

**NOSF magazine #22**  
Presents Croatian  
Science Fiction Author  
**Milena Benini**



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With each new issue of **NOSF**, starting with this one, there'll be an English supplement presenting Croatian Sci-Fi authors.

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## Dragon Is A State Of Mind

by Milena Benini

One slumbers. Birds gossip in the forest surrounding one's lair, leaves whisper lullabies to droplets of sun that bathe them like hand-maidens. The air is warm yet fresh, smelling of the brook that flows just behind the next hill, always just behind the next hill. There had been rain, earlier, one knows it by the soft touch of moisture in the cracks of one's skin. There is a collective word for all of the above, one just needs to remember it ... ah, yes. Spring.

One slumbers in spring, like in the winter just past, in so many springs and winters and others. The force of belief has grown so diluted, slumbering is about all one can do. Holding on to sheer existence, teeth and claws. There had been a time, long ago, when one would have felt offended by the very idea. The glorious past ...

Times change, however, and with it the beliefs of men. One had seen it before, happening to the deities of springs and hills, and even earlier, with those half-animal creatures that used to be gods before humans dared sanctify their own image. But one didn't believe it could happen to his own kind as well. With hindsight wisdom, one now knows it was a foolish misconception. But now, one is too weak to do anything much but slumber. And wait ...

Stroke ... stroke ... Sunwarm ... calm ... Stroke ... stroke ... Manfriendgood ... Hopefood ... Stroke ...

"Was I right, little one? Am I right? Am I bringing about the destruction of our world, or am I just a tool in the hands of some other gods, more mysterious even than this newfangled god of love that everyone's so hot about? Am I really doing this for the good of my people, or just for my personal gratification, or was it written in the stars? Do you know?"

Stroke ... Feelbadmanfriend ... Pity ... Hopefood? Stroke ...

Something stirred the birds downstream. Merlin closed his eyes to listen. Horse's canter, impudent and reckless in the deep forest where all life was careful of all other life. And a rider on the horse, black-haired and young, well-muscled, proud, bringing with him the faint music of strings and drums and flutes, as if he was constantly marching in a victory parade in the manner of Romans. A wooden cross on his broad chest, dancing in time to the horse's hoofbeat, in time also to the sword in the scabbard on the young man's back. Merlin felt a shiver of apprehension, but it was too late now to do anything except follow his own plan. Fate is a harsh mistress, he thought, magic an even harsher one. Combined into one, they make a true Xanthippa.

Strokenotwhy? Dangerno? dangerno ... Strokewant ... (flutter) Strokewant ... strokewant ...

"Don't worry, flutterwings, I haven't forgotten you. Uther will be here any moment now, and then we'll go. Here, little one."

The pixie landed on his offered palm, transparent-green wings fluttering in confusion. Merlin stroked the tiny creature's back with one careful finger, then closed his eyes again, to follow his protégé's progress. Uther rode with just one hand holding the reins, inhaling the fresh smells of the wood through flared nostrils. The expression on his face showed plainly what he thought of Merlin's choice of meeting-place. Merlin smiled and straightened. Youth will be youth, always smarter than the old ones. At least that much will not change, no matter what. It was somehow comforting to know that.

Bigbig approaching ... Dangerno-manfriend-hopetrust ... (flutternoflutter)

The grey stallion burst out into the clearing and stopped impeccably just before Merlin, showing off his battle training. The old man rose slowly, careful of the pixie on his palm.

"I see you've decided to accept my offer, after all," he said.

Uther Ambrosius slid off his horse and offered a sheepish smile. "You know I always listen to you in the end, Merlinus. So, where to?"

"Tie your horse first. We might be long time gone."

"Then I'll just send him home. In case he has to wait too long."

Merlin felt a hint of a question in Uther's voice. So, he did understand the dangers they will be facing. Good. On occasion, Uther was inclined to be too brave. A commendable fault in a warrior, not so in a king. Perhaps he will learn, with time... provided he gets enough of it.

Horse dispatched, the two men looked at each other wordlessly for a moment. Finally, Merlin sighed and turned towards the spring, pixie still in palm. Nothing to do but go.

"There you go, little one," he said, offering finally the sweet he'd been hiding in his pocket.

Foodgood. Manfriendgood.

"Now, fly ahead and guide us to the Old One. Fly on!"

Godragon. Fear ... Manfriendwant ... hopefood ... manfriendgood ... hopemorefood ... Godragon.

The pixie fluttered its wings and started flying, low enough for the the two men to follow it. Which they did.

**O**ne slumbers. Subtly, subtly, something penetrates the repose. There are changes in the atmosphere of spring. The birds still prattle, but not about each other's love-life. The very air holds its breath in anticipation. Intruders, shaking the leaves from their post-prandial naps. Could it be... now?

One raises one's head, slowly, painfully. The moisture was kind to the cracked skin, but cruel to the old bones. One sometimes wished for a different lair, but it is not a matter of free choice any more. The only place where one can survive is here, behind the hill which hides the brook. Everywhere else, now, requires too much energy, too much belief. This is the only place left for one, this place of beginnings, and of endings. Place of magic.

One reaches the mouth of one's cave, step by step, and squints at the sky with rheumy eyes. Yes, the rainbow is still there, barely visible over the hill, sustained by the stream's water. The birds hush as one waddles into the open, stretching one's wings and yawning. Already one's strength is returning, fuelled by the belief of the intruders. They

must both be powerful, the two puny creatures coming to finish one off, otherwise they couldn't offer this much power.

The colour of the sky seems to deepen, faintly suggesting a redness. One blinks, his vision improving, and settles down to wait some more.

**F**eargreat ... Powergreat ... Godragon ... gottagodragon ... manfriendwant ... dangernoyes ... hopefood ... godragon ...

They were practically running now, the little creature guiding them fluttering excitedly before them then returning, like a puppy, to make sure they were still following.

"Faster, little one!" shouted Merlin, jumping over a root, the hem of his robe in one hand.

"You're out of your mind," gasped Uther. "We'll lose your fairy if it goes any quicker!"

"We have to! We must reach the place before sundown!"

"Why?" He even had time to laugh in-between long strides. "Is this dragon of yours a creature of night, so we have to catch it before it gains power?"

"No, of course not. But we have to catch the rainbow, and we can't do that in the dark." As he had predicted, this stopped any further questions.



They were reaching a low hill. The brook, which they had lost some time ago, now returned to cheer them on their way, though they couldn't see it, only hear its gurgling. Bigbigbig ... fearfear. Godragonhere. (flutter) Manfriendtrust ... hopefood ... manfriendsilly. Nogodragon ... hopefood.

They stopped, breaths rasping. The pixie landed on Merlin's offered palm, wings fluttering excitedly. Merlin stroked it, then offered it another sweet.

"Are you ready?" he asked Uther over his shoulder. The young warrior nodded wordlessly. "Well," said Merlin, "in that case, let's go under the rainbow."

The birds, which have greeted one's appearance with silence, now break into hysterics. One glances up again, and sees the rainbow dissipate into a myriad little droplets. That means there is a traitor among the creatures of belief. Well, should one survive, one shall deal with it.

The first being to appear over the hill is small and green-winged. A pixie, then, no traitor. The revelation should be comforting, but isn't. Probably, it means simply that others, of higher intelligence, have already perished. One shrugs that possibility away; there will be time for all that later, if there is a later. In the other case, it won't be of any importance anyway.

Two figures follow the pixie, men both of them, one old, one young. The old one lets go of his robe and leans on the lonely tree on top of the hill to catch his breath. The young one looks for eye-contact; a warrior. One considers him longer than the old one, looking for signs of weakness, checking the position of the sword-pommel that protrudes over his shoulder to ascertain the man's handedness. A fine specimen indeed, blue eyes and white teeth, almost like a dragon himself.

"Old One!" shouts the old man finally. "We are here to offer you help!"

The young man jerks his head at this. Ah, so they haven't rehearsed everything quite to perfection. Good to know.

One clears one's throat without embarrassment, at the same time considering possible replies. In the old days, one would simply scorch them and be done; that is, of course, out of the question now. No matter how strong, two men are not enough to kindle the ancient fire.

"What kind of help?" one asks, himself as much as the two humans.

"A chance to prolong the species." The old man starts down the slope of the hill, without waiting for his young friend. "The last chance."

"The last chance is long gone," one replies. "All one's kindred is dead. One is the last dragon."

The warrior slowly starts after the old man, wether out of blind trust or simple habit, one isn't completely sure.

"Ah," says the old man conversationally, "that's if you count only winged dragons. Dragon is a state of mind."

One laughs at this, so human a notion. But the old man is undaunted.

"Look at it this way," he says, getting ever closer. "You can wait for belief to die out completely, for yourself to fade away. Or you can take your chance with me - with us. What have you got to lose?"

"The real question is," one replies readily, "what have you got to gain?"

"I'll be honest. This young man here - come closer, Uther, do not fear - he is a king. The only problem is, he also harbors a fervent desire for the wife of one of his strongest allies."

One snorts at such gossiping tales. "Take your problems to the birds, then. They would enjoy hearing about them."

"Wait. Here's the deal. You can help him, he can help you. It's that simple."

"What do you mean, old man?"

"We have had Uther's lady beseiged, in a castle, husbandless, for half a year now. However, she would not succumb to his attentions. But should he produce a child and

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claim it is hers, she would have no choice but to ask for Uther's protection, or face charges of adultery."

The young warrior winces slightly at such blunt words, but won't bow his head. Proud, too, even in shame. One can respect that.

"And in exchange? How would you continue a species with only one of it left?"

"Through Uther again. He will be the father of your child."

One almost opens one's mouth to discard the notion as ridiculous, then stops to think. What alternative is there, really? Slumbering, and waiting? This way, one will at least get some life into the old bones one last time. The offer is tempting, one must admit.

"And what is your role in all that, old man? What do you gain?"

The old man shrugs. "Uther's offspring will unite this land, and bring it much-needed peace. I have seen that in the fires and the waters. It is for him that I do this."

"Very well," one declares at last. "You got yourselves a bargain." One turns towards the young man. "Come hither," one calls gently, extending one front-leg. "... Uther."

His adam's apple works, but he steps closer. His eyes are wide with awe, but he doesn't let that stop him. He nearly reaches one's shoulder, tall and strong like a young oak.

"And now, bridegroom," one begins, but Uther exclaims:

"What?"

"Bridegroom. Did you not know what awaits you here?"

The old man is creeping back to the top of the hill, followed by the pixie. Uther sees it and swallows again. "Well, Merlin told me something... but I don't see how that's possible."

One understands, and smiles. "Ah. You believed your mentor was talking metaphorically."

"Or magically," Uther answers.

"In fact, anything but literally." One stretches a front leg and touches Uther's chin with a careful claw. "And yet, you see, literally is exactly how he meant it."

"But that's..." He sees his repetition, and gives up. "How? You're not even... dragons are not..."

"Sexual?" One would love to bellow with laughter at this, but it would be too great a waste of energy. "And how do we procreate, then? Like trees?" One shakes one's mighty tail, raising it in the air, high. "Do you see any roots about one, young Uther? Any branches, flowers, fruit? Does one look like something that should be in an orchard?"

The unwilling groom laughs at that, simple child. "To keep the rabbits out, perhaps." He is not afraid any more, if ever he was. Time to make the move.

"You are a male, are you not, Uther?"

With laughter still silently present in the corners of his mouth, he nods.

"Then one shall be a female for you. It is that simple."

**S**troke ... stroke ... Menfriendtense ... Gohome ... Nogohomewhy? Manfriendwaitfriend ... Stroke ...

"They will write chronicles about all of this, some day, flutterwings, you know. Though they'll probably leave out what's going on at this moment. No one would believe it. A pity, really... Such beautiful scenes for the bards. The horrifying beauty of the dragon's body, as it slithers to embrace the Pendragon. And the feeling Uther must have, though no change is visible on the outside. It must be like being broken on a wheel, his body growing, on all fours, becoming an animal... A good singer could make it a memorable epic. But somehow I don't think anyone will dare compose it, they'll probably just invent something symbolical and leave the rest to the dirty minds of their audiences. Such sad ways, this world has."

The pixie climbed up Merlin's shoulder, asking for the shelter of his robe. The night was growing bolder, thicker. Slowly, Merlin got up from his station on top of the hill and looked around for some branches to start a fire.

"It looks like we'll spend the night here, little one." He allowed himself a knowing smile. "Small wonder. It is a unique opportunity ..."

Nightcold ... Manfriendwarmth ... (snuggle) ... Warmth ... Sleep.

The man lit a fire, pixie sleeping in the hood of his robe, and settled down to wait.

**T**he deed is done. One is reluctant to open one's eyes, knowing the view will be fogged. So much energy, so much enthusiasm. Ah, the lovely strength of youth. Already distant, Uther's voice is husky and low.

"That was... strange," he says. One would chuckle if one could.

"You didn't like it?"

"I did not say that, my lady. But it was like nothing I have ever experienced before."

"Do you think you will still be able to enjoy your chosen lady's company?"

"Aye, without doubt. She is the most beautiful of... mortal women."

"Thank you for that, Uther." It is not night, nor is the day a rainy one, yet the skies seem dark. One's time is running out. "Go now, Uther," one says. "Fetch your sorcerer friend. One has need of him."

A look of confusion momentarily passes across Uther's face, but he obeys instantly. Not a man to lose his head in an emergency. He shall make a good king. What could be so special in this progeny of his, then, that a soothsayer should go to such lengths for him?

The old man approaches hurriedly, hobbling down the hill like an excited crab. The forest night couldn't have been easy on him, either.

"One sees something in common with you, old man," remarks one casually. "Rheumatism."

"That's true," he says, nervously reaching to stroke the wings of the pixie on his shoulder.

"To business, now," says one to speed things up. The rainbow, reborn with the sun, flicker's in one's dimming vision.

"The child."

"Yes," says the old man.

"When he is born, take him with you. Make sure he is raised as befits his origins."

One lays down, too weak to stand. The egg in one's belly is growing heavier with every breath. "Brave and headstrong he will be, and wise. Hover over him, old man. There will be doom in his blood, too."

"I will take good care of him, don't worry."

"Good," one says. "Uther doesn't know?"

"No."

"You should have sent him far, then."

"It's too late for that," says the old man, and indeed, Uther has returned, and stands a little to the side, trying unsuccessfully to follow the conversation. One looks at him, the one-but-last sight for one's eyes, beauty, strength, youth. Dragon is a state of mind. "Farewell, prince," one says.

"Farewell?" asks Uther.

"Indeed. You have made one's ending a happy one. No mean feast, young man."

The pain shoots through one's body mercilessly, igniting one's entrails in a single, greedy bite. One knows, now, what one used to wreak, and hisses, all that one has the strength for.

"Thank you, also, old man," one whispers over a wooden tongue, dying. "For..."

Suddenly, the old man falls to his knees; there are tears on his face. "So it is true," he whispers.

Curiosity keeps one alive a little longer. "What?"

"Dragons die in childbirth."

One's throat is nothing but burning bile, else one would laugh. "Of course. Our children kill us in their growth. One thought you knew that."

"I did," wails the old man. "I just didn't believe it."

Uther stands between the two old creatures, torn between the two pains, unable to decide which to comfort first.

"What does it matter?" one breathes, and there are tiny flames in the words, now that all energy is leaving forever.

On his knees, the old man crawls closer and takes hold of one's claw. And kisses it, of all the unreasonable things.

Then raises his head, looking at one from behind his tears. "Forgive me," he sobs. "Please, please, forgive me..."

One smiles after the fashion of his kind, tongue flickering over one's lips. "Such is the way of the world," one thinks, and maybe manages to voice.

The sharp cry of the newborn, the last thing one hears. One's eyes close on the sight of the rainbow, shimmering and disappearing in the uniformly blue sky of the new world.

**U**ther Pendragon keened.

**W**hen Merlin's sobs dried, he swallowed, got up and tried to brush his robe. Something was missing. Something wasn't on his shoulder when he wrapped the child in his robe and started for the top of the hill, followed by the future father of the future king. For a moment, Merlin couldn't pinpoint what it was. He stopped and listened. There was birds' chatter in the air... but only that. No brook flowed just behind the hill, the fierce morning sun suffered no rainbow to mar its skies. On the ground, a tiny humanoid body with transparent green wings lay, dead.



## Milena Benini

**M**ilena Benini holds a degree in comparative literature. She started writing when she was 12, and got her first professional publication when she was 14. She has written numerous short stories and some novels. She won two **SFera awards**, one for her novel *Children of Chaos and Eternity* and one for her novella *McGuffin Link*. She also dabbles in illustration and other forms of graphic expression.

She was born in Zagreb, and still lives there, with two daughters, two cats and (luckily) just one husband. You can find out more about her at [www.sff.net/people/Milena](http://www.sff.net/people/Milena).

*Jednorog i djevica* ("Unicorn and a Virgin") is Milena's short story collection, published in 2005. Her stories are characterized by intricate plotlines and strong characters. Milena writes both science fiction and fantasy.

