

PAPERBACK

No. 125



WORLDCON & EUROCON 2014

EDITORIAL

Dear Reader,

You hold in your hands the latest issue of *Parsek*, the oldest Croatian science fiction fanzine, first published in 1977 and still running. It is also the bulletin of the Zagreb based Science Fiction Society SFera (although the web mostly took over that particular purpose), a platform for young authors (in a way, being published on paper still beats web) and generally a good read.

We would like to introduce you to some aspects of Croatian SF, with the little help of SFera's cute (oh, well) official mascot, Bemmet. We will only scratch the surface, but we hope you'll be interested enough to check out our web archive for previous English editions of *Parsek*.

Enjoy!

Editors and Bemmet

In Zagreb, August 6th 2014

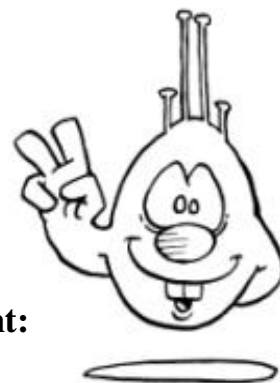


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Parsek on the internet:

<http://parsek.sfera.hr/>

PARSEK is paradoxical-secular bulletin of SFera, Science Fiction Society, IV. Podbrežje 5, 10000 Zagreb.

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PARSEK has been awarded as the best european SF fanzine on Eurocon 2011 in Stockholm.

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Vesna is one of our favorite librarians, dedicated to both reading and writing. For years, she was NaNoWriMo coordinator and she co-founded the longest running youth bookclub in Rijeka. When she has no book in her hands, she is a passionate LARPer. Her stories often question deeper social issues and one of those is The Spouses' Story, with which she won the SFERA Award in the Miniature category in 2013.

For more of her musings about LARP, writing and Croatian SF, check out her blog in English Skirts'n'Wolves. (<http://skirtsnwolves.wordpress.com>)

Vesna Kurilić

THE SPOUSES' STORY

"You were the one who wanted twins!" Sara hissed just before supper, shoving herself into her husband's face. "Two kids at the same time, sure, fine! But if we had taken them in separately, none of this would've happened! At least one of them would've been normal!"

The way her forehead wrinkled when she was pissed off was a faithful copy of her mother's angry face, but now probably wasn't the time or the place to get into *that* argument again.

"What will my mother say?" she continued more loudly, even though the boys were playing in the living room, less than a couple of yards from the kitchen, the scene of their own little private hell. "I got a passport just for this! I went all the way to godforsaken *China* – were you aware that, during our two weeks there, they found *two more* incurable diseases in Asia? - just for us to have kids! Dammit, Marin..." She ran her fingers over the top of her nose, massaging her calm point. It took her a while – almost long enough for

him to dare to hope their conversation actually might end before supper. That would lead them into a discussion about food, a topic far more interesting – but then she let her hand fall down and shot a dangerous little smile at him. "What will *your* mother say?"

"I don't really think my mother's the issue here," Marin crossed his arms deliberately, frowning. "After all, you do remember that her dad was... you know... *human*," his chin twitched. He was still a bit sensitive about his grandfather, the reason why her side of the family regularly looked down at him. "Look, the fact that the boys are, well, different, doesn't really make them bad people," he tried. Sara's glare turned black. "Okay, fine..."

"Because having all of our family laughing at us wasn't enough... It was one thing that we couldn't have kids, but now, just as they got used to the idea of adoption..." The note of despair in her voice grew slightly heavier. "Damn the Yellows. I *knew* they'd set

us up somehow. It all went too smoothly – didn't I tell you everything was going way too smoothly? Dammit."

"Yeah, but, except for the, y'know, *problem*, the boys are totally okay. You said yourself they were cute!" he spread his arms in despair. "Their English is better than yours and, umm, definitely better than mine," he was quick to add, even though *she* was the one to insist they download Croatian subtitles only. "It's not like they're infected with worms or anything", he said and only later remembered that mentioning infection was probably not the best idea at the moment. "We've talked about adjusting our lives around kids before we brought them home," he tried, a bit softer. "Why is this so different?"

The look she gave him was, it wasn't hard to guess, the same look she gave the unruly students at her school. Once more she was the spitting image of her mother. It was like *one* Matešić woman in the family wasn't enough...

"*It's different*," she answered, her voice calm – at least he managed to do that much – "because there is *no way* we could adjust to *this*", she nodded towards the living room. "Think about it for a second, Marin. Our folks will *kill* us. Remember how happy they were for us when we finally managed to set up the adoption? You know how much they wanted us to have kids of our own! They'll never speak to us again! Ever!"

"Maybe we could get away with it, say they're different because they're , like,

Chinese?" His eyebrows rose in hope. "We knew some things were bound to be different. Your mother knew it, too."

She shook her head. "I love you to pieces, but sometimes you're really an idiot, you know?"

"I know." He offered her a nervous smile and for a moment had her smiling back at him. Maybe everything will be good in the end.

Something fell, hard, in the living room.

They shot quick glances at each other.

"They've heard us," whispered Marin.

Sara shrugged, but without conviction. "I don't think they understand enough Croatian."

"They're quick to learn," he frowned, "and you don't really need to understand the language to get the tone of a conversation... Listen, sorry, but... I'm gonna go out for a run," he said. Meeting her dark gaze, he added: "I have to... clear my head. Get things in order, up there. Honestly, I don't know what else to say, not at this moment," he finally admitted.

"Don't you dare!" she growled. "You'd leave me alone in the house with *them*?"

He didn't resist grabbing her in a tight hug and smiling at her furious face. "You've already been alone with them, same as me. We're still living and breathing, right?"

"I seem to recall thinking it was a problem for them to eat homemade Croatian food..." she shook her head, letting him press down her head to the curve of his neck. He

smiled under his breath. Even though she didn't join his smile, her body seemed to relax a tiny bit more. "What about your supper?" she finally asked.

"I'll eat outside."

She sighed. "I'll keep a schnitzel for you."

Half an hour later, after she had finished preparing the mashed potatoes and slicing the meat, Sara's sensitive ears caught a distant howl through the kitchen's forestside window. This time she smiled, too. *Idiot.*

The sound of tiny tiny footsteps at the kitchen door made the hair at the nape of her neck stand up.

She looked up from the meal and saw two identical, tiny, narrow-eyed faces stealing glances at her from behind the door. For a moment they just watched each other, two boys and a grown woman, until she smiled once more. "Hungry?" she asked. Some words carried universal understanding, and the kids really did learn the language scarily fast, nevermind her previous remark. It was just another one of a myriad of little differences.

She got two identical, ecstatic nods in response, after which they raced each other to the other side of the kitchen table. "Sit with your back straight, Malik," she reminded the twin wearing the blue shirt, not even thinking about it.

Afterwards she cast a careful glance at them. Totally ordinary eight year olds. Come to think of it, were they even eight? Was it another thing they lied about at the adoption

agency? She knew their kind grew older with time, it was one of the rare things she managed to confirm with online research after they had discovered the problem, but there was no way for her to know their age for sure. What if they were two times as old as they appeared to be? What if... what if they were older than *she* was?

Pull yourself together. She took out two identical plates from the kitchen cupboard and put two identical, thick, bloody steaks on them. The third one, somewhat bigger, she had already set aside for herself.

She hesitated for just a second. They've already shared meals a couple of times – so far it seemed that the boys got hungry every five days, give or take a bit – but she still didn't feel completely comfortable around them. The boys stared at her with identically unsure looks in their eyes. "Dammit, eat away," she nodded, albeit glumly. "Bon appetit."

The boys' grateful mumble quickly drowned under their speed as they grabbed their plates and lifted their steaks. As one, four sharp, tiny fangs sunk into the abundant meat.

Sara calmly sliced off a big chunk of her own steak and started chewing, thinking.

Marin's cousin, once removed, had a day job as a nurse – his whole family was a bit weird, maybe due to that poor, long-ago deceased grandfather. Maybe she could supply them with donated human blood? On the other hand, how were they ever, dammit, supposed to bring the kids along to a family

lunch? True, Sara's mother made the rawest turkey roast in the county – Marin's mom occasionally did hers almost too well, for some morbid reason – but it won't be enough for the kids.

And what will happen when, thirty or so years from now, they supposedly hit puberty? If the online resources were to be trusted – and at least one site seemed scarily trustworthy – they will find it almost impossible to restrain from feeding on humans. How in hell were Marin and she supposed to handle that? And what about when, even sooner, they need a babysitter? What unfortunate soul will they trust these kids with?

The turning of the front door lock stopped her train of thoughts. After a short surge of fear – all of her sisters owned a pair of spare keys, what if some of them decided to stop by unannounced on their return to the village? – the distinctive thump of boots gave away Marin's step.

Her husband appeared at the doorstep, his shirt on wrong, his fingers trying to untangle a bundle of mud-stuck leaves from his impossible hair. The twins looked up from their steaks, their faces a twin mask of innocence, having steadily sucked their way to the middle of the juicy steaks.

"Dammit, Marin," her mouth was faster than her brain, "did you roll in the mud again as a pup? You'll ruin the carpet."

A moment of silence, followed with an explosion of sound; two clear children's

voices were laughing hard, not keeping anything back, their bloodied lips wide apart, so relaxed that nothing could dampen their good humour.

It took a second for Sara to pull herself together, but the growing feeling of relief quickly overwhelmed her long-carried anxiety. She gave the kids a stern look. "If you understand what I'm saying, why are you still slouching in your seats like a pair of rain drenched rabbits?"

The boys exchanged a quick gaze and answered with identical grins. For some reason, two pairs of tiny teeth in their smiles didn't seem as weird to her as a moment ago.

Sara glanced at Marin and shrugged. He was the first to smile. He took a pointed glance at the boys, and then back at her, letting his lips for the word "*ours*". She just shook her head. Still, not a second later she stole another glance at the boys, then turned to her husband and grinned in return.



Mihaela is, in her own words: Writer. Mum. PR wizard. Journalist. Translator. Clutz. SF fan. Activist. SFera member. Breastfeeding nut. Conrunner. European GUFF administrator. Got that? And she still manages to read humongous amounts of science fiction and chair the SFERA Award Jury. Do not mess with her, you stand no chance. But do read her blog, rantalica.com. Although sometimes irregular, it covers both Croatian and international SF, as well as other topics of Mihaela's broad interests...

Mihaela Marija Perković

A FINAL EXAM

Evelyn sat fixedly in her mediation posture. Her body was a perfect fit for the eerie silence of the command bridge's replica of the SpaceFrontier ship *Pinmothers* with its marble calm. Only a slight shift of a few threads of her hair gave away the tiny girl for alive. Her breathing steady, she was trying to focus on the passage of time.

How long has it been?, she asked herself and her breathing instantly turned shallower. She had to suppress panic that suffused her as the questioned fused with the white noise of running water which threatened to overcome her mind. Through carefully timed breathing in, and out, and again, then once more, and again, she slowly regained her balance.

I will not freak out, she repeated her own mantra to herself instead of the proscribed one, believing in the core of her being that she had lost this last battle already. The mantra faded away, her thoughts went wandering. The inertial force of her unadmitted surrender kept her immobile, still in the meditation posture. *I*

want to do it, I can do it... I want, I can... No rage. I'll become a frontierswoman, not a baby-making machine... Idiot children! No kids, what's with the kids, the pressure to have them comes from me, myself... I don't want to and I don't have to by the letter of law... Yeah, this is not my doing, it's Carla's, all those brats of hers lead to rage, even now when they're gone; older, "concerned sister". As if: my jealous sister, the jealous cow, she's just that, just couldn't bear to have gotten pregnant right after passing all the tests ... I don't give a fuck about Carla... This is my test and ain't gonna fuck it up... I have no rage in me, I will not have it... Breathing in, the light is coming in, breathing out, my rage is pourin out... I want to do it, I can do it, I will pass this, just this test, I'll travel the Universe, travel through the silence of space... the thoughts swirled through the Evelyn's mind, and the noise of the running water decreased and increased intermittently.

After two years of preparations, grueling physical conditioning, nigh-impossible

intellectual testing, beating her own insecurity was still the hardest part for Evelyn. She was attracted by the solitude of the frontier life, by the remoteness of the edge of the known Universe. The sweet silence of it glittered in her mind's eye, while she memorized complex repair protocols of the *Pinmotheres* under the pressure of seventeen-member family din, in the tension of a city of billion souls and the press of noise on the overpopulated planet of Pavonis-A. For Evelyn, guarding the non-existing border in deep space from aliens that might or might not have passed that way was the dream job, serene and exciting at the same time. To accept the mocking of dissidents who thought this job ridiculous, was easy - a few broken noses dealt with the option of having to have it in her face.

Evelyn came through the training with ease; with little effort, she learnt all the necessary protocols, mastered all that boring physics, absorbed the necessary routine. Her grandmother was a frontierswoman, her father a frontiersman, and her two uncles as well. She had good genes and a good chance to succeed. All that was left was the final exam: the simulation of all shipboard systems failure. Dying in the solitary chill of space, so the candidates called it. The only exam that didn't come with a manual, nor were there any preparations for it. There were no cheat-sheets or helpful summaries, or superstitious pre-exam rituals. There were only stories about peculiar and incomprehensible taciturn behavior of the rare ones who passed it.

In the 25th hour of simulation and the 13th hour of meditation, Evelyn sat immobile.

Despite her regular breathing, she could hear the water flowing, ever more clearly and ever more close. That fluid, disturbing sound swam through her mind more and more strongly, she could hear it flowing out of the kitchen tap, hear it murmur spouting out of bathtub faucet, feel it growing inside her. She began to shiver.

Evelyn...

...lil' Eve, lil' girl no one's gonna want to leave...

...lil' Lynn, there's no sin in leaving this din...

...she hummed to herself, in the rhythm of the fluid noise, faster and faster. Her thoughts swarmed, Lynn, Lynn, Evelyn, hold on, Lynn! I am holding on! I am E-ve-lyn, I've done everything right, why is this not over yet? Why haven't they entered and told me that I have passed, that I'm excellent? I am excellent! A test of stubbornness, nothing but stupid testing of hardheadedness, well, my dears, my head is hard, the hardest, you stupid pricks, my head is THE HARDEST, THE BEST! I WANT BE FLUSHED DOWN! I WANT BE, DO YOU HEAR ME, YOU BLOODY BASTARDS! IS THIS FUCKING TEST OVER, MOTHERFUCKERS?!" Evelyn's voice ripped through the calm of the test chamber. Her body remained in the meditation posture, almost immovable. Only her mouth moved, her face grew long, and her jugular veins popped out, tensing the red-hot skin like metal wires; tears went down it, uncontrolled, unfelt.

The two medtechs on duty rushed into the test chamber in fifty seconds' time. One of them caught her with well-exercised, confident movements, while the other injected the

tranquilizer with a quick, deft motion. She was taken to the medlevel, through a narrow corridor which she filled with hoarse screaming, before the hum of running water went completely silent in her ears.

She woke slowly. She was hazily aware that Commander Bratoš and the old doctor Matić were standing next to her bed, the same doctor who gave birth to the all of ten Carla's brats. Bratoš was angry, and he was just explaining something to Matić in a quick voice about the way things sometime were and the rights of women. She could hear them more and more clearly, they were talking about her after all, her good genes, excellent results she achieved in the SpaceFrontier programe, about passing the exam. She was overwhelmed with pleasure and pride. *I passed! I made it! I passed, passed! Look, Carla's here! Why is she crying, the jealous cow?! I know she's dying of envy, I'll pilot about the Universe, and she'll be taking care of those brats all by herself, but can't she be happy because of me just once? But, no - she's crying! I mean, really! Evelyn tried to move, to speak, to tell her sister to stop being so selfish.*

She just managed to open her eyes. Carla just sobbed even harder, and doctor Matić and commander Bratoš stopped talking and turned to Evelyn, stepping nearer her bed.

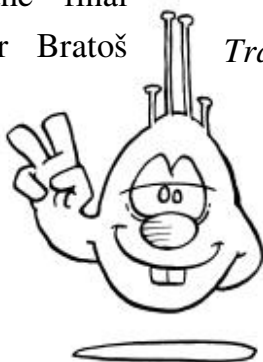
"Božičević, you've passed the final exam! Congratulations," commander Bratoš

said officially and with a frown. She wanted to answer him, but she couldn't. Probably the tranquilizer, she thought. *How ridiculously stiff and rigid does the commander look. As if he is uncomfortable. Maybe it's for the best that I can't communicate, I'd burst laughing, and that would definitely wouldn't be good for my career. Hmmm, a frontierswoman. Awesome. And Carla's still crying! How come she got such a petty soul?*

"Well done, honey! You've done a good job, Evy," old doctor's wrinkled face which smiled with satisfaction over her interrupted her train of thought. *What's with this old goat? I'm not Evy! What is he doing here anyway...* Carla had stopped crying; she stood by the cot despondently and held Evelyn's hand.

"You're so precious, dear," doctor Matić continued with his merry chatter. "You're coming with me, you know, Evy. You and I, Evy, we'll use these rare and special genes of yours! Yes, yes, you and I will together, my Evy, make a lot of, lot of babies... The whole generation of frontierspeople, yes! Mentally stable, stout, sturdy frontierspeople, and they'll all take after you, oh, yes! You're so precious, Evy, darling," doctor Matić whispered to her while pushing her bed towards his Pathology in pregnancy ward. In Evelyn's mind, the hum of running water fused with a scream.

Translated by Tihomir Maček



Among his friends, David is considered a "young" writer, an inevitable label because of his baby face and age (pushing 30). However, he has more great stories (and awards) under his belt than many of the "old & established" writers, and we are proud that some of his first works were published by Parsek. We are currently waiting for his first novel announced for 2015. Don't be surprised if you run into his name and stories works in some international magazines. He is ambitious and planning to publish in English. One thing about him we know for sure: he follows through on his plans.

David Kelečić

GENERATION GAP

"Hello, son."

"Hi, Dad." An awkward silence. "You called," the son squeezed out.

"Yes, I did," the reticent father confirmed. The unpleasant silence crept in again. "I called to hear how you are doing," he muttered finally. He had hoped that Dragoslav would help him somehow, that he would utter something meaningful. Just please, don't say that you're fine, he pleaded on the inside.

"I'm fine", his son replied. Old Dracanto sighed heavily on his side of phone and then pressed his fingers against his wizened forehead. Suddenly, his son gave him a chance to continue the uneasy conversation. "And how are you?"

"Me?" Dracanto replied with surprise. "Well ... fine. Yes, I'm fine. There, I've been taking a bit of a nap these years. What are you doing, are you plundering ..." He stopped suddenly when he remembered that Dragoslav hated the word. "I mean, are you earning a

lot?" This time, a heavy sigh came from Dragoslav's side of the line.

"Yeah, I'm earning a lot," he replied wearily. "People still talk about the crisis, but it's not that bad", he put a bit of spirit in his voice. "You know, I managed to surpass the amount I had in two thousand and eight."

"That's... great." Dracanto enunciated each word slowly. He was clenching all his face muscles in an effort not to say it, but it was more powerful than him. "Although ... I'm sorry that you had to work yourself so hard. You know ... If you had gold ..."

"Dad, do we have to go over this again?" Dragoslav pleaded when the sore was picked at.

"Oh no, it was just a small remark," his father withdrew quickly. "I understand that you know what's the best for you," he recited a mantra that he had repeated thousands of times, but never actually believed.

"Thank you, Dad", Dragoslav said with ease while he was putting down his war spear.

He reached for a new topic. "Have you talked to Mother lately?"

"No. But, we have spoken recently."

"Dad, you haven't talked in thirty six years."

"As I said, we spoke recently. In any case, I have nothing to say to her. Obviously, she's fine down there in Argentina since she thinks that her gold is safe there."

"You know, you could visit her sometimes," the son said hopefully.

"She's the one that left in '41. She should visit me!"

"Dad, you know very well that she was protecting her gold. She did what she considered wise."

"If it wasn't for her bright ideas about moving, you might have stayed sane and not moved across the big pond to that stupid city," Dracanto was losing his temper.

"Dad, it's called New York. Not 'that stupid city'. It's the financial center of the world. Besides, you're the one who moved from Venice to Istria, to Draguč."

"It's here in the neighborhood, just one hour of flight!" Dracanto replied vehemently. "And you know very well that it's your grandmother's country," he proudly drew the traditional argument-winning card.

"Yeah, fine, you're right." Dragoslav gave up reasoning with his father; he knew it was in vain.

"Apart from that," Dracanto continued although he knew that this would wrap up the

conversation, but he was sincerely worried about his son, "how are you sleeping?"

"Perfectly fine. Thanks for asking," Dragoslav replied icily. He knew where the conversation was going. It always went that way.

"Are you sure? In that small apartment ... it's not even underground," Dracanto non the less shared a portion of his misgivings.

"I'm quite sure that I sleep very well, I don't need a cave. I have a three hundred square meters apartment in the center of Manhattan. It suits my needs."

"But ... how do you treasure your gold? It's in an open space. Aren't you afraid that somebody will steal it?"

"Dad, I've told you a hundred times, I do not have gold," Dragoslav could almost see his father on the other side of line, rubbing his chest in pain at the words.

"Son ... how can you sleep without your gold?" Dracanto squeezed out desperately while anticipating the imminent storm. His one, on the other side of the line, remained calm.

"Like I said, I don't need the gold", Dragoslav hated himself because he knew how his father would react to what followed. "I have my shares, bonds, options, deposits, funds, eight tokens of net banking and a golden American Express card as well as a golden Mastercard and Visa. I keep them under my mattress and I sleep perfectly well."

"But Dragoslav, that's not NORMAL!" his father bellowed. "How can you do that to

yourself? Gold never loses its value, and now it's worth more than ever! And the best thing about it is that you can SLEEP on it!"

"I don't need GOLD to SLEEP NORMALLY!" Dragoslav finally lost it. "I've told you this a MILLION times! I'm not interested into your senile philosophy. TREASURE IS NOT COMPOSED ONLY OF GOLD AND METAL!"

"Dragoslav, listen to me! I am your father! I know what's the best for you!" Dracanto fell back on the age old parental statement.

"I'm not a CHILD anymore! I'm one hundred and eighty six years old and I am not interested in your advice any longer. You can call me again on the day you accept that!"

"Son..." Dracanto tried to continue, but the phone line went dead. He sighed heavily and plunged his face into his palms. He couldn't understand it at all, his son's behavior was actual torture to him. He wondered if his son was uncomfortable when sleeping and could not imagine how anyone could possibly relax without the daily counting of every coin in their treasure. Shares, options ... these words were as empty as their value. These couldn't be a treasure, one could not sleep on them.

"Pazin Financial Agency, Mirjana speaking," the office worker said lazily into the phone, not taking her eyes of the Cosmopolitan article explaining how to bring

passion back into a decade long marriage with two children. The voice on the other side of the line was sobering enough when she realized who is calling her. It was 'The-Weird-Guy-From-Draguć'. She put on her widest smile while nervously taking the order from their VIP client. After hanging up, she took a few moments to calm down the loud beating of her heart.

"Marica," she squealed to her colleague. "That guy contacted us again!"

"What guy?" Marica wasn't paying much attention. She was switching from Facebook to the Coolinarka online cookbook where she was picking the best out of the 73 recipes for 'chicken stew'. Unlike Mirjana, Marica knew that her husband's affection went through his stomach.

"The-Weird-Guy-From-Draguć," Mirjana hissed since it was clear that the older colleague wasn't paying attention. The mention of the VIP client was good enough to make Marica come to. Armed with many years of administrative work and a freshly acquired ECDL certificate, she took command of the situation.

"Tell me the quantity of the order!" The office chair creaked under the weight of all 38 recipes for the deer stew that Marica and her husband had tasted and eaten in 'Gourmand April'. Weekends that comprised the preparation of two full meals a day were a bit of a challenge but the quality of their spousal relationship had never been better.

“This much,” Mirjana hesitantly showed her a block with the written down order.

“Bullshit?!” uttered Marica forgetting about proper business behavior and language.

“I wrote it down correctly”, Mirjana confirmed.

“I’m calling Zagreb and you call Rijeka, Split and Osijek! If we fuck this up, we can forget early retirement”, Marica was panting furiously while taking up the phone. “Hello, Zagerb Financial Agency? This is Marica from the Pazin branch. We have code Alpha-005-Golden Luce! I repeat: code Alpha-005-Golden Luce!”

Dragons possessed few virtues. But the greatest one, all the Istrian grannies, each one with a hip more fragile than the next one, would agree, was patience. It was rumored that a dragon could sit on his gold for years without a single motion, as immobile as a rock. Among the grannies from the Far East it was even rumored that the great Buddha had learned the art of meditation from a dragon.

Dracanto disagreed with these rumors. While sitting in the basement and waiting, he was thinking about how wrong folk interpretations of his species were. Yes, it was true that dragons wouldn’t move for months, but the trick wasn’t patience. Because, had patience, they would not have any family disputes. The trick was in the dragon’s eyes which could sense subtle changes in the

growth of wall mold. To the external observer it could look like the dragon is in the deep meditation, but in fact, all the dragons were doing was watching a great action movie. They could never predict which part of the mold is going to take over the next micrometer of the wall. Dracanto understood the human obsession with epic serials like Game of Thrones quite well while poor humans had no idea what they were missing in mold.

On the other hand, dragon family disputes could take centuries. Of course, Dracanto managed to get into it with absolutely everyone in his family. And the centuries did not ease the pain; they only gave it more time to eat away at his heart. And so, despite the mold that continued to fight for every micrometer of space, Dracanto was losing his temper while waiting for the delivery.

Waving his red tail, he waited before the orifice on the ceiling through which the workers of the Financial Agency would drop the delivery. In order to be able to observe the mold, he had to return to his dragon form. Recently, he wasn’t spending much time in it. He wondered if his son Dragoslav ever returned to his dragon form anymore or if he was completely adjusted to his human shape. If so, no wonder Dragoslav slept on a human bed. Once again, he exhaled a small puff of fire feeling the pain that could only be felt by a parent.

Finally, hundreds meters above, he could hear the creaking of the brakes of an overloaded van that entered his estate in the small Istrian village of Draguč. Security guards already knew the procedure. There was a terminal on the villa's wall where they would load the bags. After that, the bags would automatically descend through dozens of top notch security systems. In the process of designing the villa, Dracanto had insisted on adding a part with swinging blades and rolling boulders to satisfy at least the minimum of traditional norms. After that, the bags would fall into a section that could be opened only from Dracanto's cave. There was no going too far in protecting a dragon's treasure.

Dracanto gave the go ahead for the descent and watched as the bags filled with hundreds of kilograms of metal cargo fell before him. Satisfied, he took them in his claws and moved to them to the hall where he kept his treasure. Dragons didn't only go for the value, they also went for quantity. Of course, Dracanto's main bed was comprised of gold, but all around it were heaps of thousands and thousands of small coins whose joint value could barely exceed one purple five hundred Euro bill. Dragons, at least the older ones, didn't acknowledge paper. The point was in the metal. That was the main reason why Dracanto was considering moving somewhere north, to Scandinavia. He knew that there the cashiers always returned the exact amount, each and every small coin. In

Croatia, there was nothing worse for a dragon than buying an item that cost a few kuna and ninety nine lipa. That one lipa ... it was his! It wasn't some negligible deficit, it was HIS small coin, and he wanted it back! However, although he would ask for it every time, he would never get it because no one felt it was worthwhile to keep such tiny, almost worthless currency.

Dracanto opened the first bag from the Financial Agency: it spilled thousands of small twenty lipa coins. Deeply pleased, he took the first coin between his claws and examined it thoughtfully and expertly. He noticed small scratches over the middle leaf of the right branch of olive tree. After that, he carefully took it with his tail and put it in the empty spot where he was planning a new heap. Grannies were definitely right about the second virtue of dragons: excellent memory. All of them knew intimately each piece of coin that they owned.

Coin by coin, minute by minute, Dracanto finally felt he himself calming down. True, he had paid for all these coins more than they were worth, but he did pay for them in paper. Stupid humans never appreciated the true value of metal. Six days later, when he finished counting, he started planning when to call Dragoslav again. Probably in a year or so. The third virtue of a dragon was tradition, at least for the older ones.

“Um... Hi, Dad. It's me.”

“Son! It's been only four months,” Dracanto was shocked.

“Well, yeah ... I wanted to call you, it's important. I would have told you sooner, but the last time we ended up on that topic again,” Dragoslav was speaking very carefully.

“OK, I'm listening,” the father replied. He hoped that Dragoslav finally came to his senses and was calling to admit how wrong he had been all along.

“Well, there is no simple way to tell you this so I will just tell you: I'm getting married.” On the other side of line, Dracanto said nothing. He tried to stare at the mold on the wall of his living room, but human eyes couldn't perform such a task. His son was only one hundred and eighty six years and he was getting married already?! Where did he go wrong as a father?

“Dad?” Dragoslav tried again.

“I'm here, son,” Dracanto replied while looking through his pockets for his wallet so he could count the small coins to calm down. “Um, somehow... it seems a bit early, you know?”

Dragoslav gave a sigh. “Dad, there's more. As a matter of fact, she's from Japan. Her name is Ryumi.”

Dracanto dropped the wallet and placed his hand on his heart. Mixing of dragon lines from the European and Far Eastern tradition? That simply ... isn't done. One moment you let them open a Chinese restaurant in the

neighborhood and in the next their dragon is plundering your gold while a Chinese traveling salesman is selling you cheap fireworks garbage. Moreover, paper money was all their fault, they invented it! The European line despised them from the bottom of their hearts for that particular stupidity. And they didn't even have wings! They just floated and were as thin as Dracanto's tail!

“Dragoslav, you are marring a Chinese?!” Dracanto shouted into the phone.

“She's not Chinese, she's Japanese!” Dragoslav replied in even higher tones.

“Same difference!”

“Oh, come on, you're just like grandfather!” This time, Dragoslav showed no mercy. He knew his father's weak spot.

“WHAT? You are comparing me with that old dragon?! How dare you?”

“I knew that this would be a mistake, but Mom **IMPLORED** me to call you,” Dragoslav said.

“Wait, SHE told you to? Since **WHEN** are you talking with **HER**?” Dracanto was shocked.

“I never stopped! **YOU** were the only one who had a problem with us leaving Italy. And now, I'm sorry, but I have a wedding to plan!”

Dracanto was again left alone on the line. Completely crushed, he called the Financial Agency.

Counting the coins, he was thinking about Dragoslav. Even if he could put

everything aside, the Chinese girl, shares and credit cards, he couldn't shake off the bitter fact that his son compared him with Dracorelli. Dracanto's father was an ancient dragon, a bigoted traditionalist who slept only in volcanoes, counted exclusively gold and ate people. Even old dragons of the Roman Age had learned that they would have to accept people and cover up in order to keep their gold. Dracanto, when he was a young son of Dracorelli's, was among the first ones to learn to speak Latin, one of the first ones who studied people, their habits and behavior.

Of course, Dracorelli had been horrified by his son's life choices. For him, people were only food that dug out and minted gold. He couldn't accept silver or cooper as new metals although the whole kingdom traded in them. Dracanto also wondered how his father even chose to mate with dragoness from Histria, a simple province of the Apennines at the time.

The pinnacle of animosities between them came about when some dragons mastered the magic of shape shifting into human form. Dracanto, a member of the new generation, had visited his father in a cave in Vesuvius to teach him the new skill. Seeing his son in human form, Dracorelli was outraged. Enraged by what he saw as his son's betrayal, he spewed so much fire he forced Vesuvius to erupt. On that night, twenty thousand people in Pompeii died and Dracanto couldn't do anything to save them. Witnessing his son's sorrow for these people,

Dracorelli disowned him and swore never to be part of the world where dragons live alongside with humans. He buried himself with his treasure deep down in the Vesuvius and closed all the entrances. Dracanto swore that he would never forgive his father the death of thousands because of his own bigotry.

Almost two thousand years later, Dracanto was wondering how his father was doing. He imagined him staring at the wall every day, his eyes intently following the motes of dust falling from the rocks of his volcanic cave.

"I could never be like him," he muttered while observing a coin with a carved tuna. "Where did Dragoslav get such an idea?" Dracanto mumbled furiously. "You're the same as grandfather," he imitated his son's voice, mocking his assertion. "His scales are still purple; he can talk to me when he's as red as I am."

In that moment when Dracanto froze. Talk to me when your scales are as red as mine, echoed his father's words from the day when Dracorelli destroyed Pompeii. Dracanto sighed, finally grasping the truth. "I really am the same as him," he felt the confession take the burden away from his heart. He wondered if he should go to his father, now that his scales were as red as his father's had been back then. He assumed that Dracorelli had by now become completely black, a legendary dragon.

He stopped counting coins and returned to his human form. He might try to speak to his own father once again, but first he had to patch things up with his son and a special dragoness in Argentina.

“Dragoslav, please, don’t make this harder for me than it already is.”

“Well, of course. But ... I’m surprised. How is it that you want to come to the wedding?”

“Ah, let’s say that I thought about it for a while and realized that these were new times. I won’t say that I like it, but the least I can do is support you,” Dracanto explained tiredly. “However, there is one thing that I really don’t understand.”

“What is it?” Dragoslav asked cautiously.

“Well, how do I put this... Do you want to have children?” Father was also careful.

“Not right now, but yes. We definitely plan it. Why does it matter?” He was confused.

“Um, you know, I do not understand if... I mean, how are you going to do it? I mean, we’re Europeans, right? So... that’s why, we’re a little bit big, right? So... then...” Dracanto was sweating.

“Dad, I don’t understand you.”

“How are you going to mate when your tail is bigger than her whole body?!” the question came furiously out of Dracanto. He

cursed himself for not managing to have that particular father to son conversation before Dragoslav left the cave for good all those years ago.

“Oh, that. Do we really have to touch that subject?” Dragoslav felt embarrassed.

“It’s just that I don’t see how that would even be possible,” Dracanto said.

“It is very simple: we do it as humans,” son replied. There was a hush on the line. Dragoslav wondered if it was his father who had hung up this time, but he then heard that the line was still active. “Dad?” he asked carefully.

“I’m here, son”, Dracanto slowly replied. “I’m counting coins; I had a bag prepared.”

“Just take your time, I’ll wait,” Dragoslav responded patiently.

“So, when do I have to fly to your place?” Dracanto asked after a few minutes.

“What exactly do you mean ‘fly’?” his son was suspicious.

“And what do you mean?” The father was confused.

“You don’t think of... wings? They have planes, you know?”

“Son, if I managed to accept that you are marrying the Chinese...”

“The Japanese.”

“Whatever,” Dracanto responded. “You will have to accept that I will fly with my wings even if I do turn up on dozen of their radars.”

Irena is another young writer we have been following from her beginnings. She says she is a geek above all, then a budding writer and emerging computer programmer. We and her university professors agree on all points, although we think she is being modest with that "budding writer" part. Folowing story won SFERA award this year, for the best short story.

Irena Hartmann

PUPPETS

“No,” the girl in the corner lies, “of course I’m not afraid.”

He looks at her chin, defiantly sticking out. Her tangled hair is scattered all over her young face. The men around her all laugh.

The darkness in the metal box is interrupted by two flickering white lines on the ceiling. He is being pressed against the cold wall, staring through the half-light. He’s shivering. The temperature is far too low. He would probably be warmer if he moved away from the wall, but this way at least he’s feeling somewhat safe. As safe as he can feel in a situation like this.

The people around him are mostly crouching in the corners. When the men’s laughter dies away, silence crawls back into the ice cold space. He feels more than hears the quiet vibrations of the machine transporting them. There are no more words. No sobs. No sighs. No one is sleeping.

He closes his eyes. Shuts them hard, trying to remember... better days. Sun. Sky. Something, anything, just to forget all this for a moment.

With difficulty he swallows and hugs his knees harder. Something in his chest is tightening, little fiery ants are biting his throat. One small decision was enough to ruin his life, even though he knows he’d do the same if he could do it all over again. He isn’t sorry for killing that man. The wrong man, protected by the wrong people. As far as he’s concerned, it was self-defense.

He puts his forehead on his knees. Swallows again. Inhales unevenly. Forces himself to exhale calmly. Maybe they’ll be merciful and just kill him. Maybe he’ll freeze to death on the way there.

He doesn’t know how long he’s been travelling – a dull buzz is smothering his sense of time. Suddenly, the engines get louder. Confined in the metal box, the passengers hear the screaming of the hull: they must be entering atmosphere. The impact of the rough landing shakes him up. He thinks he can hear steps somewhere outside, but he can’t be sure. It’s more likely just the release of the pressure locks.

Shakily, he stands up and presses himself against the wall. Now he's sure he can hear someone outside. The steps get louder and then stop. He raises his chin, straightens up – but his tightly clenched fists betray him. The white bones of his knuckles are sticking out. Solid metal doors unlock. Hinges squeal. Doors and then bright white light.

“Everybody out!” A cold voice used to issuing orders echoes through the box. A long shadow stretches out, framed in the white rectangle of light.

People are pushing each other. No one wants to go first. Somebody on the left staggers, is pushed forward. With his fists still clenched, he follows that person.

A step. Two. He steps out of the metal box into the blinding light. He raises his hand to shadow his eyes, passing by the owner of the voice. His heart is pounding, his muscles are shivering, but he keeps his mouth tightly shut. He doesn't avert his eyes.

“Walk.”

“I don't see where...” His voice is hoarse from the long silence.

“Walk!”

He frowns, but obeys. He can hear the steps of the other people behind him, along with the orders to walk forward, faster.

The metal doors slam shut behind them.

* * *

The haze from anesthesia doesn't numb the pain completely. As if in a dream, his fingers are numb, and he can't feel his arms, legs. His eyelids are so heavy, refusing to rise, but he must look. His pupil moves, slowly. White light is filling his field of view completely. His eyes are watering from... light? No. Something is wrong. He closes his eyes, trying to sort his thoughts, but fails. He takes a deep breath.

The expected sterile smell of hospital is replaced with the stench of burned flesh and blood. Suddenly, as if someone flipped the switch, he is flooded by senses which then equally suddendly disappear, deafened by the pain screaming in his joints, shoulders, face, screaming through vocal cords ripped apart...

A shadow appears in the light, someone is saying something. They're putting something on his face, he tastes something bitter and then he's floating in nothingness once more.

The screams are echoing through the sterile room. Skin is being chopped, cut, ruthlessly torn apart. The machines are stabbing him with cold forks and knives, blood is like sauce dripping from the metal down to the floor.

Plink.

Plink.

...despair? What do you know about despair? With your eyes open you're staring into the world and you do not see, you have ears on your head but you do not hear. All you know, feel and understand is a rhythm of

pain in your head and fire in your throat, fire in your eyes... And you say to yourself, don't cry, it's the only thing you have left, that little piece of human dignity in front of others...

He can't move, but tears are streaming down his face while they're digging through his inside, breaking his bones, folding and rearranging them, pushing strange rods into him to hold them. He doesn't have a voice for screaming anymore, he wants to sleep, he wants not to feel, he wants to pass out but he can't, he can't, because his skin is being stretched and pulled and split and hacked and pain, pain, pain pain pain...

...and you think, it'll be over, it'll be over once, and finally it reaches the end but then you close your eyes and you realize you cannot escape, the abyss is always there, you're in it always because you jumped once, only once, and that was enough... you dream and dream and dream, but not of better days, not of a happier past and a brighter future, but of that one moment of fear that won't leave you alone, only fear fear fear and you open your eyes and the fear is still there...

He opens his eyes. His own screams echo in his ears. A man is bending over him, not touching him. A black tear stands out on his white face.

"Are you okay?"

He shakes his head. He's gulping air but there isn't enough of it... He closes his eyes, fighting the vertigo, even though he's still lying on his side. His back hurts. He doesn't dare to touch the still fresh scars all over his

body. He doesn't want to know. Doesn't want to remember. Maybe it was all a dream, only a nightmare...

"My name is Pierrot."

Pierrot's sad face looks worried. White, his whole skin is white. That's not powder.

"Listen, I know you're in pain, I know you have nightmares. Anaesthesia holds only for a few hours of the surgery. We've all been there. But you'll get used to it, eventually. It'll get easier."

Pierrot turns around and sits on the bed across from his. Two beds, a latrine and a tap that protrudes from the wall: all the furniture in the small metal chamber.

"What's your name?"

He manages to get up into sitting position. He tries not to look at Pierrot's back and rings sticking out from his costume, equivalent to those on his own back.

"My name...?"

"You're Harlequin now, that's obvious. But if it'll be easier for you, we can call you by your real name. We'll only have to be careful around the guards."

"Harlequin?" He lifts his hand up to his face and immediately jerks it away. His skin is inflamed, irritated. His head is shaved. Harlequin... He can guess what his face looks like, but he doesn't have a mirror to check.

"Don't touch - your tattoo is fresh, too."

Something rumbles above their heads. Harlequin cringes and looks up. Pierrot raises his hand.

"Don't worry, that's just the audience entering."

Harlequin unclenches his fists. The stamping of feet is echoing through the small chamber. Cell.

"This is your first show, yes?" Pierrot is still looking at him seriously. Harlequin can feel his gaze even though he lowered his own to his fists.

"This," Pierrot stands up, "is our living space. They keep us here between the shows. They feed us twice a day. From time to time they perform check ups. It's not comfortable."

He walks up to the metal door.

"This door unlocks about half an hour before the show, around the time they let the audience in." He lifts his finger. Through the noise of the people walking through the hallway somewhere above their heads, Harlequin can clearly hear when a mechanism moves.

He lifts his eyes.

"They unlock you... us... just like that? Aren't they afraid someone'll run away?"

Pierrot smiles sadly.

"There's nowhere to run, son. The Theatre complex is small enough and built in a way that our hallways are separate from everything except the stage, closed off with heavy, always locked, always guarded doors."

Pierrot makes a move like he's going to tap his back, but he stops mid-air. He closes his hand into a fist and lowers it. He opens the door and steps through it.

"I need to warn you... Harlequins have the shortest lifespan. In that bed I've seen many men die." He shrugs his shoulders. "I hope you'll last more than them. You're holding up fine, for now."

Harlequin remains silent. What do you say to the man telling you you're probably about to die?

"Come on now, we need to go. You don't want to know what happens if we miss the beginning." Leaving the door open, he goes into the hallway.

Harlequin stands up, forcing painful joints to move. They're pinching him unnaturally from inside. He looks at his arms. Instead of normal joints, on every hand there's a bulge, a ring. He isn't sure if it's bone, metal or something else, unnaturally grown, a monstrous child of genetics. He doesn't want to know. But he knows what it's for. Everybody knows: everyone has heard of illegal Theaters all across the galaxy, places unfortunate people stepping on wrong people's toes find themselves in. *Commedia dell'arte*. A fate worse than death.

He looks up. Pierrot is already disappearing through the dimly lit hallway. After a couple of moments of silence, a few precious seconds needed to pull himself together, Pierrot's white back is followed by the black and white diamonds of Harlequin's face.

The pools of light are appearing in the dark hallway at regular intervals. At the end of the hallway, a door emerges from the dark,

then a flash of light and sudden noise. Somebody's hands are on his shoulders, on the still sensitive skin. They push him down to the floor. Painful, distorted knees groan in the dust under his weight. Some inarticulate sound escapes through his clenched teeth. Somebody is yelling something in a language he doesn't understand, it sounds like a curse, and in the background he can hear the cheering audience, the chatting of people waiting for the show to start. Somebody stretches Harlequin's arms; they are pulling cold, rough hooks on long cables through growths on his back, neck, through deformed joints, contorted hip bones.

For a moment he thinks he's going to throw up from the pain; then cables pull him up on his feet. Nothing but empty air comes out of his stomach. His eyes fill with tears, his jaw still clenched.

And then they push him onto the stage and time stops.

He cannot see from the tears, from the spotlights on the stage and lightnings of pain that flow through his body in waves, exploding in his head. He can hear the audience howling and whistling. He can hear screams. He feels a tug, a force pulling his hand. He is watching his arm involuntary stretch – consumed by pain and screams and hoarse throat and edge of unconsciousness while they're pulling him into the air on ropes hooked to his hip bones, and then they let his upper body fall down, bent into a parody of a bow. Through the haze he can see Pierrot

doing the same, on his other side is Columbine, that girl from the ship claiming not to be afraid... In the corner of his eye he sees shadows, there are more of them on the stage, but he makes no effort to remember the faces. They pull his neck and shoulders back up, and then he feels them pulling his leg, one, then other. The mob is shouting, and there are black dots dancing in his eyes. Columbine is screaming, and he wants back into darkness, he wants all of this to go away, all of them to go away, he wants to be gone. Harlequin is walking on the stage.

* * *

No sedatives. No bandages. No doctors. Only hands taking down exhausted, used up, worn bodies from the wires, throwing them into cold cells. No dignity. No humanity.

Harlequin is lying sideways in bed. Even after months of histrionics, he never got used to this feeling after the abuse. His whole body is prickling, even though the scars have almost healed and the show got somewhat bearable. That first time he was convulsing the whole night, after he threw up his dinner. Now he manages to keep it down. Mostly.

He is staring at the wall. Metal door. Pierrot's empty bed opposite his own. Pierrot is sitting on the floor in corner, with a faraway look towards the ceiling.

There is a saying in another language for theatre – *the boards that are life itself*. Surprisingly, the whole stage is built from real wood, imitating real old theatres on Earth.

The whole Theatre is old-fashioned, including its entire equipment – the only really modern piece of technology is the system moving the strings of the Puppets. Rich clients love the retro feel.

He looks up to the ceiling. Protected with a metal grid, the light is flickering. Always the same rhythm, always the same frequency. Maybe in the faulty bulb there is some secret message from the universe... Or maybe it's just another thing designed to drive them insane.

Harlequin wonders who will be next. Columbine was weak. After a few days she managed to wrap the cable all around her neck. Harlequin was watching, facing her while his own strings were dragging him around her.

The show wasn't stopped while the girl was dying on the stage.

When she stopped twitching, the wires were guiding her all over the stage, waving her dead hands. The puppeteers – or at least the system programmed to move them around instead of puppeteers – they brought her knuckles closer to Harlequin's and he could see her blue lips, eyes open but empty. The corpse was dancing, her head bobbing on her shoulders when they'd pull the string still wrapped around her neck.

The show went on.

Steps above their heads. He flinches his head in the direction of the door. He hears the mechanism activating in the lock.

It is time.

Harlequin sits on the edge of his bed and runs his fingers over his shaved scalp and neck. He doesn't flinch at the touch of the growths.

The bed squeaks when he stands up.

Hallway, rough hands, the stage. His jaw shut firmly while they're putting cables through the rings on his body. He hears the audience, hears other Puppets around him... but, something is different. He frowns... and then he sees.

He sees.

One of the spotlights flutters and then shuts down, then the second and third. There's a wisp of smoke above the colored glass. One of the technicians runs onto the stage and starts tinkering with the wires. The sparks start flying around him and he steps back and protects his face. He waves, calling someone to come and help him, yelling something. He needs to make it work, the show's about to start.

But the hole in the lighting is still there. Harlequin squints, raising his hand to shade his eyes so he can look at the audience for the first time, look at the people for whom he is being forced onto the stage every night, filled with artificial substances maintaining the structure of his new bones because his body can't do it on his own.

He looks at the audience, at the reason he wants to die every night.

His heart is throbbing but he doesn't feel that any more than he feels his fast breath or the sweat that's starting to appear and glide across his shaved, tattooed skin. A droplet

slides down his checkered face: white field, black field, white field, black field.

Sluggishly moving the wires, he wipes it off. Like in slow motion, through unbelievably thick air, through water, he gazes upon the people behind the spotlights. High hairdos, and blood red lips of women in sparkly dresses, men with jewellery made from precious rare metals found in the depths of space. Silver platters with culinary delights, drinks overflowing with steam from dry ice.

The flash of a fixed spotlight fills his pupils. He blinks the tears away and frowns, suddenly aware of the beating heart, heavy breathing, stones in his stomach. Aristocracy. Rich people. He knew the type of people attending these kinds of illegal perversions, but knowing something and seeing it with his own two eyes... Not the same thing.

His jaw is steel. *Don't think about it.*

The show starts, after the bow he's being pulled to the side – presumably, he's in the second act tonight. The Columbine that arrived with the new group of prisoners steps into the light. He can see the tears on her young face, mixed with a thin stream of blood flowing from her neck into her hair. She's fresh from surgery, and the seams have not closed yet. And the night is long.

Harlequin averts his eyes, he's trying not to look, not to think. She's nothing more than another unfortunate girl that messed with the wrong people. He closes his eyes, but even with the music and recorded dialogues he can hear her sobs slowly turning into screams.

Somebody in the audience whistles. One of *them*.

He wraps his hands firmly around the wires. He forces himself to look up. Her white collar is already soaked with blood and tears. He can't stop looking. Hypnotised, he watches as her body is convulsing, trying to get away from the pain and instead only inflicting more of it with tense wires. Did he look like that on his debut night?

That same spotlight flickers again. Harlequin takes a deep breath when a thought crosses his mind. He hears the audience laughing, clapping.

For once, he's anxious to feel the wires pulling. The wires tighten while he's bowing again in the first row, right in front of the broken spotlights. His eyesight is adjusting too slowly and he can't see – but he can imagine the faces of all those people in the audience, people paying for the show and Puppets maintenance, people paying to be separated from the criminals they're laughing at. But, apparently they aren't paying enough.

The spotlight flickers yet again. In the corner of his eye, Harlequin sees one of the technicians nervously shift from foot to foot. If something happens during the show, his head will roll. Or worse, he'll get a part in the show. And then he flinches. He saw the same thing Harlequin did. The first spark.

For the first time in months, Harlequin's teeth appear as his lips pull back. This is his night. The booming from the speakers fills his ears. They're making him wave his arms and

gesticulate something. They're making him wave his arms in the thin, cheap, breezy fabric that is his costume.

The next spark is nearly invisible, nobody even notices it, apart from him and that tech person – who looks at him, straight into his eyes. Harlequin is surprised by this more than he should be – the Puppets, nobody ever looks them in the eye. They're nothing more than some thing. But, not tonight.

He winks at the technician whose worry morphs into panic.

Something blows up in the spotlight and it shuts down. The technician runs for it, pushing away the rest of the maintenance crew, but it's too late. It's off for good. Now clearly panicking, he shoves aside the broken light, rearranging the rest of spotlights on unstable stands to fill the dark pool on the stage.

The aristocrats will not be pleased. Harlequin is. The dance took him away from the edge of the stage, but he can still clearly see what's going on there – the technician, scrambling to fix the lighting, somehow managed to get himself stuck in the entangled wiring of the spotlights, and is now pulling the wires with shaky hands.

And then, the first spotlight collapses. And then the second. More sparks fly and in the corner of the stage, a flame appears.

The working staff stirs, but the show is not stopped. Columbine in her frilly dress dances into Harlequin's hands, crying. Her

permanently bright red lips shape words, begging for help.

He firmly puts his hands on her waist. He looks into her eyes – pretty, blue.

There's no other way. If he doesn't do it now, he'll never get another chance. He wishes he could say that to her, say he's sorry, but there's no other way.

No other way. And no time. He lifts his hands up to hers, high up in air. A fraction of second too late, she realizes what he's doing and opens her mouth to scream, tugging to separate from him. But she's too tired from the surgery, too weak. With his bigger, stronger fists he grabs her thin arm, right below the strengthened joint. He looks into her eyes again, streaked with red capillaries and then he pulls and breaks the bone – and tears the skin – the blood is pouring – she's screaming – blood is in his eyes but he raises his hands to her other arm.

Small mercy: Columbine passes out from the pain. Her dress is taking on a new red color. Her arms relax, free from her strings. Her hands continue their predetermined route of the dance. Harlequin rocks her body on the rest of the strings, now quite a bit more mobile, towards the flames that are slowly but surely spreading across the stage, still burning even as some workers are running with pipes bursting with white powder and water that'll surely put the fire out within seconds.

Still, they aren't fast enough. Fortuna finally smiled on him. Columbine swings far enough for the edge of her dress to brush against the flames. When she swings over the fire first

time, nothing happens – but on the second pass, despite the blood soaking the fabric, the dress catches fire.

In the background he hears the audience fussing – some viewers are sure it's all part of the show, some see and understand something's wrong. But Puppets are replaceable, no one even tries to get Columbine down from the strings while she's burning on the stage. No one really understands yet what he's doing. There is no one stopping him.

At some point, the show course brings her back to him. He closes his eyes. No other way. He hugs her bloody, too hot body. Hungry flames spread rapidly from her dress to his thin costume. He grinds his teeth, bearing the pain. This is nothing, compared to the surgery. *Sharp knives and bone saw and cold touch of the machines and needles, sewing his skin...* He shakes his head, forcing the paralysing memories away. Nothing compares to that.

He's hot. Finally his whole trouser leg is on fire, along with his light shoes made also from some cheap fabric. He takes the shoes off, leaving them behind on the wooden boards. The wires pull him away again.

In the corner he spots a man making a sharp gesture with his hand over his throat, signalling for the break. It seems that only now he noticed how fast the flames are spreading

But it's late.

Too late.

Harlequin laughs out loud while his strings pull him off the stage. Not a merciful act of the workers – apparently the system shutdown removes all the Puppets from the stage. The stench of burning boards fills his mouth and nose along with the stink of his own burned skin and synthetic material.

The audience is now screaming, the stage and auditorium are both on fire. He can't breathe from the smoke filling his lungs but he is still unable to stop laughing. He has no way of knowing how much damage he inflicted on the construction itself and will the fire be the end of this damned Theatre.

The structure pulling the strings starts collapsing.

Harlequin finds himself hanging from a single cable, laughing at his first and last joke while the flames are devouring the place faster and faster... He spins in circles, hanging from his hand, listening to the screams of the audience, screams of all the Puppets they didn't even try to take down from strings, screams of wooden beams giving out, falling down into the flames and chaos and death.

Simple, so simple, all because of some minor neglect and Fortuna's wink.

"Fortuna! Thank you! Thank you!" He's coughing, his throat aches but he can't help himself, laughing, holding his wire and spinning like a child and laughing, laughing... And then, finally, one of the beams he's attached to snaps and the roof caves in.

* * *

Darkness.

No, not darkness. Red light. He lifts his heavy eyelids. His lungs are crackling while he's trying to inhale the ash-tasting air.

Ruins.

A memory overcomes him. All around him are the remains of fire and destruction. He sees someone's hand next to him. No bulges – someone from the audience. He coughs. His skin tightens. Burned, dry skin. Dark shadows are in the corners of his eyes.

Harlequin tries to move, and then to the left he sees the face and broken body of the Columbine. What's left of her face, anyways – burned skull, a few smears that might have been hair and eyes that were so blue... He recoils. Ash and pieces of wood roll off his back.

He pulls his hand out from underneath some beam. Broken bone, just one more in a long array of injuries painfully pulsing all over his body. There's another wooden beam over his head – probably what protected him when the rest of building collapsed. With difficulty he

climbs up through the ruin, ignoring the complaints of his half burned, exhausted body. He sits down on a still warm, warped piece of metal.

Dawn is red above him.

Someone is landing, far off in the valley. Through the fog, Harlequin sees one and then another shadow. Someone comes closer and sits next to him. A gentle touch on the bulge on his hip. Still, not gentle enough – his body involuntarily convulses.

She removes her hand immediately.

Someone is shuffling through the boards around him. They are pulling out some of the corpses. No one survived.

A smile is still flickering on his lips.

“Who are you? Do you have a name?” She is still sitting next to him.

The only thing he feels is relief. Peace.

“Harlequin. I am Harlequin.”



Iva Šakić Ristić was born in Zagreb on the outskirts of which she is currently raising two small children and one not so small husband. In the breaks between writing stories and novels. Šakić Ristić studied sociology and philosophy in her home town but has never gotten around to working in anything but the fiction writing field. She fell in love with making up people and their stories when she was a little girl and she has since published both SF and mainstream stories as well as poetry in numerous Croatian magazines. Her fantasy novel is forthcoming from the SFera Society Press

Iva Šakić Ristić

THE BONDS OF MAGIC

I was tied to the centre of the castle with chains to the pillars. The sun shone on me every day at noon through a small opening in the centre of the roof exactly above the space where they had tied me down. When it rained, it rained on me. Luckily it wasn't a big opening, and it was pretty high up, so not much rain would get directly through me. It would evaporate on the way down and the drops that did reach my skin were a salvation from the eternal heat and dirt that came out of my body.

For the first few days after the kidnapping I waited in fear for the moment they would eat me, or at least kill me. But that didn't happen; instead they would leave food and water within my reach. After that, they would leave me alone.

I got used to my new position quickly, maybe even too quickly, but I was tired of the fear, insomnia and silence. One day, I don't know which, I didn't count the days, I woke

up and I knew where I was. I wasn't surprised by my surroundings, they were familiar, accepted. I stretched out suddenly convinced that nobody was going to hurt me so I got on with breakfast. True iron shackles did press into my skin and it did hurt, the stone wasn't a comfortable bed, but all of it was bearable pain. The fear was unbearable.

I looked around the dark and empty space around me and I took that big open space for my own. There was a reason I was there, somehow I'd deserved it; I was sinful.

I laughed out loud when I had that thought, but I stifled it because it sounded a bit desperate. Surely I've sinned.

I stretched out on the stone floor and looked up into the square of the light above me. I wondered what they wanted with me, why they had abducted me; they must have had a sound reason for it.

I scan the fortress from the outside. It does not look like it would be an easy task to penetrate it. Besides, the greater challenge would present itself once I was on the inside.

There are no guards, but all the openings and windows were made for flying in and flying out, and I don't have wings. I would have to climb up the wall. That isn't so hard, but the question of how exactly I will bring her out of there remains.

I've been monitoring the fortress for three days now and all I do is count the dragons. I'm unable to estimate their actual number because they are hard to tell apart from this distance. I still don't dare come any closer. In any case, night will be best time for sneaking in because most of the dragons go out hunting by night. The only thing I can't know for sure is how many of them will stay behind, waiting.

I will cross that bridge when I come to it, for now I have to figure out how to get in and out. It's simple, I have to believe we'll get out and that she is still alive. She seemed like a stubborn and resilient person, I don't believe she would have become mature so quickly.

I couldn't think of anything smarter so I've made a rope harness for her. I could lower her down with it if I find a pillar strong enough to hold her.

This plan isn't the best one and I wouldn't risk such insanity if I didn't have to. I don't want to be a hero. I'm going only because this mess is all my fault. Next time

I'll be more careful, I won't let anyone follow me when I start calling out to dragons.

A small orange dragon brought me dinner. I smiled at him, but he didn't react in any way to my gesture of friendship. That left me angry and annoyed. What was the use of making peace with a situation when they don't care either way? They took me for no reason, just to spite that bragging fool of a merchant who steals their shells and sells them on the market.

Why they didn't take him? He is worse than me; he spites him and humiliates them, not me. What's the use of me all chained up? Chained in a cage... maybe that was it, maybe I was their newest pet.

I sighed. It was humiliating, but not as bad as all that. Pets get captured, but they are also protected from other predators, death and hunger. If I was a good pet, maybe in time they would remove my shackles. I only needed to show them that I would be good, that I wouldn't run away and I that I would respect them. Besides, it was not hard to show respect to dragons, they were so big, strong and invincible. Who could fight them anyway?

I feel helpless and exposed digging the wedges in the porous wall. I am angered by the feeling. Usually when I start a battle it is on my own terms and on my terrain. I don't

like this kind of vulnerability although I have taken every precaution camouflaging myself. I have a cape in the colour of the wall, dirty grey, a bell for dampening sounds and vibrations while I'm punching wedges, and some neutralizing water that erases all smells. That's how I take from the dragons the three things that give them advantage: their sight, smell and hearing. When you remove those then you're almost in even position. Except that they still have wings and are considerably stronger than you.

If I were to be especially good, maybe I would live longer, maybe I would even be able to make them steal some dresses and jewellery for me, maybe they would even have let me take a bath despite their hatred of water. I knew they didn't like big spaces of water that could turn off their inner fires.

That wouldn't have been a bad life at all. I would have had some sort of a position in this castle; maybe they would even have learned to like me. I knew I liked my pets... when they behaved and did what was expected of them.

I lifted my arm and the chains made clinking noise. That reminded me on how far I was from being at least somewhat respected... no, safe by some measure. I was scared by the look of my hand. It was black and sticky from sweat and grime, and it was very skinny. They fed me three times a day,

but I looked like they were starving me to death.

I rubbed my face that was surely dirty like the rest of me. I could feel my cheekbones sharp under my fingers. It made me desperate. I must have looked like a scarecrow. It was better to die than for anyone to see me like this, it was so humiliating.

A brassy purple dragon which took me passed me by in that moment and I thought I could see a glimpse of satisfaction with my condition in his eyes. He almost hit me with his tail that had a spiky ball at the end, but he withdrew it at the last moment. It seemed casual, but it swung just an inch from my face. Then he flew out into the night through the opening far above the ground that showed the dark. There were no ladders that would take me down. I would never get out of there.

I looked down and realized I got too close to the edge of my narrow rock. It dropped vertically down in the vast depths beneath the castle to where the dragons slept in caves during the day. I retreated back to where I sat before the purple dragon made me crawl back. What would happen if I fell? Would I die or would a dragon save me from falling down? Was I important to them at all? I could check that. I moved my leg and the heavy chain scrapped the rock. Nothing would happen. I would only end up hanging down above the abyss, hanging by my feet and hands until I would finally die from the strain and pain. That would be an ugly and slow death. I crouched in the middle of my

small place where the chains didn't strain my wrists.

Time would pass very slowly for the rest of my life. I shed a few tears, but not many. There was no point in crying, it served nothing. I had to embrace my new life. This was it, my life. I considered trying to win over the small orange dragon to avenge me to the purple dragon. I could have done that, it wasn't not like I hadn't done that sort of thing before. I would fail only if dragons proved to be superior to people even in that regard. It wouldn't be surprising. I was starting to think that all those stories of slaying dragons were just that, stories. Lies.

I get myself over the edge with significant strain and I get deeper in, sliding beside the wall. First I look around to see where I can anchor the harness. If I don't find a spot there is no sense in moving forward and giving that girl false hope. Or feeling guilty enough to do something stupid that will get me killed. That would be bad. If I don't find a place for the anchor I'll just go back down and sign in another unpaid debt for myself. My debt is already fairly big, but what can you do.

Sadly, above the opening there is a round dusty pillar that looks firm, it is perfect for my purpose. I go to do my other task, to find the girl. It is surprisingly easy to find her, but she is very difficult to recognize. If it weren't for the dress she is wearing I would

just pass her by. She stares into nothing with a flat expression on her face that is covered with ashes. She isn't crying, or screaming, there is no sign she has done anything like that recently. There are no traces of struggle on her wrists, only messy hair, nothing else. If she wasn't so skinny I would think she is fine here and would leave her.

I would love if I didn't even go after that stubborn grumpy girl, but my debt was dangerously high, and I'm not sure I could stand the weight that leaving her would put on me. I was careless in paying off my debts and they were already a pretty heavy weight straining my back. That old debt weight proved to be making problems with cons, because my words didn't flow as smoothly as they used to and people started to regards me with suspicion although my debt weight was invisible to their eyes. That's why I have to save this girl. I know I won't be able to utter another lie without falling down on my back if I leave her here.

Debts are fine as long as they don't become visible. If they go visible you are as good as dead, because nobody will do business with you anymore. It would be smart to pay off some debt after this, some smaller ones that won't cost me a lot, so that I don't have to run around like a fool towards the danger. As the matter of fact, I'll surely pay of some of my debts.

It took me awhile to recognize the man before me; it took me awhile just to realize it was a man, and not some new sort of dragon. It took me even longer to hear what he was saying.

"Everything is all right," he said with a whisper, sharp, not really convinced, certainly not comforting. "I'll get you out of here, just be quiet."

He wasn't quiet as he banged on the chains breaking them, separating the rings on my wrists from the chain that was fixed to the wall. Only when he started to work on the fourth chain did I finally realize what he was doing. The fool was trying to save me and take me back to my crumbling cottage so I could live as peasant! And I could stay and live as a queen in a castle. A dirty queen, true, but surely there would be opportunities for a bath.

Nevertheless, soon there a dragon would come a long to fry him up. I would not assist him so the dragon would not incinerate me as well. He had no chance against a dragon.

"What are you doing?" I spoke up sharply and loud. "Why haven't any dragons appeared?"

"Pst", he put his harsh hand over my mouth looking petrified. Did the Fool just now realize where he was?

It was too late, she was heard. I should have gagged her mouth before I began. I should have known she would talk, but who could predict everything? She looks so dull and without reaction, like she has forgotten how to talk.

I sighed. It is what it is, I just hope there won't be too many of them. Luckily her voice is pretty thin from lack of use so it didn't go far. Maybe luck is on my side. I draw out my sword and kiss the blade. Don't fail me now; it's time for killing. Just before that...

He lifted the fabric and I realized. He came to kill me so that dragons can't tame me. I could understand that, with that I could come to peace.

Instead of choking me, he put a mop over my mouth and tied it.

"So you can't scream" he whispered and turned his back to me "your voice attracts them."

I didn't notice that. I had yelled, moaned and shouted before, not for particularly long, but still. They did not come any closer, they just stood on the sides and watched me from the dark.

The first dragon is comfortably small, my size, inexperienced. I get him from aside, while he is jumping from the dark; he didn't even know what came over him.

Big hero, no doubt; he kills from behind like a coward. That wasn't admirable, a small one like that I could take myself... not that I would want to.

The second dragon is a challenge, he stands above me, a whole meter higher than me. I have to catch my breath bending and manoeuvring, but I finally manage to plunge my sword into his chest.

True, this one was bigger, but then again he wasn't anything special. So what if he did kill that dragon, the next one he surely won't, the next one will shatter him into pieces like he deserves. No one can kill a grown dragon.

The third one I see from a far and I go down one level to greet him. This will be difficult. It has been a long time since I've faced such a big specimen, he rises over four meters tall and his tail is covered with spikes.

Even I was shocked by the sight of the third dragon. My eyes widened despite the lack of emotion I grew accustomed to. I was even sorry for the fool who did not know he was already dead as he walked across the floor like he had a shoot.

I stop. This will be a good place for it. There is a boulder short enough to jump on. I avoid his burning flame and am quick on my legs thanks to thick soles of my shoes that were made for these kinds of situations. Luckily for me, big size is as much a disadvantage as an advantage.

He almost gets me with his tail.

Why did he keep trying so hard, his death inevitable? So much sweat and effort for nothing and he could just have given up and put himself out of his misery. He actually acted like he had a chance, like he could ever be the one to prevail.

Come on boy, lower your head, you can do it, just try to catch me, aren't I irritating? You could easily beat me, just put down that fire breathing mug and you'll get me permanently.

I almost turned my head away not to watch him die. He stopped. I didn't look away, if I'm going to live here I better get used to a sight like that so I can use it for myself. The dragon put his head down to turn him into ashes, but then the man jumped. He jumped? I couldn't make out what I was seeing, the whole world turned upside down. The man jumped, the dragon's head followed

him and the dumb dragon exposed his neck. Obviously the merchant was expecting that, but didn't the fool know that dragon shells are like diamond and that they were impossible to cut through from that position? It as easy to do it from the belly but... he swung his sword and... He killed the dragon. He cut through the dragon's neck like it was butter, all but separating his head from his body. The merchant's hands were sprayed with the blood of the dragon. I looked dully at the dragon's wings twitching while life was leaving them. At least the dragon's blood will eat up his hands and the dragon will be avenged.

I stared without understanding. His hands were not disappearing. Instead they started to work on breaking the last chain.

"Get up", he whispered but I didn't understand. I was chained here, I was not allowed to leave. My place was here now. At any moment the purple dragon would be there, swinging at me with his heavy tail.

She just stares at me, blankly. I am too late, she has gone mad.

I clench my teeth in frustration and put her over my shoulder. I can barely get to the opening, with all my debts it isn't easy to take even so light a weight like hers, but at least it will get easier later on.

I put her into the harness. She doesn't help. With strain, I lower her down letting go of the rope bit by bit as she descends against the wall. I am surprised she isn't complaining,

but then I remember that I gagged her mouth. That was a good call.

It takes awhile before she reaches the ground. When I finally join her she sits there without moving. I will not carry her to the forest. I make her get up by pinching her and pushing. I have to push her all the way there. She stumbles like I am not rescuing but kidnapping her. We don't get far when it dawn breaks. I sigh. It is what it is. We'll have to lay low. The dragons are returning.

I push her to the ground into the roots of a tree. I'm not exactly gentle because she is starting to annoy me very much. I cover us with a robe the colour of the ground. I cover us with neutral water. After that I lie down and wait for the flying to stop.

She smells awfully of fear, sweat, blood and other womanly smells. I can barely breathe under the robe. I manage to stay still only because of the sound of the wings above us. I have to do something about her scent; neutral water isn't enough for this. She leaves a trail behind us that is more easy to follow than a trail a platoon of soldiers not caring about being followed would leave.

As soon as the last swing of wings disappears in the distance I roll away from the robe and from her, to be able to breathe. She shows no reaction, even when I release her mouth, she stays silent.

"We have to give you a bath," I say to her. "There's a river nearby."

She doesn't respond but she lets me push her without resistance. We progress

annoyingly slowly. There will be no chase by day, but if should any dragon decide to risk the disadvantage of daytime, we will be the easiest catch ever, our bones will be his. She stops on the edge of the river. I don't have any other ideas, and am somewhat angry at her because my weight is not getting any lighter despite all the effort I've put into this rescue. So I push her in. She falls and her head goes under.

The water is freezing so she surges out from the stream screaming and catching her breath. I am satisfied with this sign of life so I continue gathering the wood for the fire. She will need the heat when she climbs out.

"You could have told me to get out of the clothes first," she growls when she finally manages to drag herself out to the shore. She is like drowned cat, her dress soaked.

"The dress smelled as bad as you did, they would sense you from a far."

She snorts.

"Like they won't find me anyway", she replies and takes the blanket.

She gets out of her wet clothes so I spread them around the fire. She shivers under the blanket.

I stared at my clothes scattered on the rocks and branches. Why did he bother? Didn't he know that we were already dead? Did he really think that he could get away from the dragons?

After awhile I stopped shivering. I felt better. The stream was icy, but it felt good to be clean. It was refreshing to feel the scent of the fire, the water, the oncoming storm. They were good smells, I got tired of being immersed into the cloud of my own scents that I couldn't control or contain. That's why I accepted the bread when he gave it to me. I took the other food, too. I ate like they kept me hungry all that time. I drank water until I got scared I would break in half.

"I don't understand" I spoke up reluctantly feeling the pain in my belly "how I can eat so much. They did feed me."

"They gave you food for repressing hunger and drying out."

"What?" it took me awhile to focus him, I was so sleepy and the ground was so soft, soft as a bed.

"They gave you food without water so you would get as dry as possible."

"Why?" my eyes were shooting down.

"So you would burn better", he tossed a dry branch into fire that was hardly burning because of the wet log in it.

That sounded silly, why would I burn? I fell asleep before I managed to find an answer to that question. I dreamt about fire, teeth and blood on my hands.

I woke up suddenly. The fire was out. It was dark, and I was alone. That scared me. He had left, that slimy, little man had left me alone in the middle of nowhere. I hugged myself and that reminded me that I was naked. My clothes were dry so I put them on.

Beside them there was a dagger. I took it and felt safer with it in my hand.

So you could burn better, I heard the words repeated in my head, *to burn better*. It meant that they were planning to burn me.

There was no hope for me there, only painful death. They had tricked me, they would have never kept me as a pet and I would have never gotten the chance to avenge myself on the purple dragon for the humiliation and fear.

Every sound frightened me. I had to get out of there, but I was held back by the hope that the little man hadn't left, that he wasn't a total jerk.

I followed him after his play in the village during which I had made fun of him. I had challenged him to prove himself. He announced that he will get shells of the dragon; we just had to say which colour we wanted.

Purple, the folks said, mocking, convinced he would never return.

I followed him on a of whim, I was being stupid. I followed him because I bet my friends that this one already had some shells in his bag and was going to paint them the right colour. I followed him for quite awhile; I should have realized that he wasn't lying when he went into the fields and up the hill. I should have, but I was too stubborn and childish, I wanted to see the trick performed. I loved tricks. That's why I didn't run away when he started to make summoning sounds while placing live bait – rabbits – on the

ground. A dragon wouldn't look twice at dead one.

I didn't know what came over me when the purple claws closed around my waist and tore at my skin. Then I realized that I was in the air. I screamed until my voice disappeared.

I froze when I finally heard the wings.

"Cover yourself, you fool!" I heard a whisper from the darkness beside me. "Cover yourself with the blanket."

I obeyed and covered myself, hands trembling. How could I be safe under an ordinary blanket that isn't fireproof?

"Be still", there was a whisper again, this time a bit closer. "Don't even tremble, they see movement."

I went still; the wings flapping above us. At least I had practiced stillness lately. When the flapping disappeared, I peeked out from the cover of the blanket. It was already dark outside. It was scary.

"How about some fire?" I whispered. Somehow I lost the desire to be found.

"Do you want to make fireworks for welcoming them? Here, eat some more", he pushed a bowl into my hands; it was full of some kind cold gruel. "As soon you gain some weight, it will become harder for them to find you by scent."

"Why haven't they seen us under the blanket?" I wanted to keep talking, the silence was full of noises.

"Because it's the same colour as the ground. You'll have to learn how to cover

your tracks from now on because you will forever remain on their kill list, especially with those shackles."

"Well, we'll just take them off", I spun my hand around remembering that I still have them. I was used to by now to their touch and their weight.

"I don't know about that. Those are magical shackles. When the victim is brought to the dragon fire the bond that closes them melts away. The rest of the shackles are made of thicker metal so they stay whole as they fall off the completed offering."

I felt the burning on my wrist beneath the metal. I didn't want to know these things.

"They wanted... wanted to burn me alive?" I couldn't hold my tongue still.

"Yes", he said evenly. "You would have been their spring sacrifice so their year be without injuries. That is how they ensure themselves against annihilation."

"Now they'll take someone else", maybe I should get back, I'm not so important.

"No", he took an empty bowl from my hand and rinsed it. "They can't do anything without the shackles. They were forged in ancient times, when men were willing to do favours for dragons because they feared them so much. That is why they will look for you a bit more ardently than they would any other, ordinary prey.

I panicked and tried to get them off. Tried to push my fingers between my skin and

shackles, but I couldn't t. I took a dagger but he stopped me.

"That's a dragon shell dagger. It will kill a dragon, splitting his armour, but it won't go through that metal."

I stared at him.

"That's how you managed to kill a dragon."

I saw him nod; he was just a dark shade in the darkness.

"Here they come again", he said. I had heard nothing. "Let's cover ourselves and shut up."

We spent the night without fire. I shivered from the cold, I almost missed the heat of the dragon castle. But when I thought about it some more, I decided that I would love the cold and the moist from now on.

Before dawn I was exhausted. He slept as though we weren't sought by monsters with wings and giant jaws. They didn't look so scary while I was near to them, but as the night went on they seemed to get bigger and bigger, scarier, invincible. I squeaked out of fear. There was a new sound behind me. I froze.

"Come, come, little girl!" I heard a tremor, hiss of barely understandable words "I can smell you and your fear. You know you can't hide from me. And why would you when you have already given up. You've agreed. I could see that in your eyes. We should have sacrificed you right away, as soon as you've gave in. But the others didn't want to hear me out and now the younglings are dead."

I breathed through my dry mouth, resisting the shivering. The merchant slept undisturbed by the hiss of the dragon voice that very much resembled the wind. I was alone. I didn't dare call to him. The Dragon would surely manage to burn me before he would be able to make a move. What would be the point anyway? I would only be sharing my destiny with him. That wouldn't be fair after what he risked for me. I remained silent, ready to embrace death, along with the kidnapping and the stinky castle.

"Come on, come on, move, you can't hide forever!" he spoke again and I was surprised to find he could not see me.

He had a weakness, he couldn't see me! And he didn't know where I was.

"It's silly to resist", he kept talking. "You've realized that yourself in the fortress. You were wiser than the rest of them, you agreed right away. The others didn't see that because the others before you took forever to give up, to surrender. They held on till the last drop of the water in their body. The conviction that someone would rescue them was stubborn and strong, they believed someone would come for them. Of course, nobody did, who would be so stupid to climb our walls?"

The merchant that sells dragon shells climbed that wall and killed three dragons, that didn't look stupid at all.

"Come on", he continued coming closer. My smell would betray me, I should have washed better, but it was late for that

now. "Come with me, you are the perfect victim, your acceptance will echo throughout a whole decade, if not century, because you know we are stronger, faster and smarter."

I squeezed the handle of the dagger in my sweaty palms. I felt silly because of its size. There was nothing I could do with it, I was doomed.

"Come out!" I could sense his heat in the dark that was growing thinner. He was close, really close. "There is no way you can get rid of those shackles. No village or town will take you in with them on, they won't risk it. You are dead anyway, at least you can die for something."

I felt the pulse in my temples, the dark retreating. The light frightened me, but it gave me courage, too. I would not give in just like that, not just so, I won't give my life away without a fight.

"Oh, there you are!" he said just beside me and I realized the dragon had found the merchant, not me.

I threw away my blanked without a second thought. I showed myself like an offering. The dragon turned around with surprise and then grinned at me. It was the purple dragon that always took a moment to frighten me with his tail, teeth and breath. He enjoyed my fear and defeat. He took his time, I wasn't a threat. My heart hardened. I waited, hiding the knife under the blanket.

He approached within an inch from my face. I didn't flinch back. He looked into my eyes.

"Something has changed", he said.

I didn't wait any longer, I didn't think. I swung the dagger straight up and penetrated his shells underneath his chin, sending the dagger deep into his skull. He screamed out, but he couldn't open his jaws. I didn't let go of the dagger. I didn't care if his blood would burn my skin; I wanted to be sure he was dead. The noise finally woke up the merchant. He jumped up and in a moment he was by my side. The dragon's massive body was still resisting and twitching, but not for long. Soon the dragon crumbled and I had to let go of the dagger. The dead dragon fell to the ground beneath my feet, spraying me whole. I was soaked with blood, but my skin didn't burn. I felt nothing.

The merchant jumped and grabbed me by my shoulders, dragging me away from the body.

He took me to the river to wash myself. I heard a strange sound, as if something fell into the grass, and then something else. He stopped and turned around.

"The shackles", he said "they fell off."

I lifted my bloodied hands. There were ugly yellow bracelets burned into my skin where the shackles had clenched to my skin. I cried, while he ducked and removed shackles from my legs.

The blood melts down the ties between the metal and the skin, between metal and metal, it washes down the magic that ties. Her resistance redeemed her, the sacrifice has to

be willing. She doesn't turn around to see the shackles that had dropped in the grass behind her. She keeps going forward, entering the river without any reaction to the cold. I stay crunched in the same spot amazed by this resolution.

Just when I think I will have to drag her out, she comes out, all blue from the cold, but not shivering at all.

"I'll need new clothes, I'll leave these here" she says looking above the dead dragon, not at it.

I give her my spare clothes, she receives them without hesitation. I take the dagger from the dragon's head and wipe it clean. After a short pause I put it in its shell and give it to her. She takes it and puts it in her belt with ease, like it's her own.

"Take the shackles" she says when we are ready to go.

"Are you sure?" I find it hard to contradict her; she has gained a new strength and serenity.

"I am" she says shortly so I take the hard metal in my full backpack.

I am a bit afraid to touch the metal. We should have left them behind; the dragons will look for them. It takes me some time to realize we're not going towards her village.

"Aren't you going home" I am scared. What will I do with her? She'll only get in my way, and women attract trouble, everyone wants them.

"I am", she says and I feel relieved "but first we must get rid of the shackles."

She doesn't need to remind me of them. My backpack is digging into my shoulders. It feels like they are becoming heavier and heavier. She wore them with such ease.

"Will you sell them?" I ask when the sun is already high in the sky.

I am covered in sweat and it seemed that at any moment I might topple onto my back to be left there like a helpless turtle. This endeavour did not lighten my burden.

"No" she doesn't explain further.

There are no villages in the direction she is going, there's only... a lake. We have been able to see it for some time now, but I wasn't aware of it because of the fog covering the horizon. She is going straight towards it and stops by the edge of the water just when I thought she would march straight in.

I take my backpack off and lean on my knees, breathing heavily. Only then does she look at me. It is like she has forgotten I am behind her. Her wrists are shining with a yellow-brown glow and I have an impression that they will not heal.

"We'll throw them in", she says cheerfully, like it's the best idea ever.

"Why?" I manage to voice my anger at her new madness. "They are so heavy that we'll manage to throw them a meter from the shore and the waves will bring them back within reach in no time."

"Heavy?" puzzled, she reaches into the backpack and takes out the metal circle as if it was made of wood. She turns it in her hands.

"Maybe it's because I've overcome them", she says thoughtfully "but for me they have no weight anymore."

She spins and hurls the shackles far out into the lake.

I looked on, amazed as they flew towards the lake. When it splashed into the water, it made hissing sounds and steam went up as if the shackles were heated. I clapped my hands. After that, I threw in the other three parts one after another.

I felt light as a bird when the last one disappeared under the surface. I shouted out with joy and danced, feeling like I was flying. It was wonderful to be alive. I didn't know that before, just how wonderful it was.

Then I was exhausted by all the excitement so I fell down to the ground as tears poured down my face. The merchant hesitated shortly but then decided to come closer. He put his hands around my shoulder.

"Thank you", I said at last "for saving me."

"You saved yourself", he said with conviction and I believed him.

When the sun touched the horizon we went back towards the village. As we walked he gave me instructions what herbs to use to hide myself from dragons.

"But", he finished his lecture "I think they will stay out of your way in the future because they can't break you anymore."

"You really think so?" I was surprised.

"I know so", he stopped. We were close to the village.

"It will be best if you don't go in with me", I said "it will be hard enough to explain my absence, the state of my clothes and my wounds without you. You would be an excellent target for blame."

"Probably", the merchant said, hitting a rock with his foot. "What will you tell them?"

"Nothing really, I will let them to make up a story they can live with."

"You won't brag about your victory?" I am surprised.

"No", she shook her head without hesitation. "They wouldn't understand, it would only frighten them."

"Probably... Well, goodbye" I turn to leave.

"Hey" she stops me.

"Yes?"

"What's your name?"

I laugh surprised and take a step back extending my hand towards her.

"Bruno."

"Adel", she squeezes my hand firmly.

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise... You know, maybe I will pass by again in a few years."

"It will be nice to see you, my friend, you'll tell me stories" her mouth smiles sharply, a smile that will surely provoke fear and respect in the future. "This is yours", she extends the dagger with the handle turned towards me.

"No", I step back. "No way, you've earned it."

She nods seriously and puts it in its place. She pulls in me by my shoulders and gives me a kiss on each cheek. After that, she turns around and marches back to her village with determination and without looking, like a soldier after a battle he has won.

I turn towards the night. The other village isn't far away. I should be there before dawn. I set my feet to that road, too. After the nightlight of the village can no longer be seen behind me, I realize that my step is light and that there is nothing pressing against my shoulders. If I gave another debt back, I might fly.



BEMMET

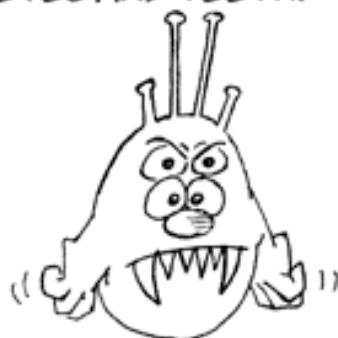
by DARKO MACAN



I MET SOME HOLLYWOOD PEOPLE THE OTHER DAY. "A REAL ALIEN - THE REAL THING", THEY SAID. THEY TOOK ME ALONG AND ADDED: "OF COURSE, WE'LL HAVE TO MAKE YOU UP A BIT!"



FIRST, THEY WEREN'T SATISFIED WITH MY EYES AND TEETH.

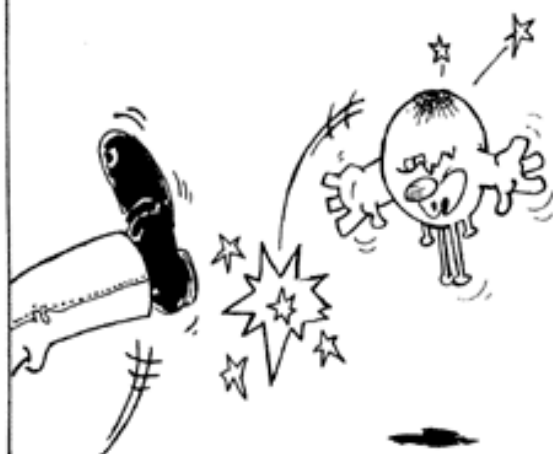


THEN THEY DIDN'T LIKE MY NOSE AND ANTENNAE.

NEITHER MY SKIN NOR MY HANDS PLEASED THEM... AND A FEW OTHER THINGS.



NATURALLY, THEY CONCLUDED THEY DIDN'T NEED ME WITH ALL THAT MAKE UP.



I YELLED IN VAIN THAT I'M THE "REAL THING". "SURELY WE KNOW THE REAL ALIEN WHEN WE SEE ONE", THEY SAID.

SO MUCH FOR HOLLYWOOD.



MACAN 88

Twenty years of the SFeraKon Annual Short Story Collection

Years counted by: Mihaela Marija Perković



Croatians have been writing genre fiction for a while now⁽¹⁾ and one of the major factors in continuing this tradition today is the work of the Zagreb based SF society SFera. SFera established the first SF literature award in what was then Yugoslavia, the SFERA Award. The Society continues to raise new genre authors and artists via its annual Art and Literature Competition for Children and Young Adults in which more than a thousand of the country's elementary and high schools eagerly participate. But the biggest influence SFera has had over the years, besides having been for years the *only* place in the entire country and possibly the region, where writing was *taught*, was its small press project: the SFeraKon Annual Short Story Collection.

"Tatjana Jambrišak and I started the Collection because enough writers had emerged at the SFera writing workshops. The

publication of the first one did not coincide with SFeraKon and the sales were abysmal. There never would have been another one had we not been given the Scottish collection Shipbuilding at the Glasgow Worldcon. I realized how awesome a distribution channel this was and we adopted it," says Darko Macan who served as editor-in-chief of the Collection for the first decade during which not only did the Collection become the place to be published in Croatian SF but it inspired other Croatian conventions to do the same. Not all of them managed to go beyond the first issue but several have stood the test of time – the IstraKon Collection, the Festival of Fantastic Literature Collection and the Marsonicon Collection.

During the Eighties, a magazine called *Sirius*, which had a circulation of some tens of thousands, was the place where everyone got their monthly fix of SF. In it, Croatians, as

(1) Should you want to know more, google Aleksandar Žiljak and his essay on the subject! :)

well as authors from all over former Yugoslavia, had a chance to see their name and their stories published alongside the biggest names in SF, such as William Gibson or Isaac Asimov. Alas, the award-winning magazine quietly died not long before the country SFera was established in died also, rather less quietly. This left a hole the SFeraKon Annual Short Story Collection filled – a place where local authors can publish. It did, however, take a little bit of time.

Most authors still wrote under a heavy influence of their American and British counterparts so there were a lot of Johns and Marys in space in Croatian stories. The editors of the Collection insisted some Gorans and Marijanas start flying rocket ships and dealing with aliens in Zagreb and this was a condition which each story had to satisfy in order to be considered for publication. And it is the reason some of the Collections have Zagreb in their titles, like *Zagreb 2004*, *Zagreb 2094* or *Zagrob*, a play on words with the name of the Croatian capital and the Croatian word for "grave" – *grob* – for the first SFeraKon Collection that had a theme. (*Zagrob* was also the first horror short story anthology ever published in Croatia.) Although writers embraced the idea

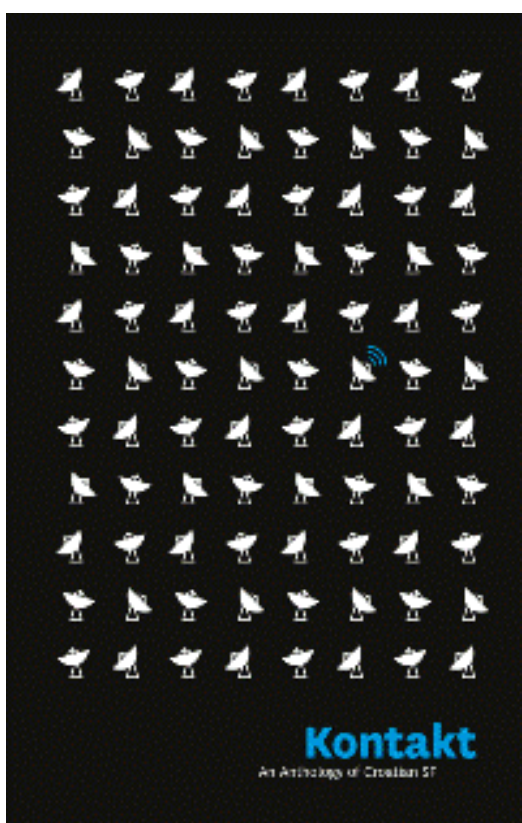
of local characters and places with enthusiasm, the readers were less eager to follow. But follow they did.

Ten years after the first SFeraKon Collection was published, the doyen of Croatian SF, editor, comics author, publisher and award-winning SF writer, Darko Macan resigned as editor. *"I am very proud the Collection has continued without me, mostly because of*

Tatjana. It was very important to me to create a tradition and this does not happen if you take a position and then refuse to ever give it up. It happens if someone else recognizes the value of what you are doing and takes it over, continuing it, as things tend to happen at SFera," says Macan.

At SFeraKon 2014 the Collection celebrated its 20th birthday with another themed

edition: *Ukronija* was all about alternate realities. After a number of years in which current co-editors Tatjana Jambrišak and Darko Vrban were joined by a number of guest editors – such as Mihaela Marija Perković for the fantasy themed *Dragon's Golden Scrolls*, which was also the first ever Croatian fantasy short story anthology – writer Ivana Delač joined the editorial team permanently as of 2013.



"It adds to my workload significantly but I enjoy every step of the process, especially working with authors on their stories as we as a team try to ensure that the possibility to publish a story in the SFera Annual Short Story Collection continues to be prestigious and therefore a strong incentive for Croatian authors to write quality science fiction and fantasy," says Ivana Delač. Three editors for one book a year may seem like much, but there are no fiction writers in Croatia who manage to live of their art. All of them make a living by other means and the SFeraKon Annual Short Story Collection is and has always been, a entirely volunteer effort.⁽²⁾

An effort that culminated in 2012 at Kontakt, the Zagreb Eurocon when two collections were published. The regular annual collection in Croatian in which stories were chosen as they always are: by the editorial team among all the stories submitted to the competition. And then there was the collection called *Kontakt*.

"The idea of a collection of Croatian short stories in English to be published for the Eurocon in Zagreb was a logical program item from the beginning of the planning phase. The book was supposed to introduce some of the best Croatian authors with some of their best stories, best translatable into English. The selection was done by Darko Macan, the translations either by the authors

themselves, or translators. The translation reviews were done also by several different people in order to achieve the twelve different "voices" for the twelve selected stories. That was the greatest challenge in making the book: to show the diversity not only of authors and stories, but also the writing style and tone of each individual author, but in English," says editor Tatjana Jambrišak.



(2) The SFeraKon Annual Short Story Collection is funded with the kind help of the Zagreb City Council and the Croatian Ministry of Culture.

SFERICA AWARDS

or How Croatian Fandom Remains Young

Reported by: Mihaela Marija Perković



Croatian fandom is young and by that we don't mean that it was born yesterday but that the average age at a Croatian convention is twenty something. (And depending on the convention, it may be less.) There are a lot of factors contributing to this, including the fact that Croatian fandom members are very inclusive, so Star Trek and Heinlein fans mixing with fanzine editors, Dr Who fans award winning writers, gamers and LARPers is not an unusual or rare sight.

But the main reason Croatian fandom has a steady influx of young fans, writers, illustrators, editors and artist is because we make an effort to raise them. How? By way of the SFera Annual Literature and Art Competition for Children and Young Adults. For thirty years now, members of SFera have been dedicating one of their winter Tuesday meetings to brainstorming and coming up with themes and topics for this competition. The topics are divided into two separated categories – Art and Literature and then subcategorized by grades. There are two themes for each category (Art and Literature)

for the four years of high school, and two themes for first four years and second four years of elementary school each. Altogether, there are twelve categories, assigned to appropriate age groups.

After the year's topics are chosen, the president of the jury, Ivana Delač, an award-winning author who earns her living as a school psychologist, checks them and compares against the ones already used in previous years. Then she writes a memo containing the topics, the rules of the competition and an invitation to participate and sends it to all the elementary and high schools in the country. Not all schools respond but with presentations to School Librarian Societies and by placing articles about the competition in daily newspapers as well as magazines aimed at school children, SFera has attempted to spread the word about the competition and increase its visibility. A school in Istria who had sent and won a number of SFERICA awards (what we call the award given out to the children, a name which is a diminutive of SFERA, the name of

the oldest national award in the genre) due to the great interest of the both children and teacher there was awarded a SFERA Award for Special Achievement. It is slow work but progress is visible: every year more and more entries are sent.

The president of the SFERICA Jury assembles volunteers who help her sort and judge works of art and read stories and novella that arrive as entries to the SFera Annual Literature and Art Competition for Children and Young Adults. In 2014 there were over two thousand entries; 1600 works of art, and 700 literary works.

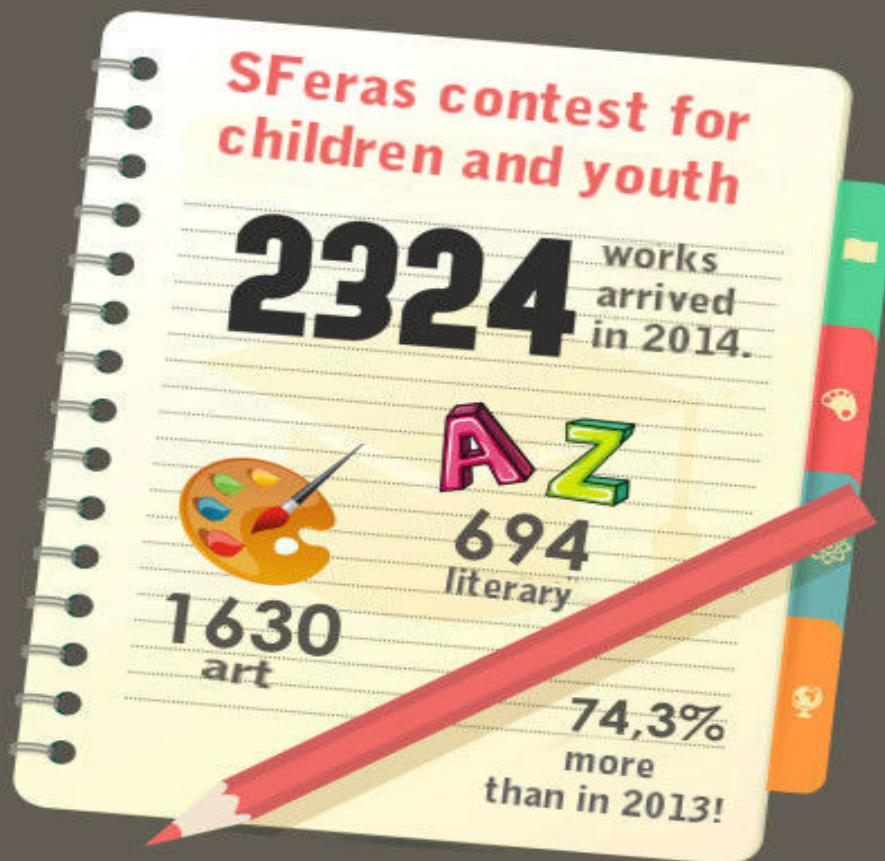
The winners are awarded books donated by the publishers exhibiting in the Dealer's Room – as long as they donated for the awards, their stands and space at the convention are free of charge.

More than half of the underage winners come to receive the SFERICA Awards in person, at the central event of the biggest Croatian convention, SFeraKon, taking place in Zagreb, in spring. It is the same event where the SFERA Awards, the most prestigious genre awards in Croatia, are given out. The equivalent of this would be if Children and Young Adult Awards were given out first at the Nebula/Hugo Awards Ceremony at a Worldcon. Yes, we take our kids seriously.

It is the non-fandom parents who are at times difficult to convince to let their children attend conventions. But, since all the SFERICA winners and their parents (and however many guests they want to bring to the Awards Ceremony) are not required to pay membership for SFeraKon they in effect get to have a free convention sampler – a Saturday afternoon and evening at the biggest Croatian geekfest. And at this geekfest, the Awards ceremony is not the only thing parents and kids get to enjoy. All the winners in the Literature category have their work published in a special edition of *Parsek*, the SFera fanzine, while the winners in the Art category have a special Art Show of their own for the duration of entire SFeraKon.

Moreover, one stream of programming is tailored to kids of all ages and that Saturday before the award ceremony is when most of the kids' workshops are happening. SFera has, over the years, found that a number of SFERICA winners will come back, with their parents' blessings and sometime with their parents, to the con as visitors, and later on as volunteers and program participants. This is why SFeraKon is able to boast volunteers as young as 14 and lecturers as young as 12.

Which is the golden age of science fiction anyway.



unpacking and sorting the artworks



most active age groups:

- 1. - 4. grade, elementary school
- 5. - 8. grade, elementary school
- high school

most popular themes:



GARDEN FULL OF SECRETS



ALIEN IN THE WARDROBE

9061

Total number of works arrived to the contest in the last 6 years

≈

inhabitants of the town of Porec

Gotta catch 'em all!

Dear reader,

If you missed previous english issues of **PARSEK**, fear not!

You can download your PDF copy from our site archives;

<http://parsek.sfera.hr/arhiva-pdf/5/>

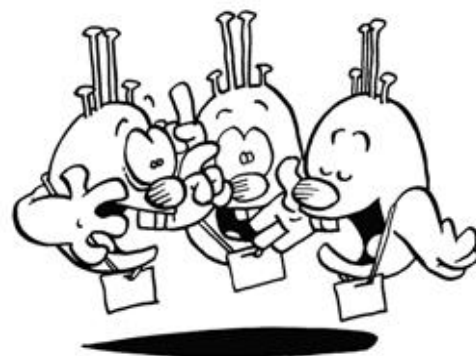
(yeah it is in Croatian, but just browse for issues labeled "*in English*")



We are looking forward to your feedback
on our e-mail: parsek@sfera.hr

Enjoy!

Croatian SF Conventions Calendar



Istrakon

When: end of March

Where: Pazin

Organiser: Albus

<http://www.istrakon.hr/>



Domikon

When: end of August

Where: Donji Miholjac

Organiser: KMDM, UDAR

<http://domikon.kmdm.hr/>



SFeraKon

When: end of April

Where: Zagreb

Organiser: SFera

<http://sferakon.org/>

<http://sfera.hr/>



Rikon

When: mid-October

Where: Rijeka

Organiser: 3. Zmaj

<http://www.3zmaj.hr/riikon>



Marsonikon

When: beginning of June

Where: Slavonski Brod

Organiser: Orion

<http://www.marsonikon.com>



SF week

When: beginning of December

Where: Zadar

Organiser: University of Zadar

<http://sfweek.org/>



Liburnikon

When: end of August

Where: Opatija

Organiser: Kulturni Front

<http://www.liburnicon.com>



