then, as the heroine stumbled into the monster's lair for the third time, we both yawned and stood up.

"I'm off to bed," we said and laughed for the last time at the way we always seemed to pick the same time to do the same things. I flicked the TV off with the remote control, just beating Nathan to it.

We nodded to each other as we got into bed.

"Goodnight," we both said as we flicked off the lights.

The next morning I sat in bed alone, listened to the roar of the early morning traffic, and smoked the first cigarette of the day.



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Starsong

Aliette de Bodard

In the deep planes, there is nothing but the void—and, on the edge of hearing, a song that she can't place, tantalisingly familiar harmonies echoing the beat within her.

It's hard, to remember what she once was.

There were cut flowers; and reams of emerald-green feathers (synthetic, for there are no birds on Quetzalcoatl)—and voices, solemnly reminding her of her duty to hold the world together through blood penances, to fight long and hard in the Flower Games, and bring captives to the sacrificial stones.

There was a factory, and a Grand Master of Design Harmony; and the soft sound of electronics racks sliding in, one after the other; and she woke up, extending her senses into silicium boards, along thousands of cables and coils.

There was—was... was...

#

There was a ship, once, made in the Dominion's finest building yard, crafted to perfection—its hull of the finest composites, its motors clean and beautiful, able to withstand thousands of ion-thrusts, its computing clusters designed and honed by a master engineer, conveying millions of blocks of information faster than any human mind. It lay in a pod in a remote station—wrapped in wet, comforting darkness, awaiting the moment of its birth. A pilot would come—and there would be neural impulses flowing through the interface, manoeuvring it faster than wind or thought through the void of space, dancing among enemy ships like the bobbin on a weaving loom.

The pilot came; but she reached out, and destroyed all the barriers and the safeguards; and her neural shunts were engulfed by the system.

Now there is no ship; and no pilot. They are one, as if it had always been meant to be.

The ship is at peace, rocked once more in a deep embrace—as in its birthing pod.

Yes. This is right—far from petty human concerns like mockeries or shame, with only the deepness of space to answer to.

This is right. It has always been right.

#

There was a girl called Axatl once—riding the mag-lev home on Quetzalcoatl, in the diffuse, orange light from the half-night sun. She looked at herself in a mirror, and saw black hair framing a round face; almond eyes and

an almost-nonexistent nose—the spitting image of her mother, every feature, from overlarge teeth to recessed forehead, alien and unwelcome.

It was wrong. It had always been wrong.

#

Chopsticks. Axatl remembers chopsticks, spinning on the ground—one bent out of shape until it snapped, the other intact, small and pathetic, its vivid red chipped and cracked. Red for good fortune, Mother had said; and she'd been wrong, as usual—so terribly wrong.

She...

#

Mayauhqui remembers walking home with Axatl—standing, in the growing darkness of the housing complex's dome, breathing in the unfamiliar smells of jasmine and unknown spices. Axatl had grimaced, and shaken her head. "Mum is making rice porridge. Again."

She'd looked caught on the verge between embarrassment and pride—and he'd been a friend to her for long enough to know that she loved rice porridge, but would rather be caught dead than admit it. "It's all right," he'd said, gently. He'd almost suggested they go somewhere else; but Axatl's mum had never been anything but the soul of courtesy to him—with that odd accent and overwrought manners that the other boys at school mocked, but that Mayauhqui found oddly charming, like a return to older, more peaceful times. "Let's go in and see your mum."

He doesn't remember much of the rest. He'd walked into a house that looked normal enough, except for the odd little touches: the characters on the wall—"her maternal grandfather's calligraphy", Axatl's mum had said, her eyes shining with pride, saying that she hoped Axatl would prove as gifted as he'd been, while Axatl looked away the entire time—the shelves holding the usual ornaments, save for the jade dragon-and-phoenix at the very bottom, almost hidden from sight; the hastily closed drawers, smelling of something he couldn't place. He'd wondered what was in them, what terrible thing that she would hide from his sight. Axatl, when pushed, had rolled her eyes upwards and said something about old scrolls. "Would you believe that?" she'd said. "In the age of feeds, she still clings to papers like a lifeline. What a failure."

Mostly, he remembered Axatl's mother: small and gray-haired, and bowed with age; and watching them settle in Axatl's room around a meal of corn kernels and cooked beans, with the public screen tuned to the Texcoco-Cuauhtitlan game. She'd stood in the doorway, her hands smelling of jasmine rice and spring onions and soy sauce;

and with an expression of terrible sadness on her face, as she'd known all there was to say, and couldn't find words that would bridge the gap Axatl was putting between them.

He'd wanted to say something then, but couldn't find the words that would make her listen.

Years later, Mayauhqui met Axatl again, on Five Reeds Station. She was older then, dressed in the clothes of a warrior, with the marks of the shunt gleaming on her shaved head, and the naxotl insignia on her chest, marking her as a fellow graduate. He walked past her as if he had never known her; while by his side, Chimalli made pointed remarks on the yellowface's lack of taste—imagine, wearing green with a sallow skin like hers. He'd forced himself to laugh, the tight feeling in his chest vanishing after the first few moments, leaving him feeling warm and satisfied, proud that he hadn't given in, hadn't been weak.

And of course he hadn't turned back; but he'd known, even then, that the expression on her face would be that of her mother, from so long ago.

#

There is a song, in the starlight, if you listen closely—behind the endless lull of the stars, and the distorted shapes, and the pull of the darkness, like that of a current waiting to sweep everything away.

It was words, once—human words, a prayer to the gods that inhabit the night.

"Please please please...

O Lord of the Near, O Lord of the Nigh,

I throw myself before you, I abase myself

With icy nettles I make my penance

With thorns, with precious water

Please please please, let it not have happened..."

#

It was spring somewhere—Quetzalcoatl, probably, with that persistent haze of blue and green, as if the whole planet stood underwater. Axatl sat at a table with her best friend Mayauhqui—chatting in real time, and catching up on news via the shunt implants.

"So can you imagine?" Mayauhqui asked. "She asked him out, even though she wasn't even a Leading Youth—just a warrior wet behind the ears with no captives and no status."

"Mmm," Axatl said. She wasn't not as good as Mayauhqui at multi-tasking. Her shunt showed blaring images of ships immobilising each other in the vast space between the stars: a rerun of the latest Flower Match, with the

final tally proudly displayed. It looked like Quetzalcoatl won; though barely, with only a single captive made in the course of the battle.

Mayauhqui rolled his eyes. "It's going to happen to you one day, you know. You should pay attention."

Axatl shrugged. "Plenty of time."

Mayauhqui mimicked exasperation. "You're hopeless. Come on. Let's eat."

They both had boxes, provided by thoughtful mothers—both featureless green, with entwined black snakes on the cover. When Axatl slid hers open, she saw, not the maize flatbread she'd been expecting—not even porridge or fried newts, but something else.

Rice—the sweet aroma rising from the box, making her stomach growl with memories of her early childhood—and prawns too large and shiny to have come from Quetzalcoatl. The whole thing reeked with the pungent, salty aroma of ginger and soy sauce.

Mother, as a final afterthought, had even provided chopsticks: not plain bamboo or wood, but ornate, red monstrosities, with the ideograms for good luck and long life painted on the upper half. Axatl's own chopsticks, the pair she'd been given on her naming day.

And she remembered—the furtive, yet oddly proud way Mother had handed her the lunch box, her face creased in a smile that had highlighted her alien features even more than usual.

That's so tacky, was her first, slow, horrified thought. Black One take her, she was going to die of shame.

And then she looked up, and met Mayauhqui's eyes—and saw herself reflected in them, small and slight, with almond eyes and teeth too large for her mouth, slightly curved like fangs. The mirror image of Mother.

Foreigner. Alien. Worse, flaunting it *here*, at the House of Tears, among the youths—who were all equals, all worshipping the deities of the Sixth World, united through penance and blood-sacrifices.

Desperately, Axatl tried to slam the lid back on—but a burly hand stopped her, effortlessly twisting her wrist.

"Here, what you got, Chink?"

She hadn't seen the boys. They must have been sitting at some other table, laughing at something—probably spring movies with couples in improbable positions, the typical adolescent fantasies that would pass or segue into uncomfortable marriages.

Axatl didn't say anything—she'd learnt that, if nothing else. But the speaker reached out, all the same, lifted the lunch box effortlessly out of her hand, and peered into it theatrically.

"What've we got inside, then?"

They were grinning, all of them, with small white teeth shining like pearls, their round faces contorted in cruel amusement.

"Leave me alone." The words bubbled up before Axatl could quench them.

They looked at her, much as they would have looked at a dog. "That what you wish, Chink?"

"Yes." Axatl couldn't back down, not now—her father's stubbornness, her mother's quiet, indomitable will. "Leave me alone."

The lunch box tilted towards the ground; the rice started tumbling on the floor, grain after white grain. "Alone," the boy said. "Why not?" His lips moved up, in thoughtful contempt. "Alone with your *kind*, gods rejoice."

He dropped the box. Axatl forced herself not to move, not even when it crashed on the floor with a sickening sound, not even when the lid spun outwards, out of control.

The chopsticks spun on the asphalt, red over black, black over red—one whole, and one snapped in half like a bent twig. Chopsticks, Mother was always saying, were two parts of a whole, like yin and yang, like day sun and half-night sun: one couldn't think of one without the other.

Axatl would have wept, if she had been weak enough.

Instead, she waited in silence for them to be gone; then knelt, quietly, and put back the shards of the box together; and the chopsticks, picking up the pieces one by one.

They were tacky by Mexica standards, but the half of her that Mother had taught knew them to be beautiful—polished wood and the calligraphy of masters, flowing like water around their length. They had been hers, and their loss hurt more than she'd have thought.

But it wasn't that which hurt most; never was. What did; what twisted in Axatl's heart like a sacrificial knife, is what she saw when she rose, the chopsticks against her chest: Mayauhqui's face, frozen halfway between contempt and shame—his eyes shifting, already turning away from the Chink, the tainted half-breed.

And she swore it, then and there: that she wouldn't go to the clergy as was expected of her, but that she'd take her chances and apply for the army—that she'd join the Flower Games and win captives and status. That she'd be on the shunt-news and on the clans' message-boards, her skill at war the talk of every Dominion planet—in every way indistinguishable from a true Mexica.

#

Chopsticks, and entwined snakes: they make no sense. She is the ship; and the ship is her. That's how it's always been.

Axatl-who-is-the-ship hangs in the deep planes: the void beyond the stars, a layer beyond reality, accessible only to ships. Within her is blessed silence—no radio chatter, no incessant photon noise relayed through her systems. Once more, she is as she was: inchoate, unquickened, with little sense of her body beyond the frontier of the hull's composites. The starsong lulls her, as it always does.

She could stay here forever.

Something in her—some distant part, some small and insignificant pathway in the vast system of her mind—protests, beats small fists against a pane of glass. She is no metal, no optics; she was born—other. Her place isn't in deep planes; humans shouldn't—

But that voice is drowned beneath the thousand messages relayed through her coms; and it gradually fades, until even its memory is overwritten, its blocks dissolved among millions of others.

#

Running running around the city walls, with only the faraway light of the stars—distorted through the perpetual haze of the atmosphere, nothing more than a distant reminder. Running all alone, with no one to watch his back, no one to warn of holes ahead; of marshy grounds; of beasts stalking him in the darkness.

Alone.

Mayauhqui's face would burn, if it wasn't so cold. He remembers being held to the ground by three of Chimalli's cronies, desperately struggling to free himself, while Chimalli herself—all muscles, with no fat to spare—smiled at him, lips spread over black-stained teeth. "So you're the Chink-lover, aren't you? The one who's all sad because he left his 'friend' back in Cuauhtitlan?"

There was no dignified answer; and he'd made none.

"There is no place for your sort here." Chimalli spat the word "sort" as if it were filth.

"All warriors are welcome here," he'd said, softly, whispering the words that had welcomed them all to the academy. "All those who would shed their blood to honour the gods-brothers under the skin."

A mistake—he'd known as soon as the first words left his mouth, and Chimalli's face contorted in a grimace, but he couldn't go back now. Might as well try to dam the lakes at flooding season. "You think you're clever?" Chimalli held something against the starry sky—gleaming bones, shining the same pale white as the moons overhead—his worship thorns. She wouldn't—wouldn't dare... He arched against the hands holding him pinned to the ground; but it did nothing, nothing to stop Chimalli dropping the thorns to the ground, and smashing them underfoot, with a crunch like broken spines.

Chimalli bent down, until her face was close: not close enough to reach, not close enough to bite, but close enough to see her distorted, almost alien features; close enough to breathe in the sour, heavy smell of chewed beans—and of stale perfume, its scent withered away by sweat. She held up a thorn shard—as sharp and as cutting as a sacrifice knife, with light shivering on its edge. "Enjoy your run, Chink-lover. I'm sure the gods will smile on you."

The pressure on his wrists and legs disappeared; and he heard laughter, moving away. Then he was alone in the darkness, the shards of his worship thorns crunching underfoot. He could have run after them; but, short of

revenge, he wouldn't have achieved anything. For what good was a night run, without blood shed to honour the gods?

So he'd gone back to the temple, begged the priests for another set—he'd pay for it on his rankings, but he hadn't cared about that anymore, at this point. And then he'd set out again, with all the others far ahead of him, leaving him utterly alone—as they'd intended all along.

Ahead, there was only darkness, shot through with glimpses of the stars. Mother had used to say that stars were the eyes of monsters waiting to consume mankind—but the Fifth World had ended in fire and acid, not the earthquake that the prophecies promised—and now the gods owned the stars and the sky from end to end.

Now it was the planets that were dangerous. It was Quetzalcoatl itself that would kill you—the marshes that hid the claws and fangs of the nazotls, the scratches of the cuayo trees that ballooned and released streams of incompatible proteins into your veins. Cycles of terraforming, and still the planet tried to shrug them off, like a cub scratching at an itch.

Running running in the darkness...

#

In the darkness, Axatl-who-is-the-ship becomes aware that the starsong has changed. It's still the same lullaby; but something else overlies it: a steady, insistent beat with two voices, that seems to distort everything it touches, to flense the metal and reveal the truth underneath.

It's not the background noise of the deep planes, but something much closer. Twin stars circling each other, she thinks, and isn't sure where the thought comes from.

And beyond them—hundreds, thousands of other songs in other systems and other galaxies, their echoes subtly penetrating her outer hull—tugging and twisting at it, endlessly renewing her into new shapes, new pathways of thought.

And she realises they were wrong, all along: it's not the planets that should be named after the gods, but the stars. The demons of Heaven have been defeated, and the gods have taken their place—a god for each star, for every mass hanging over her in deep planes, every song woven into a terrible, compelling symphony of atoms merging into each other, changing each other from core to periphery, a storm of notes and harmonies that resonates in her structure like a heartbeat.

#

It was the morning before the Flower Match, and Axatl woke up—stretched, with a mild ache in her back. The hymns were already broadcast on the system—the reedy sound of flutes, the haunting, throbbing beat of the drums interspersed with the chant to the glory of the Sixth Sun, He who keeps the universe whole.

Axatl's roommate had already left for the morning meal. In the silence, she knelt, and drew her worship thorns through her earlobes, letting the blood drip over the metal bowl in the centre of the room.

In the other station, the symmetrical of this one, other warriors would be preparing themselves for the game—no, not a game, this was a battle fought in earnest, a war providing prisoners and blood to each side, in order to keep the Sixth World whole. That was how it always been done for the true Mexica.

Once Axatl was done with her worship, the bowl flushed the blood outwards into space—no spillage aboard the space station, no waste, everything for the glory of the gods.

Sometimes, Axatl wondered, not if she believed in the gods at all—for the mark of Their presence was all around them, from the twin stars around which Quetzalcoatl orbits, to the stability point in which the station nested—but if the gods had any time for her. Was her blood tainted—was that why her offerings had no effect, why everyone still whispered and sniggered when she walked past, and why her ship felt sluggish and strange in her neural shunts, less an extension of her will than an unwelcome limb?

No point in asking questions—not today.

She dressed—soberly, in the featureless grey of unproved warriors, and walked to the docks.

Everyone had assembled in silence, their ears still glistening under the harsh lights. They listened to the priests' harangue, the eternal reminder of their purpose in securing human blood for the continuation of the world, the repayment of their debt to Grandmother Earth and the Sixth Sun for the world's rebirth on a myriad planets among the stars.

Tochtlan, the veteran who had instructed her, was waiting for her by the pod-launcher. "Ready?" he asked.

Axatl shrugged.

Tochtlan's face, as usual, revealed nothing of what he felt. But he seemed unusually preoccupied. At length he said, "Check your ship, girl."

"I don't—" Tochtlan liked her, Axatl knew: he'd never said anything or had any behaviour outside the bounds of ritual; but equally, he'd never treated her as less than a full-blood Mexica.

Tochtlan's chin rose, pointed to a pod-launcher further down the line, where a trio of boys stood just a little too casually. Axatl's face burnt. The tallest among them was Mayauhqui—who'd not spoken a word since she'd arrived on the station. He kept hanging with his cronies—with Chimalli, the beefy girl who looked as though she could down a naxotl with her bare hands, and whose easy, arrogant bearing reminded Axatl of the bullies who'd tormented her at school.

"They look too smug," Tochtlan said. "They're planning something."

Axatl could have said, “they wouldn’t dare,” but she knew better, now. At first it had only been slugs in the morning porridge, sliding under the aroma of chilli like the touch of a drowned corpse; but then they’d tinkered with her schedule—and worse, with her ship. Several times, she almost hadn’t made it to training; or climbed into her ship to discover distorted ideograms scrawled all across her canopy. She nodded, with a nonchalance she didn’t feel. “Thank you.”

Tochtlan shook his head—and bowed, formally, one warrior to an equal. “May the Southern Hummingbird walk in your shadow, girl. May He grant you luck in battle, and a swift ascent into the warriors’ Heaven.”

Axatl’s pod was emblazoned with the image of Quetzalcoatl—the god rising from the underworld with the bones of the dead in His hands, all broken into pieces of different sizes and colours. She put her hand on the pad, and the hatch dilated, revealing familiar darkness. The comforting smell of recycled air wafted up to her—and then Axatl was inside, harnessing herself into the pilot’s seat.

Outside, through the canopy, there was only the void of space—and silence, flowing to fill the cabin. The pods hung off the surface of the ship like clumps of cactus fruit, every one of them painted in bright colours, with the good-luck glyphs of their owners.

Axatl’s neural shunts connected with the interface with an audible click. Gradually, her eyes became used to the darkness; and she felt the weight of the ship in her mind, like an itch waiting to be scratched.

Out, Axatl thought, and the door closed. There was the hiss of pressurised air leaving the airlock; and then the pod peeled away from the mass of the station, and slowly launched itself into space.

Check your ship, girl, Tochtlan’s voice whispered in her mind—and, sure enough, she paused just outside the station’s hull, watching the other ships peel away from the walls like sown maize kernels, and nudged the system into a full diagnostic.

Nothing felt amiss. But—

But something was wrong. Something was—missing?

Her shunt buzzed: a com, relayed through the system. When she accepted, the overlay on her vision was from three different ships: the same three Tochtlan had pointed out to her earlier. They were grinning, showing blackened teeth that remind her of jaguars’ maws.

“Hey, yellowface,” Mayauhqui said. “Having fun?”

She could have railed; could have asked why he was doing this—any of this—to her. But she’d learnt her lesson at the academy, all too well. She shook her head, and didn’t answer—even though she felt as though she was tearing up inside.

“We’ve left you a little surprise,” the girl said. She wore a golden lip-plug, a dangerous ostentation in a ship where any metal could act as an interface.

“Yeah, see if you like it,” Mayauhqui said—with a smug, satisfied smile that stabs into her heart like a sacrificial knife.

The com shut off, but not before emitting a high-pitched sound that set Axatl’s teeth on edge—echoing in the bones of her skull until it seemed to have become part of her shunt.

When it cut off, Axatl was so relieved at the silence that it took her a while to realise the truth.

The ship was gone.

Of course, it was still around her, still cocooning her in its reassuring metal hardness; still a tangible reality with its familiar smell. But, in her mind, there was nothing but a gaping maw where it should have been.

Gently, carefully, like a man probing at a mortal wound, Axatl extended herself along the shunt, trying to make contact through the interface.

She heard nothing. She felt nothing.

Like a cut-off limb, she thought. Her heartrate rose in the growing silence, filling the cabin like a desperate hymn.

#

Axatl—who-is-the-ship could go closer to the starsong. She could see the twin stars of Quetzalcoatl; and move further on, into reaches untouched by man, hear the song of the other, unspoiled stars. It would be the work of a thought to move—to leave everything behind, and never return.

Why, then, does she hesitate, as if something were still holding her back?

#

Outside, the ships were pulling away one by one, turning off their ion-thrust motors once they’d achieved the momentum to escape the station’s gravitational pull. Their trail shone in Axatl’s after-vision; and then they were all gone, all away from her into the battlefield where the other side awaited—and she remained alone in darkness, staring at dead controls.

Over her loomed the station: she was drifting back, and soon the safeties would kick in, and drag her back into the pod, snug and safe, empty-handed. Humiliated.

The word rose out of the morass, as sharp as a worship-thorn. Tochtlan had warned her, but she had left it too late—too eager to go out, too eager to earn her glory.

There had to be a way.

Again and again Axatl pushed into the interfaces, trying to bridge the gap between her and the ship; but it might as well have been on another plane for all the good it did.

Again and again, over and over. She couldn't go home, she couldn't return like this, with nothing.

She couldn't go back...

Again and again, and something broke and yielded, snapping with a sound like bent bamboo.

Axatl hurtled downwards, into the ship's system—vaguely aware of the shunts at first, and then they became nothing more than hindrances to her flight, and then she could not remember what they were or what their purpose was—her mind scattered and expanded, into a nebula of flowing numbers and lightspeed messages, staring into the darkness until everything started to make sense.

Couldn't go back—couldn't go back like this.

And the ship—who was her who was the ship—took her away from all of it.

#

Something—something grates against her peace, a persistent itch, a sense that something isn't as it should be. There is—noises, sounds, memories that aren't hers. *Who*— she asks, but voice doesn't travel, not in the space between the stars.

Let it not have happened. Please, Lord of the Near, Lord of the Nigh...

#

There was a whisper, behind, in the darkness; the kind of exhalation that only made Mayauhqui run faster. Thorns lashed his calves—he hoped it wasn't the wrong kind, or he was dead—and all the while the whisper was growing stronger. There was a fetid smell like rotten eggs, and the air grew thicker with every moment—thicker and hotter, with the distant rumble that might be a storm, that might be something else entirely.

It wasn't meant to be run like this—yes, it was supposed to be a hymn to the gods, a worship made in solitude, but there were always people around you, always fellow warriors, even if they were slightly ahead or slightly behind. Mayauhqui shouldn't feel as though he was all alone, in the dark, not the pale glow of the half-night.

No, not quite alone—there was whatever was behind him, but Mayauhqui would rather not think about it now.

Ahead, out of the orange light, loomed the temple to Tezcatlipoca, Master of War and Fate, Lord of the Near and Nigh: a large black pyramid surrounded by the stout wall of the temple complex in its shadow. Mayauhqui had left it, ages ago, with the others of the company by his side—before Chimalli, before the broken thorns. Now he was running back towards it, alone, his worship completed.

Please please Black One, watch over me. Let me not be crushed by the maws of jaguars, not drowned by the water-beasts, not poisoned by the thorns...

Running running in the darkness, towards the gates that didn't seem to be getting closer. Whatever was behind Mayauhqui as no longer making any noise, but he could still feel its presence, its shadow over his back.

The gates...

Abruptly, they became as tall as him—and then twice as tall. A last burst of speed, and Mayauhqui was inside. The doors slid close behind him, with a hissing like air through a cut throat. He stopped, bent double to catch his breath, and listened. On the other side was a frustrated wail, and the sound of something large hitting the force-field—and then heavy footsteps squelching away through the mud of the marshes.

It was gone. Whatever it was, it was gone. He was safe.

Safe.

Mayauhqui found the others lounging in the hallway, paying calculated attention to a game of patolli, watching the counters on the screen as if it were life-and-death.

Chimalli raised her eyes, stared at him with no expression on her face. "Had a good run?"

He wasn't a fool. He knew the rules, from beginning to end—all that was needed to survive. "Very good," Mayauhqui said, even though his calves ached with the weals the marshes left on him, even though his lungs still burnt with fetid air.

Chimalli nodded, gravely, as if Mayauhqui had just passed some important exam. "Come on," she said. "Want to play?"

That was when he realised that he was no warrior; that he didn't have the courage to be alone once more, caught in Quetzalcoatl's deadly nights. That he would do everything—anything to ensure that this didn't happen again. "Of course I'll play," he said, forcing a smile he didn't feel; and pulled a chair and sat down.

After that, no one ever called him "Chink-lover"—because he never gave them cause to do so.

And the race became—no, not forgotten, because one did not forget such things—but papered over, rendered in exquisite colours like a codex painting: dead and faraway, harmless.

Until now.

#

"Please please please...

O Lord of the Near, O Lord of the Nigh,

I throw myself before you, I abase myself

With icy nettles I make my penance

With thorns and with blood

Please please please, let it not have happened..."

Mayauhqui hasn't prayed that hard—not since that night in the marshes.

#

There are—other thoughts, other dreams that don't belong in the deep planes. In her dream—which isn't hers, though she can't articulate how she knows—she's someone else—sitting in her ship, in her pod-launcher, staring at the glass of her canopy and seeing only the featureless dark of the pod's walls. Hours. It's been hours, and the ship hasn't come back.

It was a joke. A harmless joke, nothing like that night-run on Quetzalcoatl. Cut off the yellowface's—Axatl's—neural shunts, and she'd drift, and the station would catch her. They'd all have a good laugh at the poor hapless girl, and that would be it.

Except it's all gone wrong, and she can do nothing to fix it.

She prays—her hands and earlobes are slick with blood, and she stares at the darkness until it seems to stare back, to shimmer and bend like space around a black hole. With all her strength, she pushes, trying to bend the whole Sixth World to her will.

#

Who—?

Axatl. Come back, please. Wherever you are, please come back. In the name of He who is Wind, He who is Night, He who holds the Obsidian Mirror.

Who—?

#

Chopsticks, half-broken; a night, and a temple, and game counters neatly lined up, a pattern she cannot recognise, a message she cannot decipher.

Running running she was running away in the darkness, trying to catch the others before something bad happened, and there are whispers in the night, and the breath of something warm and large, and the noise of its approach...

Standing he was standing there watching chopsticks fall and break, and turning away to see Mayauqhi's gaze...

He is—

She is—

#

For a moment, a split moment as they both hang suspended, there is an anchor—and she sees herself as he sees her. And she remembers, all of it, everything from beginning to end.

#

There was a girl called Axatl once, riding the mag-lev home on Quetzalcoatl, in the diffuse, orange light from the half-night sun. There was a ship, once, made in the Dominion's finest yard, crafted to perfection—and she couldn't tell them apart.

But now she can.

#

Come back, his voice whispers in Axatl's mind. It's here that you belong. The ship's controls? It was just a joke, and you'll swallow it, and move on.

Move on. Like he's always done, and look what he's become now.

Come, whisper the stars, singing in the mind of Axatl-who-is-the-ship, like the water-beasts luring humans into the First Lake. Wander our pathways, endlessly flensed, endlessly renewed.

Come.

And she could. Axatl knows what she is; she knows that she'll always have to fight to fit in; that, if there is no easy path for a Mexica like him, the path for her will be even harder. Far easier to be a ship, to follow the starsong from galaxy to galaxy, to listen to the secret beat of the universe—to hang cocooned in darkness as in the womb, away from mockeries and jokes. Far easier.

But she's never been one to take the easy path. And here—where they hang in deep planes, away from skin-colours and bloodlines—they are the same, and it's all that matters.

The part of Axatl-who-is-the-ship that *remembers* slowly unfolds, pushing into the electronics boards and tangles of cables, imprinting its consciousness onto everything.

She feels Mayauhqui's touch on her mind, like a line leading back; and she follows that line, pushing herself out of the deep planes—and withdrawing from the ship's consciousness, she disconnects her neural shunts from the interface.

Once more, Axatl hangs under the shadow of the station; and her mind is her own, with no sense of the ship beyond the shunts. But the void around her is filled with music, and she still remembers the touch of starsong on her hull.

There's another ship, by her side: *his* ship, with a pale face watching her through the canopy, and panicked thoughts she can still feel as if they were her own. There are people, gathering on the reaches of the station; chatters on the radio, sighs of relief.

They'll send her for exams; and the ship, too, they'll send to maintenance, scrutinise everything as if they could put a name to what has happened.

But Axatl—she'll walk out of the ship's cabin, tall and proud, showing nothing of what she feels. After the infirmary releases her, she'll find a mirror in her room, and stare at herself, surprised to see nothing but a human face, without the glitter of metal or silicium. Gently, slowly, she'll trace the contours of her face, every feature from almond eyes to large teeth familiar: the mirror image of both her parents— like the map of a treasured country slowly coming into focus



Aliette de Bodard was born in the US, but grew up in France (in the gorgeous city of Paris, to be precise). Although French is her mother tongue, her parents insisted early on that she learn to speak English. She first discovered science fiction through the works of Isaac Asimov, then moved to fantasy when she happened upon a copy of Ursula LeGuin's *The Earthsea Quartet*, which today remains one of her favorite books in the genre. When her family moved to London for a few years she found a copy of Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Fantasy and Science Fiction*, which first made her realize that she could try her hand at writing. Aliette studied in Paris in a classe préparatoire, a prep course for the competitive exams which would enable her to enter an engineering school. After two years of intensive classes she was admitted to the École Polytechnique, one of France's top engineering schools. During her class préparatoire, she started writing regularly as a distraction from science. She completed two novels during her studies. Halfway through École Polytechnique she started writing short stories instead of novels in order to improve faster—and went on writing them after she graduated. In June 2006, Aliette attended Orson Scott Card's Literary Bootcamp, which allowed her to sharpen her skills, as well as to return with a wealth of information about the craft and business of writing. Her writing took off after she won the Writers of the Future contest and was picked out of the *Interzone* slushpile by the inimitable Jetse de Vries. This marked the beginning of a growing number of sales, several to semi-professional or professional markets. She was able to join SFWA as an active member in 2008, and was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2009, narrowly losing to David Anthony Durham. Her first novel, *Servant of the Underworld* sold to the HarperCollins imprint Angry Robot following a lucky break involving an agent, an editor, and a delayed flight (see the full story at the Angry Robot website). *Servant of the Underworld* is a cross between a historical Aztec fantasy and a murder-mystery, featuring ghostly jaguars, bloodthirsty gods, and fingernail-eating monsters. For more information, see the novel's webpage. Aliette is currently working on an alt-SF thriller, *Foreign Ghosts*, which is set in the same universe as her Hugo and Nebula nominated *The Jaguar House, in Shadow*.

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Elizabeth K. Campbell lives in Ohio, USA, with her husband. Together they have the average American household of 2.5 pets. She started Antimatter-ePress as a way to provide back-of-the-house publication services for the Science Fiction community. Together with four other writers, she maintains a blog called Darkcargo.com, a forum for the geek lifestyle, science fiction and creativity.

"The people that I get to work with fascinate me, and I am really lucky to be a part of their projects. I do behind-the-scenes work--copyediting, beta-reading, graphic design, and ePub formatting. I am lucky enough to work for Mike Allen and his highly acclaimed Clockwork Phoenix anthologies, producing the e-publications. I also get to beta-read for Mike which I consider to be a huge honor. One of my favorite long-term projects is rendering Juliet E. McKenna's backlist into epub format for publication with Wizard's Tower Press. This is one of my favorite fantasy series and I am thrilled to be a part of preserving and making it available to a new generation. I really enjoy doing beta-reading and graphic design work for Singer/Songwriter Jonah Knight. The song-stories that he tells about ghosts, mad scientists and time machines enthrall me. And I get to produce the ePub versions of all the publications from Mercury Retrograde Press and Dagan Books. As you can see, I am very lucky that I get to work with so many creative minds!"

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Europa SF is conceived as an English-language portal of news and information from and for the European fandom, a generic site: <http://scifiportal.eu> (specific subdomains for each country/fandom involved on demand will be created – bg.scifiportal.eu, hr.scifiportal.eu, ro.scifiportal.eu, de.scifiportal.eu, etc. – and each country will manage its own subdomain).

Our central idea is to have a permanent, real-time mirroring of all European SF&F products, events and activities. We hope that all European countries with a SF&F community will become involved in this pan-European project.

Europa SF is dedicated to posting news, links and original materials related to science fiction, fantasy, horror, comics, films and TV series from all over Europe. Here are the columns we suggest and their titles:

1. **Editorial** – a monthly general article on European SF
2. **On the spot** – short articles about important national or European events (festivals, conventions, book fairs, conferences etc.)
3. **News** – short news on major/minor European or world events
4. **Events** – a calendar, just the name and the date of the event
5. **Reports** – articles about (on-going) national or European events
6. **Films & Books Reviews**
7. **Authors, Publishers and Magazines**

If our correspondents indicate there is an interest in interviews, panels, essays, films, TV series etc. we will introduce new sections to cover them.

Any suggestions and recommendations are most welcome. We need at least one English-speaking person from each European SF community who is willing to help us with this project.

Please share to all those who may be interested in your country.

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