

PARSEK

WORLDCON
2017



PARADOXICAL-SECULAR FANZINE PUBLISHED BY SFERA

Dear reader,

It has become a tradition to hand over editing of English Parsek issues to guest editors. They bring fresh ideas and raise a bar for us who edit regular Croatian issues. In the last Eurocon issue Irena did a great job with Barcelona stories and this time we handed Parsek over to Maja. What can I say; that bar just keeps on rising!

So, who is she? In her own words, Maya Starling is a writer, a geek, an animal lover and a gamer. She has lived the life of a magus, an oracle, a goth mortician, a star wars rebel while sitting at a table and rolling those dice.

In reality, she lives with her wife and their adorable little boy, and of course, two rescue cats, in the small country of Croatia. Reading and writing are her passion, so you will often find her typing away a new story, or reading, eyes glued to the screen of her phone or a page of a book.

She has published two fantasy novels, *Dragon's Treasure* and *Dragon's Prize*, as well as a couple of short stories, both in English and Croatian. She also worked on several anthologies of short stories in English.

You can surreptitiously check her out on

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/StarlingMaya>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MayaStarling>

or follow her scribbling at www.mayastarling.com

And now, I hope you'll enjoy this issue as much as I enjoyed watching it being put together with Maja at the helm.

Mirko Karas

Editor in Chief Absence

PARSEK is a paradoxical–secular bulletin/fanzine published by the SFera Science Fiction Society, IV. Podbrežje 5, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia.

Editor of This Issue: Maja Škvorc ♦ Editor in Chief: Mirko Karas

Cover Art: Borna Nikola Žeželj ♦ Cover Design: Maja Škvorc ♦ Interior Design: Damir Salopek

Proofreaders: AnaMarija Abramović, Emily Snyder, Vida A. Mraz

Materials are translated by the authors themselves, unless stated otherwise.

The authors reserve all the rights to their stories and articles.

PARSEK has been voted the best european fanzine in 2011. by the ESFS at Eurocon 2011 in Stockholm.

Parsek online: parsek.sfera.hr

Contact: parsek@sfera.hr

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Dear World(con)!

We have prepared a special edition of Parsek just for you. Most of you must be familiar with Parsek by now, but we will repeat what it's all about for the new readership.

Parsek is the oldest Croatian science fiction fanzine, first published in 1977 and still running. It is PARadoxical and SEC(K)ular, the official fanzine/bulletin of SFERA. SFERA is Croatia's oldest SF&F Association, and next year, in 2018., it will celebrate the **40th SFERAKON Anniversary**. Alongside SFERAKON (SF&F Convention), the fandom in our little Croatia has grown so much that we now offer over 10 conventions and other SF&F themed events, and more than 20 medieval tournaments and renaissance festivals throughout the year. Check our calendar at the end of this issue, pick a convention that appeals to you the most, then come and party with us! We might be small, but we are **mighty** ... and so are our writers.

In this issue, we would like to introduce you to some aspects of Croatian SF&F. One of the more interesting aspects might be what Croatia has to offer for writers and readers worldwide. Certainly, some of you will find the information about **Croatia's Old Gods and Mythological Creatures** interesting and inspiring. Continue on to **the Legend of the Black Queen**, and we're sure you'll agree with us that those scheming Borgias have nothing on our **Barbara Celjska**. The cover art was based on Croatian deities, and you will find more of the artist's amazing illustrations within this issue of Parsek, as he drew inspiration from some of the stories. There are many more Croatian myths and legends to inspire one. Did you know that the first real person described as a vampire in historical records was Jure Grando from Kringa, Croatia? Croatia was also popular with Jules Verne, and is a major filming location for many TV shows, such as Game of Thrones. You also get to learn more about Croatian **cosplay** and video game production.

Eight authors will entertain you with their stories in this issue. Some of them are the most prolific and known Croatian writers, and some are yet unpublished, this issue their first step into the publishing world. We have a bit of everything, so you are bound to read something you'll enjoy. Most of our authors are very versatile, writing short stories, novels, SF&F related articles, translating books and comics, TV shows, and recently even having their short stories made into stage shows. This issue is limited to Croatian authors only, but otherwise, **we are open to international submissions** and we will translate them into Croatian for you, but alas, we are not a paying market. Currently, we are only able to provide translations from English and Italian.

The biggest news is that we have **leveled up our Parsek** making skills, and you are the first to hold this shiny new version. I hope you will enjoy the inside of it just as much.

I also want to take the opportunity to thank SFERA for trusting me with this issue of Parsek.

Your Editor,
Maja Škvorc a.k.a. Maya Starling
www.mayastarling.com

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Igor Rendić is an interesting person to meet and chat with. He is, in no particular order, a literary and non-fic translator, a writer and copywriter, a hiking enthusiast, current Editor-in-Chief of Eridan fanzine, a pub quiz aficionado, a 10+ years member of 3.zmaj SF&F society, holder of a master's degree in English Lit, member of the Rikon SF convention org team, and an all-round geek. Also, he has a serious book habit. I had two Editors-in-Chief choose his story as a best read in their short story anthologies, so Mnemosea was my choice of the two. Hope you enjoy it just as much as I did. It certainly did inspire the amazing illustration, by our featured artist, at the end of the story.

Contact or follow the author on Twitter: @igorr1985

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Original publication: Fantasy Literature Festival, 2016.

Translated to English by author

Mnemosea

by Igor Rendić

It's not that different from diving into a real sea. Not a lake, though — salt water is much closer to the sensation you get when entering the Mnemosea.



I pushed myself away from the metal platform by the opening of the metal sphere and leisurely floated to the sphere's very center. Green lights blinked at me from my helmet's holovisor. I reached with my mind, felt the sphere and what lies beyond it, outside the reach of mundane human senses.

I closed my eyes and sank. The Mnemosea embraced me. Minds were floating around me now, my esper vision perceiving them as multi-hued lights flowing into themselves, Möbius strips made of pure color.

It's not 'vision' in the usual sense: it's my extrasensory perception that allows me to metaphorically 'see', 'hear' and 'touch' the Mnemosea.

I dove deeper between the minds, felt them pass me by; shiny and silent.



The Mnemosea, sea of memories, no longer serves its original purpose – at least we think it doesn't. You see, while we can reach its minds and the memories stored within them, it's not what we believe the Mnemosea was originally created for. The current hypothesis is that all these minds were at one point fully active within it. We have tried contacting them, both through individual targeting and mass esper signaling, from the spheres and from within the Mnemosea. No response. The Mnemosea is, at the moment, just a vast archive and nothing more – a seemingly endless archaeological dig hiding a myriad secrets.



I dove deeper and deeper, then finally came to a stop. I picked one mind from the multitude surrounding me. I reached out – with my hand, with my mind. Contact; as if you’ve just woken up and the world needs a moment to slide into full focus.



We don’t know what happened, or when or how. Our first hyperflight expedition expected to find Earth either destroyed or conquered by a former colony or an unknown alien species – these were the three most popular explanations for the sudden stop in communication between Earth and its colonies decades ago. As the expedition neared its jump-out point, the bets between expedition members grew.

Nobody won.



First, the contact, and then that moment when it felt like I was oozing through an invisible barrier between the Mnemosea and the mind and then I was falling – and I was inside. To an outside observer it might have seemed that I melted into the flowing colors. The first layer of memories now lay before me. I reached for it.



You see, Earth has experienced the Singularity. The cities are empty of human inhabitants, overrun by nature and ruled by feral descendants of household pets. In high orbit, we found floating metal spheres, each ten meters in diameter, with a surface completely smooth and made of an alloy we haven’t identified yet. Each sphere also has a tiny hatch leading into a completely hollow interior.

Now, it took us some time to figure out the spheres – luckily, there was an esper on the first exploration team. Mind you, he was a biologist so he hadn’t been part of the first barrage of tests, but once they started throwing everything they had at the spheres the captain sent him inside as well. He hadn’t expected to be of any use – espers could feel only other living creatures, that much was known.

It turned out that espers could also feel *minds*, and that the spheres were an interface for Mnemosea: billions and billions of human minds in a hyperdimensional substrate.



Memories have weight that manifests itself in a way an esper can perceive. Since a human mind will remember *absolutely everything*, an unimaginable amount of junk memories accrues during a lifetime.

Memories like gossip, films you paid only half your attention to, people you’ve passed on the street, bland food you’ve eaten: stuff like that is usually ‘light’. As such, it tends to float to the surface and remain there. First kisses and failed college courses and deaths of loved ones and births of children; all the stuff that affected you profoundly, the stuff you’ve never forgotten – whether you wanted to or not – and came back to often, that stuff is ‘heavy’ and it sinks down into the deeper layers. Sometimes a memory can sink so deep the consciousness can no longer reach it, and it remains there, at the bottom, in the subconscious, at the very core of what makes you *you*.

I began to 'sift' through the surface layers – to plunge my hands into the memories and then pull them back as though about to drink them from my cupped hands – and then feel each and every memory as it flowed over and between my fingers. For a moment I was overwhelmed by a cacophony of tastes, smells, sights, sounds and touches.

– *you have the right to remain silent* – a girl in a red dress, dancing – *you won't believe what she told him* – a lizard's scaly back – a girl in a green dress, dancing – *cleeeean, cleeeeeeeean, everything is* – next time: *You have the right to remain* – a girl in a blue dress, dancing – *something completely different, try our new* – *cleeeee-aaaaann, everything is clleeeeeaaaann when you wash it with* – the girls become one girl – *I like it cleeeeeaaaaannn* –

Not that you ever find anything *useful* in the surface layers but I like to acclimatize myself to each new mind – to stretch the sea metaphor, I'm one of those who like to wade slowly into it, instead of plunging in headfirst from a rock.

I reached again, scooping deeper.

– a soft bed and the smell of fresh linen – the smell of morning coffee – the taste of morning coffee – a warm shower – two bodies in the shower –

I pulled back. I've never liked this part. I'm sure there are voyeurs among the espers serving on this project, but I'm not one of them – even though I'm certain everyone else thinks we're *all* a bit pervy.

I just hoped I'd be debriefed by someone who'd believe that I wasn't intentionally searching for, uh, *action*.



All I experience in the Mnemosea, I remember, and the implants in my brain later help me recall any detail. Thus, little by little, we have built a database that our teams of tireless analysts search for answers.



I reached again, this time keeping far away from the previous location.

– walking down the street, eyes tracking the pavement – *seventy one seventy two seventy three* – counting calms her – *Stop it already!* – a dog runs past her – a dog jumps on the bed – a dog jumps on the two of them in bed – *I can't take this anymore!* – a dog barks in the night as she sits on the bench in front of the building, watching the windows *seventh eighth ninth* window from the right edge of the building *first second third fourth* floor a shadow moves behind the drawn curtains – tears flowing down a cheek – *Leave me alone! Go away!* – *fifty one fifty two fifty three* steps – a crying voice and mumbled words – *four five six* heavy knocks on the door – *No. – I'm sorry. – No. – I'm sorry. – No! – I'm sorry.* – hard hit seventh hard hit eighth hard hit – a dog barks behind a locked door – a dog barks in the street – *eighty fourth eighty fifth* line in the pavement – blood on a metal bottle – skin cut by the broken edge of a metal bottle that is bent and broken by hard hits –

When I finally managed to pull back – it's not always easy, memories can drag you like a current – it took me a while to calm down. This wasn't the first time I'd witnessed violence but it was the first time I'd witnessed a *murder*.

I was about to leave the mind when something drew my attention. Surface memories rippled. This does not happen, as far as I knew. Curiosity and cats came to mind but I've always been more of a dog person. I reached in, slowly and with greater care...



You probably think it should be easy to discover what had happened to Earth. Just send an esper into the Mnemosea, have him root around the first mind he finds, look for the last memories in which the person still has two legs and two hands and a head and there you go.

But the Singularity, it's obvious, happened *fast*. Ground exploration teams have so far hypothesized that the entire population was uploaded at the same moment, their bodies vanishing into thin air. And we're talking about billions of people here, 99% and more of whom had nothing to do with the singularity directly. They were doing their own thing – eating, walking around, dying of boredom at work, having sex. Sleeping. And we would not only have to find a person who was aware of what was about to happen but also find that specific memory.

It's like taking a random nuclear attack victim and hoping they were standing atop a hill with an excellent view of the surroundings just as the attack was taking place.

Which, to be honest, is exactly the type of person we're hoping to find.



The memories were heavier, firmer now – countless countings and arguments and children and grown ups crying and dogs barking – *and then something grabbed me*.

It drew me inexorably towards the deepest layers. I fought back. I didn't want to enter anyone's subconscious – those few espers that had done so, by mistake or intentionally, had all reported different rules at play down there – memories become like mud and you're very lucky if you can get out – and now something was pulling me down there, pulling me like that was its singular purpose in life. I could feel my mind going numb as the darkness of another's subconscious spread around me like a drop of ink in a glass of water.

And then the pulling stopped.

There was nothing around me.

I wasn't alone. I realized that the moment I stopped panicking. Something was near me. I looked for a way out but I had no idea which direction to take – here there was no palpable difference between memory layers. Everything felt uniformly heavy and thick.

I could feel it coming closer. I could feel it reach for me, but there was no aggression – in fact, it seemed tentative.

Leave.

The word echoed in my mind like a whisper.

Leave.

If a whisper could be as loud as a roar.

Leave.

What do you want? I sent telepathically.

Leave.

I don't understand. Was it a wish or a command or a threat?

Flow. Leave.

I'm sorry, I don't understand.

Leave. Leave – leaveleaveleaveleave – leave.

You leave or I leave?

Flow. Leave. Leave. Flow.

I had the impression of the darkness around me suddenly growing thicker and panic started reasserting itself. I pushed it back but it was getting harder now. *Treat this as any other first contact situation*, I told myself. I'd been in exactly zero such situations but I had received training: stay calm, try to ascertain how the alien entity communicates, and try not to be threatening; work under the assumption that the alien entity is not hostile.

I tried sending images instead of words: the Mnemosea, me approaching a mind, the layers of memories I passed through.

Flow. Flow. Flow.

I sent the images again and it 'spoke' at the same image as before. 'Flow' must have been what it called memory diving.

I sent something else then: a memory of the previous mind I'd explored—specifically, the memory of leaving said mind, going through the barrier and back into the Mnemosea –

Leaveleaveleaveleave

I stopped sending.

Leave.

There was almost palpable longing and sorrow in that last 'leave'. I sent more – the spheres, me entering a sphere and then the Mnemosea.

Conversion.

Mnemosea and back into my body inside the sphere –

Conversion.

I reached for the entity, felt *something* – not a mind per se, nothing I could make an image out of.

The entity must have interpreted my blind pawing correctly because a moment later I felt – it was like a hundred holoscreens simultaneously pushing themselves in my face and screaming images at me and forcing me to breathe in the sounds – it took all of my mental discipline to channel it all into something I could understand.

It was an image of my unplanned entry into the subconscious – but from the entity's point of view. First the dark, deep tones, full of foreboding – and then it had felt something new in the mind and it had reached in panic and it had grabbed – like a drowning man pulling its rescuer under.

It had been trapped – and now, so was I.

There was something comforting in the knowledge that the entity wasn't hostile. Not very comforting, but it was *something*, considering the situation.

I reached again and this time found the entity easily. If you think talking about a human esper's experiences in the Mnemosea is hard for me – since I have to translate them using very stunted comparisons stemming from the five mundane senses – imagine how hard it was at that moment: translating *alien* mental images which are in themselves just an approximation of an *alien's* experience of the Mnemosea and the minds therein (which were, to the entity, *alien* minds) into something I could understand without overloading and short circuiting my own brain and sending it into shutdown.

I took me a while but I managed to piece together what had happened to it.

– infinite loops coalescing into other loops – an unexpected break in a loop – curiosity and going through and discovering an entire vortex of sounds (music, the entity perceived the human minds of the Mnemosea as music, every mind a symphony, every memory a note) – all the music sounds discordant to the entity but then it hears a sound that is *even more* discordant – curiosity again, drawing it to investigate (that part, at least, is very familiar to me) and the entity lets a symphony surround it, seeks the sound within it – seeks among increasingly lower tones, the slow, deep, stretched tones – the sound is suddenly all there is it's all around it tries to get inside the entity tries to make it its own but the entity resists *it hits it tears it bites* and the sound retreats but it's a short lived victory – the slow tones are still all around the entity – the entity cannot leave – and the predatory sound is still there, at the very edge of hearing –

All of which meant that, from the billions and billions of minds I had managed to pick the one that contained not one but *two* unexpected residents.

The entity had been drawn in by the sound. Just like I had been drawn in by the ripple.

Then it hit me: the entity had grabbed me to *pull me away* from the predator.

But there was no more time for thinking about it because the predator was around me now, I could feel it reaching for me, something like a hand a feeler one two three four five six seven reaching for me something like a tentacle eight nine ten eleven twelve thirteen it was hungry it was thirsty it sought a new mind one mind two minds –

Resist. Resist resist resist resist resist

The entity was between me and the predator. The bastard had jumped us – tried to get inside my mind. It, too, was looking for a way out.

I felt the fragments of the mind we were in on the predator's carapace – fragments of violence, death, *murder*. From the predator itself I could feel a hunger for escape, rage at its imprisonment, a violent, burning rage. Whatever the predator was, it had crawled into this person's mind and fed upon the violence she had committed, becoming a prisoner when the mind had become part of the Mnemosea.

The entity succeeded in chasing the predator away and I was now able to sense it as well – what the entity perceived as a discordant sound was to me a shapeless form, more easily seen from the corner of my eye than by looking straight at it.

I could feel the entity around me: it was shielding me, which meant it was upon me to find us a way out.

There was, theoretically, a way for me to leave and take the entity with me. Unfortunately, this would mean opening myself to the subconscious around me and risking a type of diffusion, the loss of *I*. We've lost several espers that way, rescuers finding only echoes of them in the dark. But I didn't really have an alternative.

I sent to the entity, melding several of my memories into new images: the entity around me and the predator attacking and the entity fighting back and me moving through the layers and the barrier and into the Mnemosea with the entity by my side. I hoped it would understand –

Resist flow conversion?

That's the idea. I started opening myself to what surrounded me.

(a slow clap of thunder never reaching its crescendo)

resist

worthlessworthlessworthlessworthlessworthl

resist

deepthatbindsthe deepthatbindsthe deepthatbi

resist

(the deep expands and contracts around me the emptiness overflowing with nothing)

everbe goodenoughyou'll neverbe goodenoughyo

(wrong direction – I'm in too deep – wrong direction – no no –)

(I can't tell the entity it's over it's sacrificed itself for nothing)

Light; not the end-of-the-tunnel kind but just an echo of a glow – I reach and grab and –

– it grabbed me one two three four five hands pull me down grab me press against me climb over me eleven twelve thirteen it pushes me down as it's ready to launch itself up

RESIST

The pain the claws leave behind as they try to maintain their hold – but I'm out, I rise through the memory layers and I can feel the entity by my side

Flow. Conversion.

The memories are increasingly lighter and numerous and the barrier is in front of us

Conversion.

And then we were out, the entity and I, in the Mnemosea, the mind we'd just escaped from looking in no way different from the countless others surrounding us. The entity was still just a shape I could not make out, but it somehow seemed smaller than before – I wondered how much of itself it had lost fighting the predator.

I could feel it reach for me – a soft sound surrounded me, the scent of soft light, the touch of color human eyes could never see.

You're welcome, I sent. And thank you too.

And then it faded away into nothingness and I was alone in the Mnemosea. The mind floated in front of me and for a moment I thought I could see – through the colors of its barrier – a ripple in its surface memories.

When they told us our job wouldn't be that different from a standard archaeologist's, they were *very* wrong.

I turned from the mind and started reaching through the Mnemosea towards my body, filled with a desire to see and hear with the mundane senses, all the while in my mind echoed the entity's parting *thank you*.



Croatian authors are known for their versatility and Danijel Bogdanović is no exception. His first creative outlet was drawing, but soon, his love for writing prevailed. His first two short stories were published in 2006. in Istrakon's (SF&F convention in Pazin) Annual Short Story Collection. After that, his writing career took flight. In the same year, he published a dozen stories, and the pattern continued for the next couple of years. With over 80 published short stories, some of his work was translated into Slovenian, and he won many writing awards, including three SFERAs, Croatia's oldest and most prestigious SF&F writing award, and three Artefacts, an annual SF&F award presented by 3rd Dragon Association from Rijeka. In 2011. he put together an anthology of his best work, "The biggest game in the universe and beyond", and it was published the same year by SFERA. In 2015., he published his first novel, Night train for Dukka.

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Sfera award for flash fiction 2017

Translated to English by Maja Škvorc

Spacebabe

by Danijel Bogdanović

I met Marko, his best friend, and this is how it went.

"Hey man, I have to tell you something!"

We sat in the apartment, a green frosted bottle in Marko's hand.

"You know that woman I went out with last night?"

"Dark, big tits, short hair?"

"Uh-huh. At the end of the night, I brought her back here and fucked her brains out. The sex was out of this world!"

"I can only imagine. With a body like hers ..."

"No, I mean, really! We had sex out of this world, *in space*. She is ... wait for it – a spacebabe!"

He shot me a look, the green bottle an inch away from his lower lip.

"It started normal," I continued. "I banged her all over the apartment, and then she straddled me ... and everything disappeared. Poof! The walls turned to darkness, no floors, no sky, no Earth, nothing. We floated in the blackness, just like when you're naked under water. It's like you are falling, and not falling, all at once!"

"Naked in space and you didn't die?"

"It's a thing on her planet. You get this sort of protective layer of something."

He chugged from the green bottle. "And in her world, you have to go to space to get laid?"

"Well, yeah. And after sex, the females eat the males from the inside and then take over their bodies and live in them."

Marko laughed. "You must have been a lousy lay. I don't see her 'taking over' you."

"She did. Right now, she's using my brain and vocal cords, so she's acting like me."

"Man, your story suc –"

I threw away the earthling's head and dug my digestive strings into him, devouring his limp body through the hole in his neck. Marko was a tasty meal.

And that's how I met Marko, *his* best friend.

RIKON

6 – 8 October 2017, Rijeka, Croatia

RIKON is a 3-day convention held every year in Rijeka, Croatia, organised by the 3. zmaj society. In 2017 it is celebrating its 20th anniversary, and the Guest of Honour will be Emma Newman, the acclaimed author, podcaster, blogger, gamer and larper.

Rijeka is also bidding to host Eurocon in 2020, and our experienced and energetic organizing team is ready for the challenge. We look forward to seeing everyone in Rijeka!

I wanted to dedicate a story slot, or two, in this edition of Parsek to yet unpublished authors, because we, authors, have to start somewhere, and someone has to open that first door for us. Vida A. Mraz was an obvious choice to fill this spot. Don't you just love it when a writer manages to fill a short story with vivid, unique worldbuilding, a fleshed out character that you care about and that shows growth by the end of his or hers short journey. I am honored to present you this undiscovered gem.

Vida A. Mraz works as a translator, but writes undercover. Even though she is yet unpublished, she has been writing for years, and has only recently gathered the courage to brave the publishing world. Thank you for that Vida, and for the opportunity to enjoy your words.

Contact or follow the author on Facebook: www.facebook.com/Vida.A.Mraz

Grief

by Vida A. Mraz

I opened my eyes. My cat, Mitzi, was sitting on my chest.

"Hello," she said. "I'm hungry."

She didn't actually speak. It was telepathy, or something like it. It was magic. I didn't know how magic worked, I was only using it.

"Fine! I'm up."

I got off the couch and went to the kitchen. I didn't sleep in the bedroom.

The last time I had laid on the bed was two months ago. That was a long day, with me alone and drunk, and resting on sheets that still smelled like her. I stared at the ceiling, and cried, and kept drinking vodka. I wished for Pain to be something I could grab and pull out of my chest. I wanted to dig my fingers into It, like into a small, slithery beast, and squeeze hard to watch Pain shriek. Then I could flush It down the toilet, so Pain wouldn't grow big enough to devour me. Instead, I had spent the night hugging my knees, and rocking back and forth like a hurt child.

"You cried in your sleep," Mitzi said, which brought me back to present.

"I wasn't sleeping."

"Why?"

"I have insomnia."

I made myself coffee. I put Mitzi's bowl with her favorite food in front of her. She was a small chocolate point Balinese cat, always playful with me, and attentive.

"Lana, why did you cry? Do you miss Tamara?" she said.

"Yes."

"But, you didn't go to the funeral. You spent the entire day with me."

"It was too dangerous to go."

I took a sip of coffee. I used an aromatic blend of grinded coffee beans, with brown sugar, chili powder, and dark chocolate. There was magic in it too, to give it a kick. Everything *They* gave us – everything other-worldly – was called magic.

When *They* had come a decade ago, there were no big vessels emerging from the darkening clouds. There was only pure, unconstrained magic bursting above the

Earth to illuminate the skies in happy pastels. Then, magic fell like heavy, tepid, sweet rain, and was absorbed by all. It had made people feel warm and fuzzy.

Now, I gently scratched Mitzi's cheeks just behind the whiskers. She started to purr.

"I talk to you about Tamara. You can keep it a secret, because you can talk only to me," I said.

Tamara had brought Mitzi with her to our apartment. I closed my eyes, trying hard to remember the softness of our first kiss, and the passion of all the kisses that had followed, until the day Tamara died.

"Do you want to talk about her?" Mitzi lifted her head.

"Not now."

"Why not?"

I wanted to cry, so I shook my head.

"Enough with the questions, or you'll go back to meowing."

Coffee in hand, I walked past the kitchen table, and sat on the couch. Mitzi followed me.

"You won't do that," she said.

"And why not?"

"Because you can talk only to me about her."

I sighed because she was right and we both knew it. I grabbed the remote. They gave huge, magic-enriched, paper-thin televisions to everyone. Mine covered the entire wall, its opulence clashing with my modest furnishings. I turned it on, and it came to life. I quickly reduced the picture size. Now the tv program was displayed within forty by twenty-five inches, while the rest of the screen was black.

"I like the full-size view," Mitzi said.

"Well, I don't."

"I like SE."

Sensory Enchantment or SE was similar to the old 3-D, but a zillion times more intense, because it had magic. Magic was combinable with technology. It was able to integrate itself into spirituality and religion. Magic could be understood in whichever way you chose to interpret it. SE could make you dizzy, disoriented, or give you mild hallucinations. Some people hated it, some couldn't get enough.

"I don't like SE," I said.

Mitzi blinked and licked the inside of her paw, which was her way of saying, 'you're acting grumpy.'

I pretended not to notice.

Anyway, the Show was on. A young man was standing naked on an elevated, round stage. There were hundreds of people in the audience. Billions were watching around the world. He resembled a Greek sculpture, which meant an oblong face with a high-bridged nose, and a muscular body with small genitals. *They* liked the art and mythology of the Ancient World. *They* saw it as beautiful, so we saw it that way too.

The young man had trained his body for years, and altered it with surgery. That was the easy part. The difficult part was mastering the best magic he could afford. *They* were selling Their magic to us, but not the powerful stuff. Human brains couldn't handle it, or so *They* said. We got superficial illusions, mainly for appearance, and lust.

It revolutionized the entertainment industry. *They* redefined the meanings of beauty, talent, and success. To be admired was to be *Them*. Our own icons faded away.

So, the young man about to perform was perspiring. All hair was shaved off his body, except for pubic hair, and sweat glistened on his smooth skin. Magic made him sparkle. Steam rose from him, and it floated around his head and shoulders, as if he had a fever and was standing in the cold. Strands as thin as spun sugar formed slowly within the cloud, and he magically wove them resemble a laurel wreath. It was all the man had; his body and magic, to create art. And now he had to sing. He strained to hit the big notes, and maintain the magic, and make it seem effortless.

Most people were too imperfectly human to ever pass *Their* tests. But, hope springs eternal, and if you worked hard enough against your flawed mind and body, you might get there. *They* broadcasted these tests as entertainment shows. The winners were given longer lives, riches and an illusion of ageless beauty. If limitless hedonism doesn't kill you, you could live for two centuries, then die and make a youthful looking corpse.

Buzzard stopped the young man mid-performance. He bowed his head to hide the tears. He managed to smile, and wave to the audience, as he left the stage.

I ran my hand over Mitzi's soft coat, forehead to tail.

"Poor guy," I said.

"At least he is trying."

"What does that mean?" I frowned at Mitzi. She stretched in my lap.

"You do nothing, but watch old movies."

This from a cat, who slept fourteen hours a day.

"I'm sad and unemployed," I said.

"You need a job. I need food."

I got up to take the shower. Mitzi looked at me.

"Fine!" I set the screen to full-size and pressed the SE button on remote. "Go nuts."

Mitzi sat straight on the couch. Her pupils narrowed into thin slits, as colors filled the entire screen.

I went to the bathroom. I stepped in the shower, and, eyes closed, let the warm water pour down on me. If only it could wash away my sorrow. I lifted my head so the drops would hit my face. I reminisced about her.

My dear Tamara! She blushed when we met, and kept her head down. I so wanted her to look at me. She finally did, and her eyes took my breath away. Tamara told the lamest jokes with such earnestness that I had to laugh. She liked to tiptoe behind me, then wrap her arms around my waist, and whisper something sweet, like telling me to turn around and kiss her. My dear Tamara!

I must have been standing in the shower for a while, because Mitzi showed up at the door.

"Don't watch me when I shower." I wrapped myself in a towel.

"Why not? I've seen you shower before," Mitzi said.

"But now we talk and it's weird."

She tilted her head to ponder over that. I applied moisturizer with aloe vera, almond oil, and magic. It made my face glisten. A pale shade of pink was brought to my cheeks, as if I had just finished a morning jog – a sort of a sparkly-sweaty look – and my

lips looked slightly swollen and red. It mimicked the post-quickie appearance, and the eroticism was boldly apparent. It was considered modest these days. I put on a gray turtleneck, and a short sleeved, tunic top. I had to suck my belly in to button the jeans.

"Are you going to buy it?" Mitzi asked.

"I don't know" I reached for Tamara's favorite cashmere shawl, and held it in my hands. I hesitated, then wrapped it around my neck.

"It could be dangerous." Mitzi was self-conscious, like most cats, and she usually avoided direct eye contact. But now she held my gaze for a few long heartbeats.

"I will be back, and I will bring you food," I said.

I left the tv on for Mitzi. I stepped into the dark hallway of my apartment building and locked the door behind me.



My neighborhood was the last vestige of economic diversity in the city. It consisted of four and five story apartment buildings, and single-family homes that were nice a decade ago. Every birch and maple seemed to have its bench. Neighborhood had its share of graffiti, and some were elaborate and quite amazing. There were small grocery stores and bakeries here and there, staunchly standing because of tradition, and familiarity, and the ceaseless need people had for something hot and greasy after a night of drinking. A small Komerca flew over to me.

"Hello!" The floating card chirped. "Would you like to go beauty shopping today?"

Komercas were all-present and designed to offer concierge service for a day. They could fit into your palm, or double their size for a nicer display. SE included.

"No. I'm not beauty shopping today." I shook my head.

"Are you sure? There's a new boutique nearby with promotional discounts!"

"No."

"Okay! Have a nice day!" Komerca said, and floated away to bother somebody else.

I saw a teenage girl grab it. She wore a pink jacket with words 'Magic Babe' on it. On a building behind her, someone had spray-painted 'Magic Sucks!'.

People were a diverse, opinionated bunch. Most were enamored by vibrancy, potency and seemingly limitless potential of magic. Tovenars, as pro-magic people were called, wanted wizardry in every aspect of their lives. There were many Tovenars in both science and religion, who saw magic as either the new frontier, or a way to be closer to their God. Others believed that *They* were using magic as a Trojan horse to try and take over. The Skeptics rejected all magic, and cursed its delicious ways.

We were divided. We still waged our wars, and struggled to pay our bills. But, now magic was here! We lived in a new world, which was still familiar enough for us to accept it. And it was crafty of them, I thought, how they seeped *Their* magic through our way of life.

I crossed the street, then took a footpath through foliage between the buildings. I was moving away from the main road. I walked through gaps in chain-link fences that separated people's backyards. Things were rusty and tattered here, but beautified by small herb gardens, and old tire planters with daisies in them. It looked more like world before magic. Though I could see the rosy glow above the houses, a telltale sign of wizardry being used, and I had to politely ask a few Komercas to bugger off.

Komercas were pushy because there was a new magic on the market. It was controversial, and Mitzi didn't want me to buy it. Death is not the end, *They* were saying. Ghosts do exist, and magic can help you bring a loved one – but only one! – back to you. I didn't know why *They* offered this to us, or why it was so cheap. *They* did love all things Ancient, I thought. And Hades, the old Greek god of the underworld, let Orpheus try and bring Eurydice back to life. Would this make *Them* God-like? The question made me uneasy. Then I remembered Tamara, and tears came. I wiped them away. Fear be damned! Whether it was true, or a siren's call, it was so very human to reach for it. I didn't care to solve the great mystery. I just wanted her back.

I stepped on the porch of one of the houses and rang the doorbell. Diana opened the door. She was a few inches taller and a decade older than me. Yet, her golden brown skin was smooth, and she looked like my peer in age. Diana leaned against the door frame.

"Lana!" She studied my face and spoke gently. "How are you?"

People were still careful around me, as if I might suddenly snap and start sobbing. "I'm fine."

She let me in. Her house had an open layout, which made the small space feel larger. Diana run an underground gay dry-bar and restaurant. It was designed in inviting earth tones, with half-dozen bar tables in the dining area, and a couple of coaches in the living room. There were Moroccan-style area rugs throughout the space, with reproductions of impressionist paintings on the walls, all lit by mellow sunlight and yellow bar lamps. It was kitschy, yet cozy and eclectic. The regulars were here for lunch, and I stopped to hug and say hello to them. Safe havens like Diana's existed throughout the city.

Soon after *They* had come, *They* inflamed our ignorance and hate toward each other. Whatever group we discriminated against, *They* did the same. I couldn't go to Tamara's funeral since our relationship had to be a secret. *They* had ostracized the vulnerable among us, appeased the most, and rewarded the selected few.

Diana led me to the big kitchen island with several bar stools. She served me my favorite, pork chops with plum, and sat next to me. I took a bite. It was delicious, drizzled with olive oil, and spiced with ginger, but I had to force myself to eat. Diana tilted her head to look at me. She had short hair, curly and black, with ruby highlights that complimented her oval face. She was a Skeptic, and yet I noticed traces of magic on her skin. It was impossible to live completely magic-free. People absorbed it by simply breathing. Magic was in the air, food and water, and on every person and object one touched. But, Diana didn't use wizardry in her house.

"You are thinking about buying it, aren't you?" she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"The latest poison *They* are peddling. These so called ghosts."

I tried to look away, but she touched my chin to make me look at her.

"Lana, this will not bring her back."

I flinched.

She kept her eyes on mine. "Tamara will look as beautiful as you recall. She will say things you remember her saying. Because she will be nothing but a projection of your memories."

"You don't know that."

"I know how They operate," Diana said. "And I know how things are supposed to be. We grieve, we heal, we remember... but live fully again, and then, we die. And those we leave behind, they will go through the same thing. That's our human story."

"Stop it. Just stop with your Skeptic bullshit!" I raised my voice, and people turned around to look at us. "There's no higher meaning to my pain. It just hurts!" I got up.

She opened her mouth to speak, but changed her mind. I felt foolish and vulnerable. The room was quiet.

"Lana, please, don't do it," she finally said.

I wouldn't look at her, or anybody else. I quickly left.

Once outside. I took a deep breath of cold air. It didn't make me feel better.



I took the Tube to the city centre. Tubes, our new transportation system, were one of *Their* gifts. Made of foreign material, and powered by magic, tubes interlaced above the city into a thick, giant web. Their outer layer reflected the world like a mirror. Otherwise, there would be hardly any sunlight reaching the streets. The high concentration of magic inside the tube gave one a sense of well-being. Cars became obsolete, and smog was replaced by magic.

I stepped outside at the main tube station. I stood at the foot of the vast, stark white square, with the city centre stretching before me. Everyone was pro-magic here. People strived for perfection as defined in our new culture. Men were bald, well muscled and thin-waisted. Women kept their hair red and long, tied in a knot or a crown braid, with hairnets made of silk. A woman's body had to have wide hips, and be plump, supple, and soft. It was all easily achievable and maintained by magic, if your wallet was deep enough. Or you could do it the old-fashioned way, with plastic surgery and exercise. Most people used it all. To a Tovenar, a fine body meant a fine mind. It meant that you were beautiful, brainy and magic-beloved.

SE was incorporated into the architecture, and commercials played on every facade. I looked at the man walking next to me. I could see through his skin, the colorful strings of magic around his beating heart. It was a fleeting, unsettling experience. I blinked, and the world looked normal again. Damn SE, it made me hallucinate. And yet, as disorienting as it was, it felt good to breathe in magic-saturated air. I was energized, as if I took a sip of Irish coffee after a long night.

I entered the skyscraper facing the main station. I walked across the floor mosaic depicting images of chariot races. Tall walls on each side of the palatial hall displayed reliefs of Ancient gods. Though those reliefs appeared made of marble, the figures moved to show different scenes of conquest and seduction. At the far end of the hall, a young man was standing behind a counter. He was green-eyed and broad-shouldered, and wore a simple, red tunic that reached to his knees.

"Welcome to Magic Store," he said. "How can I help you?"

"I would like to see the new magic. Ghosts."

"Of course." He touched my hand. "Your loved one will be back with you."

He guided me to an elevator, and then down the corridor, to a small, round chamber. It was empty, except for a chair on a small platform. The chair was made of steel, and it was cold. As soon as I sat down I felt a strong pull, and couldn't get up.

"It is for your protection," the man said. "Some people immediately reach for their ghosts."

He sensed my apprehension.

"This is a preview. When you press this," he pointed at the button on chair's arm, "the preview will be over, and someone will be waiting for you outside."

I nodded, and watched him leave. When he closed the door, the lights were turned off.

I was alone, unable to move, and facing an infinite darkness. Just as I sensed wistfulness turn to anxiety, soft light came from above. I could see water pour down like a curtain around me. Once it hit the floor, some of it changed texture and became thick, and jellylike. Out of water, this new liquid rose to create a generic human form. For a few long heartbeats, I stared at the beautiful, translucent sculpture. Then, magic came to its surface. Hundreds of tiny bursts of light pierced through it. Chips of it fell, as if an unseen sculptor worked at it with hammer and chisel. My chest tightened as I recognized the face and body of the woman before me. She stood naked. Her skin glistened. I could hear drops falling from her fingertips into the water at her feet. Then she opened her eyes.

"Lana?" she said.

I gasped.

"Tamara!"

She smiled at the sound of her name, and it all came back to me; our conversations, our laughter, and all the quiet moments we shared.

"You came for me," she said.

I was afraid to look away, as if that would make her disappear. I knew, the root of my fear was suspicion. Was Diana right? Were *They* showing me a mere memory?

"Tell me a secret," I softly said.

"You know all my secrets."

"That's not possible. I am not you. Am I?"

She pondered over my question for a while. She was so beautiful! I fought against the surge of memories.

"I miss you. I dream about you," Tamara said. "There is a place between sleep and wakefulness where we are together. Then reality shatters it, and I grieve. So I stay awake. I'll rather remember and let my sadness age than dream and forget, only to feel fresh sorrow again."

"That's me, Tamara." I started to cry. "You're describing me."

"I don't understand." She was child-like in her effort to grasp something – a human emotion – that she couldn't reach. And she wasn't able to do it because she was just born out of magic, and had only a taste of my recollections of a person she was supposed to be.

I closed my eyes.

"Lana! Don't leave me!" She cried out.

"I won't," I said. "You will always be with me."

I pressed the button.



It was late evening when I returned home. Mitzi was resting on the couch. She raised her head.

"Did you buy it?"

"No."

I sat next to her. Mitzi jumped in my lap.

"It was not really Tamara," she said.

"No."

She licked my hand.

"Do you want to talk about her?"

I gently scratched her forehead. I had no more tears left.

"Yes," I said.



"Grey and Yellow" was chosen as one of Istrakon's Editor-in-chief's favorites from this year's edition of Istrakon's Annual Short Story Collection (SF&F convention based in Pazin, Istria, Croatia). Marin Pelać isn't a newbie when it comes to writing. As a double major in English language and history, he has published quite a selection of short stories, and he has also won three writing awards. Unfortunately, just like a lot of highly educated young people in Croatia, he works in the tourism sector, dreaming that he will one day be able to teach what he loves. In the meantime, keep on writing, Marin!

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Translated to English by Petra Štiglić

Grey and Yellow

by Marin Pelać

"I signed up for the program *Serve'n'Chat* by chance. There was no specific reason. As I was buying the laptop, a salesman offered me the aforementioned program. I had no idea what it was, but he said the magical phrase 'for free' and I agreed. I just nodded, as I had been doing for the previous ten minutes while he explained the specifications of my new laptop in detail. I didn't know much about it, nor did I care to. I've always been one of those 'just give me Internet and Word and we're good' types.

I read the description on the back of the box and the program seemed fun. Once launched, after a fast and simple installation, it would organize after you as you used the computer - automatically sorting documents, serving as an internal search engine, suggesting web sites, movies, and music. In short, it would remember your every move on the computer and try to make your life easier by offering content similar to what you liked. It wasn't anything overly impressive, not even for an amateur like me. It was a multi-functional program with features that were not revolutionary in any way. But that was only the *Serve* part.

As for *Chat*, things were somewhat different. While installing it, you had to fill out a questionnaire about yourself. There were hundreds of questions. Yes, it did get annoying, but what could you do once you started installing it? You were prompted to answer all sorts of queries - from your favorite color and food allergies to your relationship with your parents, and questions like: "Would you help a bear caught in a trap, though it could attack you after you release it?"

"So?" A dry voice interrupted the speaker's monologue. "What did you answer?"

"About the bear?"

"Yes."

"That I would set it free."

Silence.

"A risky move," the voice flatly said.

"Sometimes, the risk is worth it."

"Yes ... And sometimes it isn't. As you can see now," the voice observed emotionlessly. "I apologize, I interrupted you. Please, go on."

After a few silent seconds, the speaker continued.

"After filling out the questionnaire, you had to upload your photo. And that was all you needed to do as a user. The program would create a basis upon which everything else was built. It analyzed your documents, e-mails, visited web pages and comments on social networks. It 'combed through' everything in a matter of minutes. And then it was up to you again. The program would ask you to choose its name, age and sex. I did not take this seriously. I named the program after my favorite relative and selected my own age."

"And then?"

"And then the program would communicate with you. It was up to you to decide whether it was going to be by voice or typing. You were allowed to change that setting later. You could talk about anything. It did not work like an educational program; it wasn't a smartass. It was more like a virtual friend whose interests were similar to yours. It knew your pursuits. It would start every chat with those topics, taking into account the emotional component of the conversation. For example, if your answer indicated that you were nervous, it would not insist on that subject, or on talking at all."

"Impressive."

"Sort of. Not so much that it knew who won the bronze at the 1990 World Basketball Championship, but other things. For example, we once had a conversation about women. It seemed like he actually had a real experience with that."

Silence.

"Continue."

"After about six months, I received an e-mail from the store where I had bought the computer and got the program. It was a poll. I was supposed to, among other things, state how often I use *Serve'n'Chat*. I admit, I did get hooked. And then, they played me."

"How?"

"They tricked me like you would any addict, by offering more of what I was addicted to in exchange for something else. They said they were delighted that I recognized the quality of their product, blah, blah, blah, and they'd love me to try out a demo version of their new program."

The speaker briefly paused, and then continued.

"They offered me a free program, similar to *Serve'n'Chat*. Only without service features. In other words, a program that would talk to you when you wanted to talk, comfort you when you were having a hard time, comment on daily events -"

"Sounds like a weaker version of the first program." The dry voice interrupted the speaker. "I do not understand. What was this new program's goal - to become your best friend?"

The speaker's smile was sour.

"A friend? No, not really. Its goal was to become your life partner. The company promised to reward me if, believe it or not, I could manage NOT to fall in love with the new program. Specifically, with *her*."

"Excuse me?"

"The expectation was that you would develop a bond through intimate conversations and fall in love over time, even when there was no physical manifestation of a partner. They gave me a three month deadline. After three months, I had to take medical and psychological checkups in the presence of the firm's representatives. Now, for this exam, they would boot your program. While you conversed with it, they looked for signs of infatuation - increased dopamine levels in your blood, dilated pupils, and so on. If you had not fallen in love, you would get a full version of the program and a new computer of your choosing. But if you were enamored... then you agreed to be at their disposal."

"What does that mean?"

"The e-mail stated, they would get the rights to experiment with your mind. Well, those were not the exact words they used. But, you were tactfully informed that you consented to participate in their research on future, similar projects. I asked for a further explanation so they briefly clarified, without mincing words, that they would erase my memory and use my brain as they saw fit. I would become a test subject into whose brain they could 'paste' things that suited them. The good news was - if you could call that good news - that it was not a surgical procedure. I just had to take two pills, grey and yellow. Though the e-mail was somewhat creepy, I burst out laughing. The whole thing seemed silly, like a bad joke made up by boring IT experts. I agreed."

"Were you confident that you would not fall in love?"

"Absolutely. The chances of falling in love with a computer program were slim, even if it communicated like a real person. Especially if you were warned beforehand that this was precisely the purpose of the research."

"Maybe that's how they wanted to prove the program's capabilities."

The speaker ignored the interviewer's last remark. "The chances were even smaller if you met someone in real life."

"Was that the case with you?"

"Yes. Not even a week after agreeing to the deal, I met Laura. We met in a cafe where I usually have a drink after work. She sat alone at the table next to mine. I noticed that whatever she was working on on her computer wasn't going well. She was trying to book a plane ticket over the Internet. I offered to help. We clicked right away."

The room filled with tense silence.

"Next week will be our three-month anniversary," the speaker added in a gravelly voice.

"Let me guess - the problem is, you didn't tell the program about Laura? Look, I believe that you really want to get a new computer for free, but if you want my advice as a psychiatrist, you have to tell me exactly what is bothering you."

Silence.

"Laura is the program."

"Excuse me?"

"The program they give you to install on your computer is a diversion. Laura is a girl they found, and they offered her a deal similar to mine. She fell in love with her version of the program. Once that was confirmed, they erased her memory and shaped her to fit my tastes. Her features were altered with surgery and they rebuilt her personality so that it would, in this instance, suit me perfectly. This was done based

on the data collected through *Serve'n'Chat*. All they had to do then, was put her in the right place at the right time. Like, in the cafe where I drink coffee every day."

The speaker's eyes suddenly filled with fear.

"That's why I came to you," he said. Now it sounded like he was starting to panic.

"How can I help you?"

"The company is already breathing down my neck. When I did not pass the check up, and I realized that Laura was their program, I asked to talk with a psychiatrist before the *procedure*. I found your number. You are the only one who can help me. This is not a joke. I do not know the full backstory to all of this, but these people are serious."

"Of course, sir. Don't worry," the psychiatrist replied in a friendly voice. "Everything is going to be alright. Relax. Here, take off your shoes, have some water," he said and stood up from his armchair. He wrote something in his notebook and, as he was scribbling, he added:

"Oh yes! Before we go any further, please, take this to calm down. It's not a big deal. Two pills. Grey and yellow."

Tvrtko Lovreković is another writer making his debut in this issue of Parsek. He describes himself as big, bald and hairy, but he's also a translator and a subtitler. Some of the more popular shows he has subtitled are Game of Thrones, Castle, House of Cards, True Detective, Burn Notice and MacGyver ... at least those are the ones that he still remembers or is currently working on. When he's not slaving away in front of the computer, he likes reading, hiking, gaming, traveling, and learning new languages as any normal Earth monkey, besides English, German, Slovenian and French. His next challenge is Afrikaans.

Contact or follow the author on Twitter: @Banky07 and Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/tlovrekovic>

The Seventh of November

by Tvrtko Lovreković

It was the seventh night of November. A harsh wind was blowing in from the sea. It swayed the cypresses overlooking the shore, spreading their sweet smell through the cold air. The sky was clear, but it was a dark night, save for the gleam of the stars. The sun had set soon after six and darkness had since crept into every corner of Cartagena. The wind forced the shadows to the bone of every citizen and there weren't many people who stayed out longer than they had to. It was half past eleven and city lights flickered in Zita's dark eyes. The blackness of the Mediterranean encroached upon the city. Even the moon hid this night. It was perfect.

Nathaniel looked at the open sea through binoculars, hoping to claw something out of the heart of darkness. Zita swept her gaze over him and thought, *he'll make a good leader if he survives this final test.*

They were in the Murcia region in the south of Spain. Her Sire bore the region's name. The childe of his childe needed to prove itself here one last time to earn his honour, to succeed Zita as a leader of *Abandonado el Destino*, a templar pack of Ramon, the vampire bishop of Madrid. And what of Zita?

She had decided to join her father in the conquest of Budapest as a leader of a new templar pack after they took over the city from the Heretics. Budapest was just one of the battlegrounds in the push across Eastern Europe, in a centuries-old war between two vampire factions, and her father was a fast-rising archbishop in the Inquisition.

But now she was here, on her last mission in Spain. She turned around to Sonia and Wolfgang, her brethren. Sonia was sitting on the hood of the car, legs crossed as she lay back on the windshield, watching the stars, not a care in the world. But Wolfgang stared at Zita, a dark cloud above him.

"I can see them," Nathaniel said and everyone tensed. Sonia stopped gazing at the stars and looked intently at Nathaniel, waiting to hear what he'd say next.

Wolfgang was still focused on Zita as if she were the one holding the binoculars. He still wasn't pleased that this cur would lead their pack once Zita was gone. The kid barely had twelve years under his belt and he was so much weaker than Zita, even a blind bat could see it. He didn't even know the Inquisition rituals so Sonia would have

to take the role of pack priest when Zita left. *To master your body, you need to master your spirit first*, Wolfgang remembered his harsh beginnings. There was so much truth in the words of his beloved priestess Zita. And now she was leaving them and leaving them with "this" as leader?!

Sonia slid off the hood and pulled Wolfgang into the car. *The poor bugger's lost in thought once more*, she shook her head as she started the engine. It was their last assignment under Zita and as much as she liked the fact that she would be taking over the function of pack priest, maybe even pack leader, she wasn't pleased that they would lose a capable warrior. *It's funny though*, Sonia mused, *I am the only one not trained by Zita and now I'll be the caretaker of her brood.*

Zita and Nathaniel mounted their bikes and sped off. The taillights of the two motorcycles had become red dots in the distance by the time Sonia and Wolfgang finally hit the road.

"They're rushing again," Sonia frowned and glanced at Wolfgang, who was gazing at the hills and just grunted in agreement. Sonia's mind drifted as she hit the pedal to the metal, her eyes closely following the road. *He is a good soldier, but perhaps too close to Zita; cast away from his clan, trained by her... he doesn't know anything better than her... boot?*

Zita and Nathaniel passed the first and second tunnel and were driving by the coast while the ship Nathaniel had spotted drifted slowly towards the port of Cartagena. Yesterday night, they had scouted a small access road to the port which offered a great vantage point across the harbour. With lights turned off, they stopped their motorcycles behind a row of trees planted by the side of the road and waited for Sonia and Wolfgang.

"We shouldn't have rushed," Zita mumbled through the open visor of her helmet, and Nathaniel nodded. The boat they were waiting for, a twenty-five meter yacht, came to a stop at dock 3. It contained members of a Heretic coven, together with a paid vampire Assassin. Zita and her pack had spent the better part of the last two months following their activity on the Iberian Peninsula.

When the Heretics, a Rightblood and an Artist, had made landfall two months ago, Zita had first thought they might be a scouting party for a larger force of vampires, ready to take the war to the holy Spanish ground. The Rightbloods had been the manipulative nobility of the Inquisition before the split. And while Zita's clan, the Umbra, manipulated the shadows, Rightbloods worked in the shadows as masterful plotters. The Artists, on the other hand, were an old Independent clan which had aligned itself with the Heretics soon after the split. Their mastery of illusion was without parallel. Zita had soon realized that Heretics did not give up their way of warfare so easily. At first, they had started spreading their filthy tendrils among the mortals, trying to get the feel of the territory. But then they'd made a mistake and conferred with the independent vampires in the area. Too bad those owed Zita a few favours, so she'd learned their final objective was the destruction of Bishop Ramon, who was under her protection. Zita had learned that the leader of this cowardly coven was a Rightblood of Spanish origin who hoped to upgrade his ranking among the Heretic hierarchy by assassinating a bishop of Madrid. And here they were now, strengthened by an Assassin, fully convinced everything was going according to plan.

As the newcomers' entourage was mooring their yacht to the dock, Wolfgang and Sonia arrived and stopped their car alongside Zita's bike. The four of them watched the intruders from the shadows.

"You can always count on a Rightblood to bring a bloody circus to town," Zita said as they watched their adversary's retainers carry heavy suitcase after heavy suitcase from the boat to the black Range Rovers waiting for them at the dock.

"Damn, Wolfey and I could use a new car," Sonia tapped the hood of their old Seat.

Zita looked at Wolfgang and asked, "Is that all? There's no one hiding among them?"

Wolfgang concentrated at the procession on the dock. The juicebags were irrelevant, but he didn't want to miss anyone of importance. After a minute, he finally shook his head, and in a gruff voice said, "Just three vampires. No one else."

"Three vampires as a bishop hit squad? Either they're cocky or they're stupid," Zita said and grinned. "But I know what they'll be by the end of the night. Dead."

"They're leaving", Nathaniel hissed and started his bike. Zita followed suit and looked at Sonia who slid across the hood to the driver's side of the car. As she opened the car door she winked at Zita.

"Try and stay close this time, bitches. And you, watch where the fuck you're going." Zita laughed and snapped her visor shut. She started after the Heretic procession, and she had a good hunch where they were headed. She concentrated and drew energy from her immortal blood. Shadows crept out and enveloped her. She followed the two Heretic cars through Ignacio Street. The Range Rovers were so conspicuous it was easy to track them even from a distance. They headed north toward the Spanish Square and then turned eastwards along Alphonse Street. Zita smirked inside her helmet. It was so predictable of them to head for the hospital and the luxurious hotel right by it. This particular Rightblood was staying true to his nature even when it came to picking out a haven in enemy territory. Not fifty meters in front of her, the two cars veered right at the hotel. Zita crossed to the other side of the street to see if they would continue down the street or stop at the hotel parking lot.

She turned around to see where the rest of the team was. Ten meters back, she could see Nathaniel and Sonia park their vehicles. Zita knew Wolfgang was in the car, even though she couldn't see him. He'd probably entered the *fugue*, a nightmarish existence between life and death. Turning back to their targets, the jeeps stopped at the hotel parking lot. After a minute, the vampires and their retinue emerged from the cars. They crossed the road with bags and suitcases in their hands and entered the hotel. Nathaniel and Sonia came up to Zita's bike.

"There are three juicebags and three vampires," Zita said. "Chances are that the Assassin is a bloody Moroccan and he'll probably want a room to himself. The Rightblood boss and the presumed Artist are going to have a blast with their retainers."

"So, I'm on the Rightblood and his chums?" Sonia asked.

"You got two Claymores, right?"

"Yeah, didn't plan on using both though."

"You Claymore the rooms and then clean one room with Wolfgang. If possible, try to stake whoever you encounter. Nathaniel and I will take the other room. Whoever finishes up first can come and help the others if need be. Again, try to stake if possible. That sound good to you?" Zita raised her brows at them, receiving nods of

agreement in return from Sonia and Nathaniel, and a grunt from Wolfgang. They all knew when to say yes.

After waiting for another hour where they'd parked, Zita checked her shotgun and gladius. She adjusted her kevlar vest and crossed the street with Nathaniel and Sonia right behind her. Wolfgang was around somewhere as well, hiding in *fugue*.

Hands in her pockets, Sonia walked over to the parking lot, then sneaked over to their targets' cars. She glanced through the rear windows and noticed they'd taken all their baggage and equipment with them. She hurried back to the hotel.

Zita and Nathaniel entered the hotel. Since it was late and Cartagena wasn't a busy town in November, the lobby was empty, so they went up to the receptionist. The woman looked at them, her gaze drifting over their guns and armor, and her eyes widened. Zita noticed her hand going for the phone.

"Now, now, dear, calm down. We're only here to ask a few questions," Zita said with a rare, but unearthly sweetness in her voice. The mystical and melodious nature of Zita's voice calmed the receptionist somewhat.

"Dear, dear girl, could you show us the guestbook?" Zita asked politely and the receptionist quickly turned her computer screen to them. Zita scanned the guest list on the screen but didn't find any entry at the time when their quarry had entered the hotel. *Clever*, she thought.

"Darling, darling, could you tell us which rooms are not occupied but still not available?" Zita said with the most sincere smile, caressing the receptionist's face. The poor girl was trembling.

"No such rooms, miss," the receptionist answered and leaned into Zita's hand like a kitten asking for attention.

"Come now, just check the computer and tell me if there are any such rooms," Zita whispered to the girl, *le petite mort* shaking through her.

The girl recovered and dutifully checked the computer and then with honest surprise said, "Rooms 304 and 305, miss."

Without a word, Zita turned on her heel and briskly started towards the elevator with Nathaniel and Sonia right behind her. The three of them entered the elevator and, what would seem strange to the outside eye, held the door until they were sure Wolfgang was with them. *Fugue* smelled of death and anticipation, almost like a drug for them.

Once they were all inside, Zita checked her shotgun once more. Nathaniel pushed the button for the third floor and cocked his submachine gun. Sonia crouched, taking her backpack off as the lift started. She took out two mines, handing one to Zita. They each shoved their mine into their vest pockets.

They were in complete silence as they whispered private things to themselves, blood flow inducing the righteous rage for the battle.

Death. Death. Death. Death.

In their minds they were already there – among the carnage and the blood of their enemies.

The elevator pinged, and before the door opened, Zita pushed the stop button. She faced her team.

"This is my last battle with you all by my side. We've been through the nine circles of Hell together, bled together, fed together, and we mourned together."

She turned to Nathaniel first, "In you, my childe, I have trained someone of my clan to replace me if I am to taste Final Death. You will serve the Inquisition perhaps even better."

Nathaniel stood silently as Zita turned to an empty corner of death. And only she could feel the pain within it, "With you, Wolfgang, I have shared the rage of your exile and I've helped you mould it into a force to defeat the threat of Heresy. You truly are one who understands what it means to throw away the shackles of our Elders."

The corner stood silent.

"Sonia, my dearest sister, you are the only one I have not trained and some would say moulded to my will. And yet... here you are, our equal. Our bond is such a strong one, not even God or Satan themselves could break it. Whatever happens here, or after I am no more with you, let it be known that there were no closer brethren in the Jihad than us."

They stood watching each other in silence, remembering and acknowledging the stories and paths they'd shared together. Zita pushed the stop button again. Springing into action, they pulled up their firearms. Zita whispered, "Death comes for us all, boys and girls. Make sure it comes for them first."

Sonia crept along the wall, her gun at the ready. She pointed with two fingers towards the farthest doors. Nathaniel silently approached her position on overwatch. He concentrated for a split second and let the oily shadows of his ancestors envelop him, while Sonia pointed the Claymore mine towards the doors. She then returned in front of Nathaniel, who tapped her on the shoulder signaling he was moving back to Zita. Sonia felt Wolfgang's presence to her right and knew he was ready.

Nathaniel hustled back to Zita, who had just finished putting down her Claymore in front of the other room. For the first time ever, he took up position in front of her.

Zita held her shotgun in her left hand and her gladius in her right. She glanced at Sonia who looked eager to end the wait. Zita raised her sword in the air and ...



The Claymore in front of the room 304 exploded with a loud bang – synchronous with the mine placed in front of room 305.

Wolfgang saw a flash and then silence; a moment of utter calmness, followed by a cacophony of screams, shouts and moans. Wolfgang peered inside. Mangled juice-bags and their assorted parts lay on the floor, covered in blood.

I'm not a beast.

Sonia burst into the room in front of Wolfgang. Six bodies lay on the floor. One person was missing an arm and one was missing a leg, both screaming in agony. She tried to identify the Rightblood. Tall, blonde man sat in an armchair. His gray suit was torn, but aside the blood on him, his body was intact. His tattered clothes revealed golden chains and bracelets, but also the pink skin of a mortal.

"Cabrón!" she shouted and fired two three-round bursts in his head. His brains splattered over the armchair. His body hadn't properly slumped into the armchair as Sonia nonchalantly shot two short bursts to her left and right. The moans stopped.

Fuck!

Wolfgang scanned the room trying to spot the Artist. He looked to the left – nothing.

Sonia's submachine gun startled him a bit when he looked right. He noticed *him* then. The body of a beautiful young man. Pink skin, but not really. Clean shaven. Warm blue eyes. Robed in a beautiful blue tailor-made suit. He looked like an admiral, proud and mighty. The suit was now shredded, its beautiful navy blue colour ruined by blood. Wolfgang kneeled beside him, feeling pity for such a beautiful thing.

The young man didn't smell human.

Wolfgang reached for the man's throat, intent on tearing his head off. A loud crash to his left. His attention strayed. A half-naked man was on top of Sonia, hands on her neck.

Big mistake, he thought as Sonia pointed her gun at the man's chest.

Wolfgang turned back to the beautiful man, now no longer there. Three short bursts from Sonia's gun, and Wolfgang snarled.

Where the fuck did he go?



When the two simultaneous explosions rocked the third floor, Nathaniel leapt over the destroyed doors into the room 305, knowing Zita had his back.

A pitiful creature was pulling himself with his hands towards the balcony. His legs were a meter behind him.

Nathaniel kicked away the door debris and ran past an overturned table in the corner. He put his right foot on the creature's lower back. Without preamble, he fired three short bursts into its back.

Kneeling beside the creature, he slowly turned its head to him. It was a young man with a brownish complexion and a face full of splinters. His features were soaked in blood. He wasn't human – his skin crumbled as his body was left bereft of its undead strength. Shots resounded from the other room. The head thumped as Nathaniel let go of it. He shouted, "Clear!"

Zita had watched Nathaniel in action, pride swelling inside her as she entered the room.

The overturned table in the right corner caught her eye. The wall behind it was splattered with blood, too far from the vampire now lying dead beneath Nathaniel.

The table board was turned towards her. The force of the explosion should have overturned it to the other side. Nathaniel cleared the room as her eyes narrowed. The table board was riddled with Claymore pellets. Complete silence ensued.

It's alive!



'Abd al-Malik al-Muzzaffar threw the heavy oak table at the target to his immediate right. The table swept the figure away and crashed him against the wall. Just in front of him, the woman's eyes widened. He tackled her, his primary target. Pinning her to the floor, he inhaled the smell of leather and the sweet scent of her lily perfume. She narrowed her pretty eyes at him. With a wicked glint in his own gaze, he caressed her face, before spitting on her.

Her scream was the most beautiful symphony to enjoy, but another sweet-smelling target approached.



Sonia pushed the half-naked man away and jumped to her feet. A loud crash from the room next door told her it wasn't over. Her blood told her to go there. Wolfgang, halfway out of *fugue*, looked at her with a pained gaze, like a child that had lost its toy. She was sure he would follow her. His blood must have been screaming for it even more than hers did.

She ran out of the room. Deafening silence met her. She couldn't hear even her own stomping footsteps. Her blood told her what had to be done.

It could be her Final Death. Still, she raised her submachine gun and turned towards the door where Zita and Nathaniel were.

Then she felt the knife. And then there was darkness.

Madre de dios!



'Abd al-Malik al-Muzzaffar took position to the left of the door and waited patiently for the sweet-scented girl. The one on the floor screamed in soundless agony as his acid spit ate away at her face. The boy behind the table started to come around, but it was too late for him. It was too late for *all* of them. And the sweet-scented running girl would be the first to find that out. As she turned the corner, 'Abd al-Malik struck his poisoned blade between her ribs.

He looked her in the eye for the briefest of moments. He saw not fear, but something that scared him. This little woman was not a victim of destiny, but an agent of it.

Then he found himself enveloped by darkness.

Al-ḥamdu lillāh!



Zita screamed as the fiery acid burned through the skin and flesh of her face. She squinted in painful rage. Sonia's display of sisterly love in taking the Assassin's blade into herself, eased some of her pain. Her sister was buying her some time. Zita hoped it would be enough. Bishop Ramon depended on her. Her children depended on her.

Through the pain she evoked the anger in her veins. The room was engulfed in darkness. She rolled over. Kneeling, she looked at their assailant as the oily shadow tentacles she evoked grabbed his legs and arms. They pulled him away from Sonia.

Now was the time for her childe to show his mettle.

She watched Nathaniel hurry through her thick, unearthly darkness to where he knew the door was. Approaching from the right, he pulled out the gladius she had given him just yesterday. What seemed like a moment of eternity must have lasted a few seconds as the Assassin tried his best to resist the tentacles of her rage.

Not long now, she thought. Sonia opened fire from her submachine gun, trusting that Zita held the Assassin in front of her. Bullets pierced the creature's skin. Nathaniel's blade hacked away at him. Nathaniel couldn't see or hear Sonia. Still, he knew what the priestess-to-be would do. After all, they'd done this so many times before.

For a brief moment it seemed as though the body enveloped by the dark tentacles went limp.

A second later, her body convulsed under the onslaught of pain.
No, not now!



As 'Abd al-Malik al-Muzzaffar swung to stab the sweet-scented girl one more time, his arms and legs were yanked back. That look in the sweet-scented girl's eyes was the last thing he saw before his world turned black. He floated in oily pitch darkness that the witch had enveloped him with.

Darkness and silence. The scent of gunpowder. Bullets pierced his stomach and torso. Sharp pain burst in his right arm. A keen blade sank into his flesh. Once, twice... And the third time to his ribs. The bullets he was familiar with, but the sword...

He remembered watching lambs being butchered in his village in Antalya when he was a small child. He remembered how the village butcher always caressed the little lamb before killing it.

The woman with the burned face had already forgotten he had touched her. And like the butcher from his village so long ago, that meant he would kill her.

Strength left his body as he imagined her lungs filling with her blood, burning through her veins. Soon, she would lose hold of him and he'd be gone.

But I will be gone knowing that I did what I came to do.



Pain consumed Zita. The darkness that had enveloped the room was seeping through her eyes. Weakened by the Assassin's acidic spit and blood curse, she fought to control the shadows. Her blood boiled, and her lungs swelled and seized.

The tentacles slithered back into her, light returned to the room. The Assassin, now free, ran out the balcony door and jumped down. Zita's eyes lingered behind him.

His fall will be as long as eternity.



Wolfgang gazed into Sonia's eyes and knew what he had to do. His every instinct told him to go to the other room, but Zita had taught him to master his spirit and his body.

He jumped out of the window of their room at the same moment Sonia ran to help Zita and Nathaniel. His fall lasted an eternity, as every little bit of his animal being was walled up behind the mantras Zita had taught him. He was in *fugue* yet again, but the mantras helped him stay focused.

He landed in the street, among the shattered glass of rooms 304 and 305, invisible to the normal eye. He stood with his back to the wall, trembling in anticipation. Time passed, slow and quick. Something slammed into the pavement, half a meter in front of him.

His inner walls crumbled as the Beast within overtook him and he swiped twice at the creature, not stopping for even a moment to check who or what it was.

What have I done?



Zita trashed on the floor. Sonia and Nathaniel kneeled over her, as the new priestess and the new leader of *Abandonado el Destino*.

Blood coursed and bubbled through her veins. Her lungs filled with crimson liquid and half-controlled shadow.

Still, her mind raced as all strength left her body.

The Assassin hadn't run when they found him. He'd stayed and fought while Bishop Ramon was miles and miles out of his reach. He'd stayed and done this to her in the region that bore her father's name. The Bishop was not important. This was a message to her father. But it had failed.

Finally, peace overwhelmed her as that thought lingered in her mind when she entered the long sleep. Most of all, Zita knew, that once she awoke again, her thoughts would be able to kill.

Croatia's Old Gods and Mythological Creatures

by Deniver Vukelić, prof.
Translated by AnaMarija Abramović

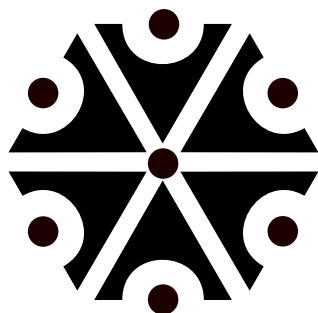
The Old Gods of Croatia

Almost every nation emerging from a crop culture – dependent on the change of the seasons – has its own myths about the circular passage of time. Although the idea of linear time is somewhat newer in origin, the people and cultures who lived for thousands of years before us noticed that the annual cycles and dates are repetitive.

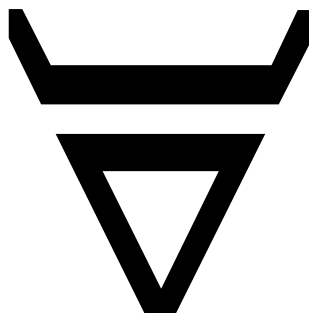
Ancient Croatian mythology, inherited from the Slavic people, also tells stories of gods and mythical heroes whose lives and deeds fall on certain dates of the year, when the people performed period-specific tasks or celebrated certain holidays. Many of these dates and customs continued with the coming of Christianity to Croatia, with the main protagonists' names and attributes changed to match those of Christian saints.

Many of these rites, rituals, and tales are simply human reenactments of the divine acts of creation, meant to make the year good and bountiful. Many scientific attempts have been made to reconstruct the mythological realm of pre-Christian Croats, but these are always complex and slow, mainly due to the lack of written historical and archaeological sources that would explain the sacral life of the Croatian Old Age. No preserved holy books of Croatian pre-Christian worship exist; there are no ceremonials, nor a complete and precise calendar of holidays. Even so, remnants have survived the Christianization of the Croatian lands, merged with Christian folk beliefs, in poetry and feast days, through ceremonies and customs, arts and crafts.

With the identification of two great mythic events, the greatest strides in the reconstruction of the old Croatian faith were made in the 1990s and at the dawn of the 21st century. The first is a tale of the perennial conflict between the deities **Perun** and **Veles**, a natural balance: Veles keeps water on the ground, while Perun strikes it with lightning, creating rain. Perun and Veles are the mythical opposites of a world divided: up / sky, middle / earth and down / the underworld. This division is present in most Indo-European and other peoples' traditions under different names, such as the Hindu gods Indra and Vṛtra, the Egyptians' Horus and Seth, Germanic Thor and Jörmungandr, Phoenician Baal and Yam or Greek Zeus and Typhon.



Symbol of Perun



Symbol of Veles

In the World Tree concept, Perun's mythical court is always on high ground – on a mountain, at the top of the tree (usually an oak). Humans live in the world's middle – the trunk, while the god / serpent / dragon Veles inhabits the roots, the underworld of darkness and water. Thus, the human world depends on the balance between the two.

Today, several mountaintops in Croatia still bear Perun's name or a derivative. Close to the foot of these mountains, a source of water can usually be found: a spring or a river, a peninsula, a crossing or some other place marked with a variant of Veles's name. The **goddess Mokoš** is Perun's wife, glimpsed in what records there are of Croatian oral tradition, as well as in some aspects of the national Marian cult^[1]. Mokoš is a dual Slavic goddess who, according to the mythology, spends part of the year above ground and in the mountains with her husband Perun, where she is fiery and represents the Sun. For the other part of the year, she is with Veles in the underworld.

The second mythical event happens in a yearly cycle. The sky god Perun and his wife Mokoš have a son, named **Svarožić, Jarilo** or **Juraj**^[2]. The infant is kidnapped by patrolling carollers, servants of Veles, who take him to the god of the underworld, where he grows up unaware of his true parentage.

In April, at the apex of spring, the feast day Jarilovo or Jurjevo^[3], he takes the form of a horse and emerges onto the surface of the world, bringing greenery and fertility and earning the nickname "Green Juraj". His departure from the underworld, in some places including a fight against his "father", Veles, is the moment in which spring replaces the winter. With no one recognising him, he then falls in love with the maiden Morana, or Mara, not realising that she is Perun's daughter and therefore his sister. In June, the feast of **Ivanje**^[4], they are wed in Perun's court, atop the World Tree. This divine wedding rite is in itself the pinnacle of the fertile season.

In the mythical narrative, Jarilo betrays his divine wife as summer's end approaches, and she kills him in consequence. From a youthful goddess of vegetation, Mara becomes Morana, cold deity of winter and death, dying herself as the year comes to

^[1] *Veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church.*

^[2] *Variants are used in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe. The English equivalent of the name is George.*

^[3] *St. George's Day*

^[4] *Midsummer, or Saint John's Eve*

a close. The cycle begins anew with Jarilo's wintertime birth and the renewal of the order of the passage of time at the New Year.

Mythological Creatures of Croatia

Most Slavic countries have saved folk stories, tales, myths and traditions about **fae**. The name "vile"^[5] is a generalised Slavic term for usually female nature spirits. In other cultures, they were additionally seen as either minor deities – or demons.

The animistic belief in spirits of nature is common to nature and ancestor-worshipping nations and cultures worldwide, and "vile" have their counterparts in the *apsara* in the Indian vedic myths, the *landvættir* and *Valkyries* in the Germanic and Scandinavian cultures, the *Kami* in Japan and *nymphs* in ancient Greek beliefs and myths.

In the 19th Century, writer and historian Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski divided the fairies of folkloric tradition into three groups, based on where they were said to live: fairies of the *air*, fairies of the *earth*, and fairies of the *water*. He further divided earth fairies into *mountain* fae and *meadow* fae. Others additionally separated them according to the dualistic principle of *good* and *evil*, where fairies of the air are always good, water fairies are always evil, while earth fairies are of fickle character – sometimes good and sometimes evil. The coming of Christianity also brought the belief that fairies were really spirits of women who were unable to find peace in the afterlife – women who were condemned to an eternal life as fae because of their sinful ways in mortal life.

In legend, fairies do not only fly using their wings, but with their "auspices" as well; a veil, shroud or crown which gives them the ability to take flight. They lose their power if a human man steals their wings or their auspices. The only thing marring their harmonious appearance is said to be the *monstrous shape* of their feet, which are in the shape of a cloven or whole hoof. For this reason, they often cover their feet with long dresses, punishing anyone who stares at their feet in various ways. They are usually represented and imagined naked, in order to emphasize their archetypal connection with nature, as well as the sexual element of the attraction for the magical and preternatural. Occasionally, they are shown wearing a long, flowing clothes, colored blue or green.

The mythical and magical fairy ring dances are a vestige of the oldest beliefs that whirlpools and other natural phenomena of circular movement were doorways to another world – the world of the dead. While they serve as a warning in newer legends, in older beliefs and stories they are teachers of a sort, instructing women in the ways of healing and knowledge of plants. Women who studied with fairies were known as "vilenice"^[6], becoming healers knowledgeable in the secret properties of plants. Less common were men, called "vilenjaci". In some folk songs, Mokoš, wife of the Slavic and Croatian thunder god of the old faith, Perun, was seen as the mother goddess of nature and a Vila.

^[5] Pronounced „veele“

⁶ Vilenice / vilenjaci – elves, elvenkin

The fairies were also considered masters and keepers of a sort, like in the legend of the three women by the fireplace, spinning the threads of human lives. The first two spin on spindles, while the third cuts the thread with scissors. In Croatian tales, the fae who take an interest in human lives are known as "suđenice" – fates. The triple fae and the fates can be closely associated with the triad configuration of the Great Goddess – *maiden, mother and crone* as the symbols of *birth, life and death*, but also as "jobs": the maiden is a "vila", the mother is a "vilenica", while the crone is a witch.

In addition to fairies, other nature spirits are known in Slavic mythology. Russian traditional belief has preserved several spirits in humans' lives, such as forest spirits **леший** (Leshy), **домовой** (Domovoi – en. Brownie), spirits of house and hearth, courtyard spirits **дворовой** (Dvorovoi), **полевой** (Polevik) in the fields, **водяной** (Vodyanoy) in the water and many others whom humans must mind and appease in everyday life.

The last of these, the water sprite, is a well kept and far-spread concept in different Slavic legends. The Russians call him Vodyanoy, to the Belarus he is the vadzjanik, vodjanik to the Ukrainians. Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Bulgarians and Macedonians know him as vodnik, but also topielec and utopiec, while the Croats and Serbs call him **vodenjak** – the water carrier. His figure has been one of the astrological star signs since ancient times, though better known under his Latin name – Aquarius. The water bearer is usually imagined as an old man, naked and with many aspects of different physical elements of water animals, especially frogs and fish. He has been depicted as being covered in scales and having the face of a frog and webbed fingers; he has been both green and covered with mud.

In some legends, the water bearer is able to shapeshift into a dog, ram, snake, stag, fish or a small, crying child. These guises serve to lure victims to approach the water and drown. He would call to his victims three times, the power of three having some occult significance in most cultures, and the human's only defence was to reply to the call. It was believed that he lived in deep waters, whirlpools and maelstroms, river-mouths, near mills, in swamps, wells and other bodies of water. Legend spoke of a house, or even a castle made of water or crystal at the bottom of his residence, where those he kidnapped from the surface would live forever to serve and entertain him.

This legendary being was the main scapegoat blamed when people or animals drowned in the rivers and lakes, together with another mythical creature, the **Rusalka**, usually believed to be his wife. He was worshipped by people who lived close to water and depended on it – fishermen, millers, beekeepers and others. To appease the water bearer, especially in earlier times, they would often bring him sacrifices, such as the first fish catch of the year, a smaller kind of animal, bread, salt, fruit or money. A popular folk belief was that millers performed human sacrifices to ensure their safety from his attack.

The **Rusalka** is a female water spirit, similar to the mermaid and nymph of ancient Greece and Rome. In earlier beliefs, she was said to spread the dampness of the water on the fertile ground in the spring, and to maintain the crops. Later, with Christian influence, she was said, along with the "vile", to be the spirit of a young woman who had committed suicide or had been murdered, cursed to wander the afterlife. Rusalka

used their voices and appearance to attract victims, usually young men, whom they would then tie up with their long hair and legs, pulling them into the depths.

Belief in **witches** was also widespread in Croatia from the Middle Ages onwards. It was believed that these were old, especially ugly women, who could be recognised by their red hair, squint, hunched back and goiter. Their behaviour was said to reflect their nature. Witches could be seen and recognised by people born on certain days, whose punishment for this ability was to die young or violently. It was also believed that a young girl close to an old witch could also become a witch, as the old one would have to transfer her knowledge and power to someone as her death approached. Witches were said to blight harvests, weaken other people's cattle by stealing their milk, cause diseases and interfere in matters of the heart.

One of the most famous Croatian mythical creatures is certainly the **pozoj**, a winged serpent–dragon, who the people of Međimurje say is born of swamp mud, from a fish, snake or frog no one has ever seen, or from a cockerel older than seven years. A pozoj can be tamed exclusively by a grabancijaš, a young sorcerer's apprentice.

This introduction only scratched the surface of Old Croatian myths. Croats' early adaptation of Christianity resulted in much of these legends to be lost or assimilated into new beliefs, only to be recreated later as a base for stories and fairy tales (i.e. works of Ivana Brlić–Mažuranić). However, as of lately, the Old Slavic mythology is gaining popularity in both the East and the West.

Croatian Gods slowly return....

Barbara Celjska, the Legend of the Black Queen

by Vida A. Mraz

The forests of Medvednica inspired many legends. Tales of small forest men, fairies, and witches – known as “coprnice” - who met there at night, filled people with awe. So it makes sense that a young queen living on Medvedgrad, whose beauty was bested only by her reported cruelty, would be forever immortalized in legend.

Barbara of Celje (Barbara Celjska) was born in 1392, to Countess Anna of Schaunberg and Hermann II, Count of Celje. Barbara was the youngest of six children.

In 1396, Hermann fought for Hungarian king Sigismund of Luxembourg against the Ottoman Turks. During the battle, Hermann saved Sigismund's life. The king rewarded Hermann with lands and privileges, making the House of Celje one of the most powerful noble families in Croatian lands. They owned the fortress of Medvedgrad, ruled over by Barbara's brother, Frederick. Frederick's first wife was killed, likely murdered by him. His second wife was accused of witchcraft by Hermann and drowned. Frederick was a cruel ruler in Medvedgrad.

At the age of sixteen, Barbara became a beautiful, young bride to thirty-seven year-old King Sigismund. Four years into the marriage, she gave birth to her only child, a daughter named Elizabeth. By her thirteenth birthday, Elizabeth was wed to King Albert II of Germany.

When Sigismund died, Barbara's son-in-law swiftly accused her of treason, took her possessions, and transported her to prison in Bratislava castle. But, Barbara found her way to the Polish royal court, where she negotiated financial support and was granted shelter. Meanwhile, the Hungarian nobility accepted Albert as monarch, Elizabeth being a mere consort.

Albert died in 1439. Two years after her arch-rival's passing, Barbara moved to Bohemia and reconciled with her daughter, now Queen Elizabeth. Elizabeth would start a civil war for the throne on the behalf of her infant son, and die at the age of thirty-three. Her son, however, would be recognized as king of Hungary.

In her lifetime, Barbara of Celje was crowned Queen of Hungary, Queen of Germany, Holy Roman Empress and Queen of Bohemia. She was known for her beauty, intellect, and penchant for political intrigue. The Habsburg court labeled her 'dangerous' and tried to convict her of heresy, alchemy, and immoral and agnostic acts. She died of plague and was buried in Prague on July 11th 1451.

Her life could inspire a novel, but it was the time she spent on Medvedgrad, her family's history and her affinity for astrology, alchemy and black outfits that propelled her from the drab pages of history books into the vibrant world of legends.

Tales were spun about rowdy parties she hosted in Samobor. Men succumbed to her beauty. And, as the legend goes, once the cruel queen became bored, she would throw her lovers off a fortress. She was enamored of lust and of pain. Unlucky men found themselves locked in a cage with a wild boar, as Barbara watched the carnage.

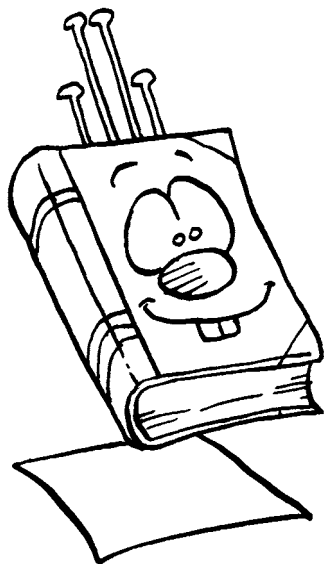
She always wore black. Her long hair was black. She rode a wild, black horse. The queen had a raven and the bird would attack upon her command, clawing at the eyes of her enemies. Thus, the people named her the Black Queen.

The Black Queen was well-versed in dark magic. In times of drought, she ordered rain, and the resulting downpour formed the Plitvice Lakes.

When the Turks came upon Medvedgrad, and no one would help her, the Black Queen summoned the devil and offered him Medvedgrad and her soul. The Devil did her bidding, but the queen regretted her words. To break the curse, she promised twelve buckets of gold to anyone who could carry her around the fortress three times. Many tried and failed because of the devil's fiery traps. Upon her death, the devil came and turned her into a snake queen. And to this day, with her servant snakes, she guards her treasure hidden in Medvedgrad.

Another story says that the Black Queen met Count Vlad Dracula of Transylvania and became a vampire. She rose from her grave and took many innocent lives in Varaždin. She was, at long last, stopped by an Orthodox priest.

The fact that the tales of the Black Queen are with us six centuries later, confirm the strong mark Barbara of Celje left on Croatian history.



Srebrenka Peregrin is a real living storyteller. She started writing in 2015, and is already showing great promise. A writer and storyteller by day, she is an EFL teacher by night. She has published several stories in foreign and Croatian publications, and this year, won her first writing award... actually, two. Her main interests are folk and fairy tales, and the fantasy genre. As a storyteller, she is a regular part of fandom festivals and events. She presents folk stories and fairy tales, legends, myths, her own stories You might find it interesting that she also tells tales that your favorite book characters might have listened in their youth. Her superpower is doing all that while being a mother of two and volunteering with therapy dogs.

The featured story was written as a part of a writing sprint event (Pričotrk) during Sferakon 2016. The participants had one hour and a random first sentence to work with. Among 20 others, Srebrenka's story was picked as a winner.

Contact or follow the author on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/srebrenka.peregrin> or vial email: srebrenka.peregrin@gmail.com

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Translated to English by author

He Who Lives May Tell the Tale

by Srebrenka Peregrin

He spent about half an hour looking for one of the organizers, to inquire why all the exits had been locked, when the sound system blared, "SFeraKon Survivor begins in five, four..."

Several people began to murmur. He was obviously not the only one without a clue as to what was going on. Several parents with young children pointed out there was no way they could stay. Those most insistent were let out. When others began to insist as well, heads were shaken and security bars lowered.

Security bars? He smiled. This would be too easy.

Yesterday, it had taken him over two hours to find someone willing to chat – someone without company – and then two more until the youngster was properly pissed. The young one was barely worth the effort in the end. It seemed today would turn out to be a breeze.

The lights dimmed. Those gathered in the hallway were clearly divided, according to their reactions, into three groups. So typical – some stood, as if frozen, and watched as the rest were either getting ready to fight or already fleeing.

He was in the flight group, of course. Blending in was always a neat tactic.

Some of the classrooms were still too bright because of the open windows. He chose one at the end of the hall. Holding the doors open, he let the others enter first. As the last one in, he passed his fingers over the lock, welding it shut. The only thing passing through the doors were screams and shouts. Survivor was in full swing. What-

ever it was that the organizers had prepared as part of it this time. Soon enough, it would be similar in here, but the preps for that were his responsibility alone.

He inhaled deeply, enjoying the moment. There was no better feeling than a sure catch, and the pleasure of knowing he did not have to rush it. Lions must have felt this way when they knew they did not have to move from the sun under which they dozed.

He jumped to the ceiling, shutting out some of the lights. People turned. Smartly dressed, cosplayers, students in jeans – the mask did not matter. They were all the same under their costumes. They were all cowards.

He would not talk to them. It was below him. Only stupid villains waste their time talking to their prey. Lions never spoke to zebras. He leaped again to smash more light bulbs.

Apart from the frightened looks, he was now expecting some screams as well. Perhaps even an attempt at flight. Somebody from the outside was trying to get in, but the welded locks hindered them. They would also stop anyone who tried to get out.

Strangely enough, it did not seem anyone was keen on getting out. For a group of frightened SFeraKon goers in flight, they seemed a little too peaceful. They watched him, as he landed, and they did not say a word.

They didn't really care that his costume was not a costume after all. As if it was all the same that he could reach the lamp in a single leap. Why were they smiling?

He stepped back. To find his balance, he assured himself. Still, he was not sure of anything anymore. Was one of the 'zebras' crossing her arms?

"You know," she said, "they're playing Survivor out there."

"I know," he said.

"And do you know why *we* are *here*?" she asked.

"Because you didn't want to take part?" he countered.

"Exactly," she said. "It wouldn't be fair."

She uncrossed her arms and took her costume off. It had marvelous wings – he had thought earlier it would have been a pity to ruin them. While he was pondering what it was that would not be fair, he noticed the others were disrobing as well. Not only the cosplayers, but the smartly-dressed ones too, and even the students.

He swallowed hard. Underneath their costumes they were not cowards after all – they all had the impenetrable skin of dragon-hunters. He yelped, opened his mouth wide, but there were too many of them.



When the door was finally unwelded, one of the organizers was shaking his head.

"You guys didn't have to be scared shitless. It's just a game. You missed all the fun of SFeraKon Survivor."

"Not all of it." A girl with wings smiled and winked at him. He was almost sorry he had not gone hiding with them.

"And what've you done with the lights?" he asked.

"It wasn't us," she said with a shrug, "At least, none of us coming out. You really ought to work on the security level next year."

"Yeah," a student leaving behind her said. "A dragon could get in without you ever recognizing it."

It is hard to describe and tell you who Aleksandar Žiljak is with only one word ... well, even a few more words are not enough. As one of the most prolific male Croatian writers, Aleksandar is also an illustrator, translator, editor in Chief for UBIQ, book editor, and a cover artist. He has written novels, numerous short stories, and won many writing awards, as well as awards for his illustrations. And that's not all, because he actively promotes Croatian fandom by writing and translating various articles about Croatian sf&f scene, and publishing them on many foreign websites. Most recent news is that one of his short stories, "Bells in the Distance", has been staged as a play. But maybe, Aleksandar Žiljak is most known for his lectures on fandom conventions, especially the Book Auction as part of SFERAKON. If you ever get a chance to participate in one of those, don't miss that opportunity.

Contact or follow the author on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/aleksandar.ziljak>, or mail him at aziljak@globalnet.hr

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Translated to English by author

All the Colours of Black

by Aleksandar Žiljak

It's sunny morning in the space port, the first after five grey days of continuous showers threatening to wash the hotel away into oblivion. Lukas is absorbed in the collected Tezuka, book three, the size of the phone-book. Suddenly, the doorbell tears the morning peace apart. Lukas looks up as the entrance membrane opens and a woman with a luggage in her hand enters the vestibule. She must be about thirty-five, attractive, black-haired. She looks around, as if assessing the place, and then comes to the desk and puts her suitcases down.

"Please, do you have a double-bedded room?" A man enters immediately after her, heavy bag hanging from his shoulder. He's older than the woman, his face is refined, his hair streaked in first traces of grey. He wears dark glasses. Lukas expects him to take them off, and it is only then that he notices a folded white cane in the man's hand and realizes he's blind.

"Room 109, Madam", Lukas answers immediately. He always knows which rooms are available, he almost takes pride in it. "It also has a bath and a kitchenette. And it's on the first floor, you don't have too much stairs." For a moment, there's a barely noticeable twitch on the man's face. Pity is the last thing he wants. "And it's also dry", Lukas adds quickly: a dry room is jackpot in this climate. The woman passes their IDs to Lukas. They're married. Miryana and Lavoslav Veltz. Lukas reads the data quickly as he gives them their key-cards. And then his eyes stop on their occupations and, as the couple climbs the stairs, he hopes that his amazement wasn't too visible. Because, Lavoslav Veltz is a painter.



Two weeks passed since the Veltzes checked in. The day nears its end and the first purple of the twilight pours across the sky, as if spilled from a cup. It is time for the Veltzes to return, Lukas muses as he sprays the lantern-fungi with nutritious solution. They respond with contented purr and pale yellow light that tears the semi-darkness of the vestibule apart. The Veltzes go out every day, weather allowing. He, wearing the somewhat outdated white suit and wide-brimmed hat, dark glasses and the white cane. She's always next to him, in a flared skirt and a white blouse, her hair under a silk kerchief, carrying a sketch-pad under her arm. To Lukas, they look as if from some dated movie, living in a time-line of their own, lagging behind for centuries, and enjoying it in some privately quiet way of theirs. And maybe that's why he likes them so much.

They usually don't return until late afternoon, tired, but with the sketch-pad filled with new Lavoslav's thumbnails, sketches and drawings. Tumbledown wooden houses by the river, some abandoned, some dangerously not, waiting to be carried away by the murky flood. Impenetrable rainforest covering the hills above the spaceport, trees almost suffocated by vines. Huge starships on the apron, waiting for their freight to be loaded. Streets flooded after night cloudbursts, market stands filled with fruits, stares from the moving, whirling mass of humans and aliens. Brief, passing moments in lives captured by the stroke of pencil across the paper. "Excuse me, we need help!"

"Right away, Mrs. Veltz." Lukas lays down the sprinkler and follows Miryana out to the porch. Lavoslav waits next to a large root tied to a collapsible wheeled frame. The root, dug out of earth a long time ago and thrown aside, resembles some ominously twisted hand, gnarly, knotted fingers clutching greedily at some unseen treasure. The fingers are overgrown by thick velvety layers of lichens and mosses, patches of dirty grey under the soft red and green and yellow. A fine subject, Lukas approves as he and Miryana bring the frame into the vestibule. It takes them some ten sweaty minutes to rise the heavy root to the first floor and wheel it into the room.

"You are so kind, we could never manage ourselves", Miryana wipes the sweat off her forehead as she puts the root away into the corner of the room. "In other hotels, they certainly wouldn't even let us bring it in. Are you for some drink?"

"Not now, I'm afraid", Lukas declines Miryana's offer with his hand. "Lantern-fungi await me. They have to be merry and happy, or I'll end up in the dark."

"Perhaps tomorrow afternoon? Around five o'clock? Tea?"

Lukas wants to refuse, he likes to keep a distance of courteous formality between himself and his guests. A matter of experience, long and occasionally painful. But he notices Lavoslav touching the canvases, delivered several days ago, stacked against the wall. Lavoslav chooses one and tries the texture of the weaving under his fingers. And Lukas recollects sketches and drawings, his curiosity becomes almost unbearable. "All right", he agrees finally. "Tomorrow at five."



Lukas takes a look at his watch, it's ten minutes to five. The membrane is before him, red 109 glitters in the semidarkness of the corridor, red triangle beneath the digits. Lukas touches the triangle and rings the bell. "Come in!", Miryana replies from the inside. Red triangle changes its colour to green and Lukas enters the room.

Miryana and Lavoslav sit before a canvas on the easel. Paints, cleaning rugs, cups and jars, painting knives, brushes neatly arranged on the table next to them. The root became a mythic monster on the canvas, alive in the inextricable knot of lines. Lavoslav dips a brush in the paint on the palette. Lukas follows him with his eyes as he skillfully goes around the sketch, laying down dark brown background. Miryana watches the canvas and Lavoslav's movements tensely. At that moment, she becomes aware of Lukas's presence and her eyes sway from the canvas. "You're early!"

"Miryana!" Angry and begging at the same time, Lavoslav's hand stops above the canvas, suddenly insecure, paralysed in the midst of a movement. Lavoslav's hand reminds Lukas of a robot with a malfunctioning camera that he saw once. He can almost hear helpless buzzing of the servo-motors as the blinded processor tries to decide what next. Miryana immediately returns her gaze to the canvas and the hand completes its stroke.

Later, as Miryana puts the kettle on. "You wish to know, don't you?" Lukas tries to deny it, but Lavoslav interrupts him. "You're not the first one. I owe part of my success to my ... condition. Perhaps even bigger part, critics never liked me. Too much colour, triviality of motifs, I don't follow trends. So they write." Resentment in his voice is tangible. "But, people like to buy paintings painted by the blind painter. It's a good subject for chitchat. Goes with tea and cookies. And they can only guess how I manage to do it."

Suddenly, Lukas understands. It's so obvious! "You and Miryana. You are connected telepathically?"

"Miryana is my sight", Lavoslav nods. "I read her thoughts, as those who have no idea use to phrase it. And I see everything she sees. When I work, she sits next to me and I look at the canvas through her eyes. Sketch, paints, everything ..."

"Without her ..."

"Without her, there's no light ... Nor colours, it's all just one big black ..." Then Miryana brings the tea and sits next to Lavoslav. He takes her hand in his, tenderly, with love, but Lukas sees a spasm of fear in that touch, like a child afraid to be left alone in the dark ...



A month passed. It is late afternoon and it's showering outside. Torrential rains last for days now. Lukas thinks of the Veltzes, rains interrupted their walks. Only Miryana goes out, for an hour or two at most, to run errands in the city. It takes her somewhat longer today, she left after lunch and still didn't return ... Suddenly, a bell rings and a police woman enters through the membrane. Lukas looks at her questioningly, police doesn't come here often. "You have Miryana Veltz staying at your place?"

"Yes", Lukas replies. The police woman removes the hood from her head and takes off her cap, running her fingers through her blonde hair, looking for words. She'd rather be somewhere else now. She's young and they sent her to do what nobody

else wants to do. With chill creeping into his heart, Lukas realizes something terrible happened. "What's the matter with her?"

"There was a disaster. A land-slide, down on the bank, the river washed away part of a street ... There are many victims, we don't know how many yet. Rescue party recovered her body, we searched it. Found her ID and your key-card. Was she staying alone?"

"No, she was with her husband ..." And as he takes the police woman upstairs, Lukas musters his courage. He'll need it, he knows he'll need it. "Room 109. I'll tell him." The police woman gives him a grateful look as they pause before the room. Lukas rings the bell, the triangle turns green and the membrane lets them in. Just one glance and Lukas, almost relieved, realizes that Lavoslav knows. He saw everything that Miryana saw. He saw her death, too.

And now he sits before the canvas, holding a flat brush in his hand. His sketches are scattered around, some torn, some crumpled in helpless fury. The tubes are squeezed empty, all the colours are mixed on the palette into one. The brush dips into a dense, sticky mass. Heavy, oily drops drip as the brush searches for the canvas. A desperate stroke filled with grief, then another, and another. From one edge of the canvas to the other, horizontally, vertically, in all directions. More paint, the brush collides with the canvas, dark brown background and the root disappear beneath it, stroke after stroke. The root like an ominous hand, twisted, gnarly, knotted, the grey under the red and green and yellow, covered by the thick layer of black. In the silence of the room, as it showers relentlessly outside, one world becomes a big black, without light, without colour, just the black.

What is a Croatian fanzine, magazine or a short story collection without the work of Milena Benini? Milena is Croatia's most prolific female author, published both in Croatian and English. She has numerous short stories tucked under her belt, as well as a couple of fiction novels, writing guides, and writing awards. We are thankful for her wonderful translations of works by authors such as Michel Houellebecq, Jules Verne, Michael Moorcock, Terry Pratchett, Douglas Adams, Thomas de Quincy, Stephen King and many more.

Contact or follow the author on Twitter: @milerama, Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/milena.benini>, or as mumblr on Tumblr.

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Translated to English by author

A Witch's Patience

by Milena Benini

There is a spot of blood on the road.

If it were any other time of the year, she would have missed it. In summer, her bike's wheels would have been raising dust, and she'd have been riding with her eyes squinted, blind to anything smaller than a bear. In autumn, the surrounding trees would have covered the narrow path in spots of red, amber and sun-yellow, drowning out the single crimson cry like the sea taking a life.

Unfortunately, neither in summer nor in autumn would it be possible for the spot to appear. Summer saps all life juices with its scorching heat. Autumn needs them to create fruit for the forest creatures. There are no surpluses in nature. Very little reserve, this world is running on.

In case you were wondering: winter is sleep, so it's not even an issue. Besides, in winter, the blood spot would stand out for a mile, and she'd be walking instead of riding, and would never venture so far away from her house on the lee-side of the hill.

But it is spring, and the light green of the young grass creates a contrasting background for the spot. It is small, and almost hidden in the grass. Even so, she doesn't ride through it. She swerves at the last moment, taking pity on what she thinks is a strange, early flower. I would curse through clenched teeth if I had them. She rides on, ignoring the gust of deep-winter cold that flooded her in passing. Her brain wrote it off as a patch of shadow, despite the fact that it is almost noon, the sun directly overhead.

Living brains are inordinately good at writing off things they're not familiar with. Particularly when they're young, and focused on reaching the town as quickly as possible, so they could get their chores done and spend the rest of the time hanging with the handsome merchant who holds the stall in the last row from the church.

I will have to do better next time.



Mary entered the town and immediately turned right. It was the longer path, but she was at her destination now and could afford a small detour. The slope was slighter here, requiring less effort. She'd spent some precious non-toxic water washing that morning. She wasn't going to waste it by getting all sweaty and puffy.

She could have gotten off and walked the last rise, too, but that would mean becoming the same like all the other people who came to town for the fair. So she took the road around the church instead, rang her bell a few times to get the slow walkers out of her way. Arrived to the square still smelling of crushed herbs, still pedaling.

Her eyes flew towards the edge of the square immediately. The blue and green stripes of the spare-parts stall stood out among the reds and yellows of the cloth-sellers and the cobblers. Mary smiled. She could not see under the tent from her vantage point, but it didn't matter. He would be there. There was nobody else to bring the broken entrails of long-dead machines to the fair. If the tent was here, so was he.

Forcing her gaze away, she got off her bike, locked it to one of the metal rings set into the wall of the town hall, and took out the bag she'd brought in her basket. Their wares usually traded well: honey and incense and tea were luxuries. Most merchants were glad to have them, for further trade if not for themselves. And, of course, every now and then, somebody would lower their voice and ask about ... that other stuff.

Walking between the stalls, Mary bit down a smile. There *was* no other stuff, of course, no witches, and Mary's family was always scrupulously honest. If someone asked for a cure for the wasting disease, they would get only sympathy. But if people asked for love potions or wards against evil, her family was happy to provide it. The love potions at least were guaranteed to work. Not for long, true, but give someone enough desire and they'll invent love where there is none, or so Grandmother used to say. And wards made people feel better, which often helped them face whatever was really ailing them.

Mary shook her head to clear it of stray thoughts and love potions. The vinegar-seller drove a hard bargain: she needed her wits about her to bargain the price of a bottle of vinegar down to a reasonably small measure of honey. Eventually, they reached a mutually satisfying deal. Mary was just putting the bottle into her bag when a sound – not a cry, not a word, more like the threat of a seagull than human voice – made her turn around.

The Madman was standing not three paces from her, finger pointing. "Witch!" he cried, in his half-articulate way. "Witch!"

Mary closed her eyes and felt her cheeks redden. She didn't need that. Not now.

Nobody took the Madman seriously, of course. The town let him wander through their streets, opened one of the old cellars in winter for him to sleep in, fed him scraps, because they were all decent people, but they did not take him seriously. Everybody knew witches did not exist, and ghosts did not walk between the trees at sunset. Yet they all looked at her, too. That was how humans functioned. If one of them pointed, all the monkeys looked in that direction. And fell silent, waiting for the sound of the predator.

The pointing finger returned among its companions. Dirty palm went towards Mary's chest, as if to pat it, stopped just short.

"Beware," said the Madman quietly.

Mary looked at him. Dark bloodshot eyes seemed unexpectedly calm. Thin fingers curled into a fist over Mary's heart and disappeared under the dirt-brown sleeve. "It is spring." He bit his lip, as if holding more words back. Then he turned and disappeared, as abruptly as he'd appeared. Mad brains were good at disappearing. If they wanted to live.

A hand landed on Mary's shoulder. "Has he been bothering you?" asked the handsome merchant from the stall furthest from the church. "People like him shouldn't be permitted to hang around the fair."

Mary shook her head lightly. The handsome merchant's body was warm behind her back. "No," she said, half her mind wondering where the Madman could have gone. The other half was too busy calculating how long she could make the contact last, whether leaning against the young merchant in a false faint would work in her favor or against it. "No, it's all right," she muttered at last, having settled on simply not moving away from the handsome merchant's wide palm. "I'm fine."

"You must be shaken," said the merchant. "Let me buy you a drink to warm you up."

Mary lowered her head to hide her smile. Her eyes were still searching the wall where the Madman seemed to have vanished. She could have whispered a thanks. She didn't.



Evening is stretching the shadows over the forest path when the second spot of blood appears. It is larger than the first, and fresher, its color the lively red of arterial blood. It lies on the young grass like a patch of velvet.

The bike arrives like clockwork, racing the last rays of the sun. Mary is smiling. The drink with the handsome merchant had turned into two, and then into a quick grope behind his stall. That was as much as a girl could ask from a first tentative step after a three-month flirtation over the counter.

She was careful to stop before things went too far; she wanted to be remembered as unfinished business, not as light entertainment. The traveling salesmen only visited the town once a month. That was a long time to remember a girl. But unfinished business, which was a different thing, much harder to forget than a quick tussle. Mary was well aware of that.

The front wheel skids over the blood spot. She didn't even slow down. The leaves in the forest whisper with the wind of her passing, or maybe giggle in satisfaction.

It has worked. Now, the only thing left to do is wait.

Waiting comes easy once you get used to it. A hundred years pass in the blink of an eye if you let your mind melt into the forest, set into the rhythm of the trees. And I don't need a hundred years any more. Not half a human hour passed when a figure appeared on the path, quick steps following the narrow trace of the bicycle tire. The figure is tall, blond, and handsome, if you like that sort of thing.

It sees the smeared spot of blood. Stops, unable to resist the lure. A hand reaches out, fingernails long, growing longer as they near the spot.

I am about to step out when a hand clasps my wrist. (None of this is an accurate description of what is going on, but it's as close to it as living minds can grasp.)

"Don't," says a familiar voice. "She can deal with him."

I try to free my hand. It's not easy when it's neither a hand nor long dirty fingers holding it.

"I've been waiting for two hundred and sixty four years for this. I will not stop now."

"Please. Let her."

"Just because she has your blood in her—"

"Yours, too." The non-fingers around my non-wrist become softer. "Do you not trust your own blood? Just because we failed to protect—"

I turn and slash in the same movement, my other non-hand turning into a blade in mid-flight. The dark brown robes slit, as does non-flesh beneath them. "It's not about trust," I say to the figure curled on the ground. "This is *my duty*." I stand over him, add another slash for good measure. "You let him burn you alive."

"So you could save our child."

"I *must* stop him."

"Not like this," says the Madman, dying. Not that it will stop him for long.

I run out of the forest, but the figure on the road has already passed on. The bloodied tyre is a trace I can follow, though. And I know the figure is following the same trace.

I race. Like I didn't race two hundred and sixty four years ago, when another bout of speed would have perhaps saved my life, perhaps that of my husband. It's hard to tell what would have happened, given that we were pursued by a demon.

Then, I was too slow, burdened by a physical body already abused by life and pain. Today, I overtake the figure easily.

It is standing before the small house half-way up a sharp hill. On its back, a bag with unsold wares looks like a giant hump. The long shadows make the house look like an etching against the sky, the figure threatening and larger than life.

It is exactly what it looks like, if your mind is not desperate to fool itself into thinking otherwise. Mine isn't, not any more.

"Stop!" I yell at the top of my non-voice. The figure turns, spreads its hands.

It is the Madman, again. Behind his back, the figure with the hump-bag continues towards the house.

My non-throat is dry with very real despair. "No."

"If you stop him now, she will never learn to protect herself! In another generation, we'll just have to go through this again!"

"None of them learned!"

"So? Is that what you're going to spend the eternity doing? Protecting your offspring?"

"What else is there?"

I rush towards the house, ignoring his answer. He grabs me, like so many times before. My non-hands turn into blades, his non-flesh into metal to stop another carnage. I turn into fire to melt him; he is all ice, hissing but holding out. I am an octopus, crawling over his frozen limbs; he is long blades of sea grass, curling around all of mine.

The figure is knocking on the cottage door.

I am a thousand black butterflies flying towards the darkened sky. He needs a moment to come up with a counter-measure; that's all I need.

I coalesce into a huge bird and dive towards the figure before the door opens. Behind me, the Madman is a mountain cat, jumping for my wings.

The figure turns, handsome features showing their true nature. Before my talons reach the demon's eyes, the mountain cat's paws clasp over my tail, taking me down. I scream and scream and scream as the mountain cat drags me away, as the door opens, as the figure turns its back to us, face once again blond and young and innocent when it is anything but.

Mary opens the door.



We're deep in the forest again. My tail is displumed, one of my wings bleeding. The mountain cat opens its jaw, licks my open wound. I get up, release all appearance. The mountain cat looks at me with sad eyes that see me still.

"Until next spring," he says, paws dissipating. "Unless you would consider...?"

"I wouldn't," I say, and go back to being just leaves, sap and waiting.

In the distance, a column of smoke rises from half-way up a sharp hillside. My non-eyes see a human figure escaping with bare life. Mary jumps over her bicycle, rolls down the hill, hops over the brook that babbles on the opposite side of the hill. The demon pursuing her reaches water, hisses, disappears.

Who would have thought, centuries ago, that all-out technical destruction would bring out the magic that had lain dormant for so long? Witches, that's who. So when shadows rose through the night, we protected what was left of mankind from monsters, and destroyed all but a handful of the strongest ones. But we paid for that, oh so dearly. All our bloodlines cursed and haunted. Forever.

Mary is lying on the opposite side of the brook, her sobbing so loud even my human ears would have heard. But there is nothing I can do to help her now. She will have to find her own way. For a flutter of a leaf, I wonder whether my once-husband was right, and I should just die in peace and let the future of our family take care of itself. But then I think of all the ones that did not survive: Mary's mother and aunt only the most recent. My mother and aunt as well. Myself. My husband. No. I will catch the demon trying to destroy us, some day, sooner or later. I will catch it, and destroy it forever.

I close my eyes, let myself disperse into the forest for a season or a century. I will wait as long as I have to.

Sometimes, all a dead witch has is patience.



A chat with Tajana Štasni, Croatian Cosplay Queen



Tajana Štasni is Croatia's most famous and most experienced cosplayer, with more than 15 year experience of working the thread and needle, the glue-gun and hammer, soldering and stitching. She has won numerous awards, and when her costumes became unsurpassable in their quality and execution, she has turned to judging many more in return. Nowadays, everyone is excited to see what she will produce for her next cosplay opportunity, and I am sure you are just as curious about her beginnings and inspirations as I was. Luckily, I had an opportunity to participate in some of her projects and to see her skill grow. Her imagination really is endless, knowing no bounds or obstacles.

Q: Going back to your beginnings, what drew you into the SF&F world?

Tajana: The E. T. movie. It was the first SF I ever watched and I fell under its spell.

Q: What inspired you to make your first cosplay costume and what was it?

Tajana: Star Wars were my first inspiration. Inspired by the new saga Episode 1: The Phantom Menace, I made my first official cosplay, an Amidala Decoy Gown, back in 1999. Mind you, back then I did not know of the word *cosplay* and I had no idea that there were happenings like cons...

Q: Where and how did you learn to make costumes?

Tajana: I learned to operate a sewing machine from my grandmother, she showed me some basic operations and the rest is history. She also taught me some basic pattern drafting and I started making my first costume when I was 13. Since then, through trial and error, I have made progress in developing my sewing skills. I ended up going to the School of Applied Arts and Design, where I learned some basic modeling techniques that I used in costume making. I always liked special effects make-up and I devoured every book about it that I could get my hands on.



Q: What was your favorite costume to work on?

Tajana: It is hard to answer that. Every costume I've made has something that I liked to work on. It's like asking a mother who her favorite child is.

Q: What was the most difficult one you made?

Tajana: The most difficult to make was the Alien costume, since some parts had to be cast from silicone. I had lots of help from my friends back then, Igor and Zrinka.





Q: What is your greatest achievement as a cosplayer?

Tajana: Having made over 50 cosplay and original costumes in 17 years of my career. And that I am now invited to judge cosplay competitions.

Q: What is your favorite fabric/material to work with? And which one do you just hate?

Tajana: My favorite is velvet. Just the feel of it is gorgeous, not to mention all effects you get. I do not have one I hate; being a fabric fetishist!

Q: You have appeared on many TV shows and at movie promotions, like Star Wars. How was it working on such a big project with so many costumes? Did you have help?

Tajana: It was exhausting because you are given just weeks for all the costumes, but I had a lot of help from my friends. I am in big debt to them, without them some projects would not be possible!

Q: Have you had an opportunity to work on a movie set? Which ones, and what can you tell us about those experiences?

Tajana: I have worked as an assistant to costume designers and as a costume designer myself. It is huge work and very exhausting, but I love it. I worked on "La Femme



Musketeer", "Egon and The Hole", and I'm currently working on the fantasy documentary series "Northwest Wind".

Q: What was the last costume you made for yourself, and for a commission?

Tajana: The last one for myself was the Lady of Pain from the D&D Planescape setting, and my last commissioned costume was Quorra from Tron.

Q: What are you currently working on?

Tajana: On a commissioned Kylo Ren costume.

Q: Let's talk dream projects: if you had free access to resources and tools, what would you make and why?

Tajana: A fully working Batman suit. Because Batman!

Q: Can you tell us more about the cosplay scene in Croatia?

Tajana: I am glad that cosplay has started to be a thing. In the last three years it has grown so much. I see lots of talented people who are doing an excellent job!

Q: What's your next big plan?

Tajana: It's not big, but it's a plan. I want to show my daughter that dressing up as your favorite character is a super hobby and can be much fun! There is a saying: teach your kids to cosplay, and they won't have money for drugs.

Q: Is there a future for cosplay in Croatia? Can you see yourself making a living from it, cosplaying and costume making?

Tajana: There is a future, lots of conventions and events have started to see benefits from cosplay. There are now competitions that offer great rewards for one's work. I do not see myself living from the fruits of cosplay, we are not the country for it. I can see myself living from movie costumes and sets. I am currently steering my career into organising cosplay weddings.

Check out Tajana's work and contact her via:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AzdajaCosplay>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/brocadebudoir>

Etsy shop: <http://www.etsy.com/shop/BrocadeBudoir>

Email: tstasni@gmail.com

VIKTOR – Croatian Steampunk Point-and-Click Adventure Game

by Danijel Štriga



Set in a steampunk world populated by animals and political stereotypes, *Viktor* tells the story of an overweight wild boar who works as a humble street sweeper while dreaming of a better world, one without hunger, poverty or powerful authority figures that aren't him. After losing his job due to his short temper, Viktor decides to undergo an epic quest to fix everything that's wrong with the world – by becoming the new Emperor of Austria–Hungary.

Developed by a trio of Croatian game enthusiasts calling themselves **Studio Spektar**, *Viktor* is a 2D point and click adventure game heavily indebted to the legendary adventure games such as *Monkey Island*, *Day of the Tentacle* and *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. During its two years of development, *Viktor* received media coverage on many adventure gaming portals and won the Most Creative Upcoming Indie Game award at one of the biggest gaming shows in Europe, Reboot Infogamer. As of March 2017, the game is finally available on Steam.

What is it all about?



A boar named Viktor had a turbulent youth full of adventure, fear, several strong blows to the head and a short prison sentence. His attempt to lead a calmer life fails after his short temper gets him fired. In a fit of megalomania, Viktor then decides to depose the current emperor of Austria–Hungary and take his place.

Viktor's crazy journey takes him through beautifully drawn and animated steampunk versions of Vienna, Kraków, Prague, Budapest, Dante's Inferno, and more. Throughout his adventures, Viktor encounters numerous figures from history and fiction, such as Franz Kafka, H.G. Wells, Nikola Tesla, Lake Kubilius and Dr. Jekyll.

While most of Viktor's story takes place in central Europe, the rest of the world is also fleshed out. Most countries are cartoon parodies of the times when they were at

the height of their power. Every country has its distinct style of architecture, technology, and living. If you feel insulted by anything you see in *Viktor*, feel free to tell everyone how terrible the game is and where they can buy it.

Insulting? Terrible? Tell me more!



Set in a cartoonish version of the late 19th century, Viktor is a classic 2D point-and-click adventure, similar to games created in the 1990s by LucasArts and Sierra On-Line. The game's interface allows you to try to kick, grab, look at or talk to anything you encounter. Anything worth taking can be stored inside your inventory and used later with questionable, yet fun results. In a conversation, you can often choose to encourage, provoke or confuse the characters around Viktor. All the while, the game allows you to explore and experiment without fear of dying or getting stuck. If you feel like you made a wrong choice or forgot to do something, there is always a way to solve any problem. *Viktor* also features a number of mini-games: from puzzles and fight sequences to race games.

Viktor is quite possibly the silliest psychological drama you will ever play. Unlike most lead characters in point-and-click adventures, Viktor is not a one-dimensional, good-mannered cynic: he has issues and unrealistic expectations. Viktor can be happy, confused, scared or raging mad. He can laugh, yell and sometimes even whisper if satiated. It's almost as if he was a real humanoid boar in steampunk Austria-Hungary.



Who made this mess?



Viktor was made by a trio of enthusiasts from Croatia, working under the name Studio Spektar.

A graduate of the Academy Of Fine Arts, **Sven Nemet** drew most of *Viktor's* two-dimensional art. After illustrating countless comics, children's books and board games, Sven finally felt ready to create a big point-and-click adventure. He was joined by his two friends, a programmer and an animator. In his free time, Sven loves entertaining people, running tabletop role-playing games, LARPs and claiming he will learn how to play guitar better than Lister from *Red Dwarf*.

Mostly responsible for *Viktor's* animations, **Zvonimir Barać** has been a cartoon enthusiast since early childhood, and loves to make free comics and cartoons with simple yet mind-boggling humor. Zvonimir enjoys eating unhealthy food, playing tabletop role-playing games and LARPs, aggravating people, visiting flea markets, collecting Nerf guns, shooting people with Nerf guns and taking cover after he hits people with Nerf guns.

Born and raised on the classic adventure and role-playing video games from the 1990s, *Viktor's* programmer **Aleksandar Gavrilović** is currently studying Computer Science at the University of Zagreb. He hopes for a bright future in game development or, if that fails, a cushy government job. Aleksandar loves terrible puns, trash television shows, junk food and everything else that is bad for you.

If you loved everything you read about *Viktor*, you can buy the game on Steam.

To learn more about *Viktor* and his creators, go to <http://studiospektar.hr> or follow them on

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ViktorTheBoar>,

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/viktorthegame/>

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-MYh7JLMo7JWLlkSkbzilg>

Featured Artist: Borna Nikola Žeželj

Last, but not least, I want to introduce to you the artist that made this Parsek so shiny looking, Borna Nikola Žeželj.

The cover of this issue features Perun, calling upon thunder to strike Veles in his snake form coiled around Perun's horse. It is one of more prominent scenes in Slavic mythology. And the backcover features a scene of worshiping the old Gods.

Borna also drew inspiration from two stories in this issue, Mnemosea and Grief, and they are featured alongside the stories. He really did phenomenal work with all four, and he is yet another undiscovered gem I got the honor of introducing to you. If you liked his work, please like his FB page which he finally created so he could connect with World(con). Feel free to leave him an encouraging message.

Borna was born in 1985, Zagreb, Croatia. During his second year as a physics student at the Faculty of Science in Zagreb, he became interested in art and switched universities. He graduated in 2014 on Academy of Fine Arts, Department for Restoration and Conservation of Art. Ever since his days at the academy he has been working as a storyboard and commercial artist, 2D animator and designer, mainly for a Croatian video production company Brojka Produkcija where he worked on many projects for large domestic and international companies. In 2017, he created the cover artwork for the book "Dragon's Prize" by Maya Starling, which marks his first step into the world of book cover illustrations.

<https://web.facebook.com/BornaNikolaZezelj/>





SFeraKon

May 11-13, 2018
Zagreb, Croatia

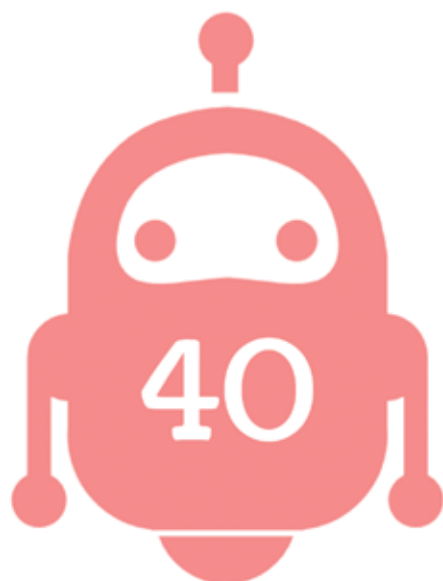
In 2018, we are celebrating:

200th anniversary of the first publication of the book **Frankenstein** by Mary Shelley

55th anniversary of Soviet cosmonaut **Valentina Tereshkova** becoming the first woman in space

55th anniversary of the first episode of **Doctor Who**

50th anniversary of the premiere of **2001: A Space Odyssey**



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LIBURNIKON

When: August 18-20, 2017 (by Kulturni Front)
Venue: Elementary School "Rikard K. Jeretov"
Nova Cesta 53, Opatija, Croatia
Web: <http://www.liburnikon.com/en/>
Fb: <https://www.facebook.com/liburnikon>



RIKON - 20th anniversary

When: October 6-8, 2017 (by 3. Zmaj) -
Venue: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Sveučilišna avenija 4, Rijeka, Croatia
Web: <http://rikonrijeke.com/en/>
Fb: <https://www.facebook.com/RikonRijeka>



FANTASTIKON

When: March, 2018 (by F&ST)
Venue: FESB,
Rudera Boškovića 32, Split, Croatia
Web: <http://fantastikon.com/en/>
Fb: <https://www.facebook.com/fantastikon/>



ISTRAKON

When: April 6-8, 2018 (by Albus)
Venue: Špomen dom
Šetalište Pazionske gimnazije 3, Pazin, Croatia
Web: <http://www.albus.hr/en/>
Fb: <https://www.facebook.com/Istrakon/>



SFERAKON - 40th anniversary

When: May 11-13, 2018 (by SFera) -
Venue: FER
Unska 3, Zagreb, Croatia
Web: <http://sferakon.org/english/>
Fb: <https://www.facebook.com/SFeraKon>



MARSONIKON

When: June, 2018 (by Orion)
Venue: Brod Fortress
Vukovarska ul. 1, Slavonski brod, Croatia
Fb: <https://www.facebook.com/Marsonikon>

