

Goodbye, Padania

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Dark Future Books

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Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of the chapters entitled *Esculent Pursuit*, *Her First Priest*, *Breakthrough* and *Meltdown* all first appeared in *The Hiss Quarterly*.

What they say

“We were blown away by Esculent Pursuit ...”

Lalo Fox, Editor, The Hiss Quarterly

“Bloody good ... superb and masterly use of the language ... a very well built piece of sci-fi with a sound psychological study of the protagonist.”

Giuliana Manganelli, theatre critic, Il Secolo XIX, Genoa, Italy

Lovers of speculative fiction will appreciate the fast moving plot, and will be intrigued by Daria's psychological dilemma.

Author Trish Jackson, Smashwords

To all exiles

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Chapter 1

Esculent Pursuit

Turin, Republic of Padania, June 2032.

Daria hated working on an empty stomach. Unless her own flesh was well and recently nourished, the sound of her knife tearing someone else's flesh thoroughly nauseated her.

Right now, with a job to start, she needed to go and look for food. The tables in the dark, empty hotel restaurant were adorned only with dead flies, which meant she would have to venture into the grey, decaying city. She should locate the casino her target would be using. She might even find her target. In any case, she strapped the knife inside her cassock, its moulded plastic warming to her thigh. A gun, fitted with a silencer, would have been better, but guns and silencers were old technology, jaded memories of wealthier times. Knives were silent, though you could never count on their victims not to scream.

Daria did not expect the evening sunlight that dazzled her as she stepped out of the hotel lobby. When her eyes adjusted, they focused on evening commuters edging out of the railway station opposite. There were not many of them. They clustered around the tram stops between the station and the hotel, those in the green uniforms sauntering to their rightful place at the head. Pale-faced beggars gave them a wide berth as they worked the queue.

“If I can get together a bit of capital,” Daria mused, “and a touch of enterprise, I could move sideways into people-smuggling.”

Now that emigration, as well as immigration, was banned, it was starting to be an enticing prospect, better than killing people you felt no hatred for. And this job would give her some capital, if she brought it off.

Daria snapped out of her reverie. There might be food at the station, but railway food was rarely nutritious at the best of times, and these were the worst of times.

She headed south, opposite the post office depot attached to the station. It still had a few battered vans loading and unloading. No shops or eating places on that side. On her side of the street, Daria passed a couple of open establishments, one selling bolts of fabric, the other doing good business in folk remedies. Then she caught a whiff of bread and turned off the main street to track it. On the corner of the side street and a small, harmonious square lined with abandoned cars was a baker's. The door examined her irises and let her in. Daria had not seen so much bread in one place since she had left Italy.

A porcelain dog on the counter solicited donations to the PSPCA. Daria slid a handful of neuros into its whining mouth. She was allocated half a dozen rolls. After the door let her out, she crossed into the heart of the small square and sat on a concrete bench to eat and plan.

The Paris-like elegance of the square's buildings was tarnished by the charred ruins of the church opposite her. What was it? San Salvario? No, there was a plaque: St. Peter and St. Paul, she read. That rang a bell. She ran her memory files. Yes, San Salvario was the name of the area, the former immigrants' ghetto. This was Largo Saluzzo, and the church was where, five years earlier, some of the last remaining immigrants in the city had taken refuge from the Greenshirts' pogrom. Although it had got rid of one of its "turbulent priests" in the blaze, the Roman Catholic Church had kicked up one hell of a fuss. It had refused to rebuild the church, out of respect for the victims, and for once the Padanian Government had been shamed into inaction. Daria stared disconsolately at the blackened stone. The bread was stale.

She left it for the crows, moving out of the square, along the same side street as it continued past the church, deeper into San Salvario. When it gave onto a larger road, she turned left. Ahead of her, there should be a market. Yes, there it was, sheltering under a rusty metal canopy, on the underside of which items of fresh produce had been painted with twee end-of-the-century optimism. There was even a lobster. But the few stalls huddled together like orphans in the vast space of the market square held precious little to eat. Not unless you had a penchant for raw cabbage, potatoes or turnips, or had somewhere to cook them.

Daria moved towards one of the stalls, calculating whether she had enough loose neuros to buy some cabbage.

A hand tugged at her cassock. Reflexively, she swivelled in its direction and kicked the beggar hard in his pallid face. The man toppled

silently from his cart. For a moment, the stumps of his legs waved like tentacles. As they subsided, Daria leaned over him and began lashing out at his torso, first with one foot, then with the other, as her fury mounted. She slipped a hand inside her cassock and reached for the knife strapped to her thigh. She had thought the beggar was groping for that. A wave of nausea rose from the pit of her stomach, filled her throat and clouded her brain. She stopped, and pulled in deep draughts of the clean city air to clear her head.

What had happened to her training, she wondered, if a casual encounter could leave her ready to cut someone who was not a target and, moreover, when she was on the way to a job?

Her head cleared. She turned away from the prostrate beggar, who was moaning softly, and strode out of the market. The stallholders and their few customers avoided looking at her.

Never mind the food, it was time to get the job done.

Past another looming church, this one fully intact, Daria came to an intersection with a major road that ran between the station and the river Po. Ahead of her, the road was blocked by works intended to get the underground railway running again. A big nuclear waste deal with Pershi'a had provided the funds.

Ever since Roman times, circuses had proved more popular than bread, especially among those in society who could afford cake. The thought disturbed Daria's stomach juices, so she cut it off and turned left, keeping alert, moving in the direction of the river.

The place she was looking for was well marked. A large gaudily painted sign proclaimed, "Disney Po Casino". The pariah state felt no need to observe trademark copyright. Above the entrance door, another hand-made sign enticed: "l dubi 'd vosti Neuro" – Double Your Money - in the local dialect. The management really seemed to be thinking globally and acting locally.

The door checked Daria and let her in. You could take a knife anywhere, if it was made of plastic. Daria took it to the saloon bar. She chose a table from which she could observe the entrance. The hour was early, so the place was not full. Casinos were a growth industry, a great way of laundering dirty money. Every town had one; there would be more if only the owners could find staff or subvert the ban on the transfer of robot technology.

There were 57 varieties of water on the menu. Daria ordered a Pocahontas. It came from nearby Vinadio, where the water had benefited from the early days of de-industrialisation without yet, as far as she knew, suffering from the dumping of noxious foreign waste. As she nursed it, Daria surveyed the two men at the nearest table. Neither was her target, but she tuned in to their conversation.

“... third time running, then they’ll have to let us back in!”

“Well, Vercelli won’t stop us, never mind their Kazakh millionaire, but UEFA might.”

“Nah, they can’t. We’re too good. What’s Europe without us?”

“Come on, what’s UEFA ever done for us?”

“You’re damn right, fuck all! They let Renault take our team down to Palermo, for a start.”

“Fucking traitors! Didn’t even keep the name. Kept our colours, though.”

“Who cares? Green and white’s better than black and white any day.”

“And look what happened to Renault. Our other lot did better.”

“Monte Carlo Toro? You’re joking!”

“Champions of France.”

“The Green and Whites could thrash ‘em any day. Real Juve! Real Juve!!”

“Calm down, pal. What’s in your water?”

“Salt Walt? Nothing except shit. Er ... you don’t happen to have ...?”

He caught Daria’s eye on him and immediately looked away. Every time. The first man in Padania who held her gaze, she would ...

The door let in a group of three middle-aged men and a young woman. One of the men looked familiar to Daria. He was tall, silver-haired, well-fed. His robust body strained at the confines of a sharp grey suit. If it was him, he had had his skin lightened since the video was taken. She knew they would drink before playing – old habits die hard. They sat too far away for her to monitor their conversation properly. She just caught snatches:

“... children ... shortage ... block the decree ... not right ... need labour, but ...”

Talking politics. Rash. Nevertheless, she identified him by his body language. He shifted to face each person as they spoke, and leaned towards them as he spoke to them, the fingers of his left hand tapping the front of his shirt as though trying to sift among whatever was inside to find heart strings. That was precisely where she would plunge the knife.

The debate warmed up. The man turned away from something he disagreed with, and caught Daria's stare. He held it for a moment before averting his head. A perturbed expression crossed his face. His fingers resumed their search even though he remained silent. He leaned in towards his companions, muttered a few words, rose and strode to the door, which let him out immediately. When the company had stopped staring after him and resumed their conversation with less enthusiasm than before, Daria followed suit.

She stood outside the casino, trying to calculate which way he had gone. As her senses quickened, the muddy air in her nostrils gave her the answer: towards the river.

You cannot run in a cassock without drawing attention to yourself, but Daria could move quickly. The river was close, and she soon reached the bridge. To the right was a park, to the left she could follow a path down to tiny riverside betting shops. Some people in the park were moving in a hurry. She went in their direction. There was her prey: she recognised him by his hair and non-conformist clothes. She closed the gap between them.

Daria could tell the man knew he was being followed, and that he had a strategy: safety in numbers. He stopped at a crowded mobile drink stand. As Daria pushed in to stand behind him, she heard the man order a Monca Cola. She pressed into his back and let him feel the warmth of her body through the cassock.

"Game over, big boy," she whispered into his ear, "the children want to work whether you like it or not."

His shoulders relaxed; he turned, looked into her eyes. For seven seconds, the outside world was not there; then she was bent double, the sting of Monca Cola in her eyes, nausea burning her stomach.

Daria brought her body back under control.

"Never marry a gambler," she said wily, to satisfy the curious.

Some of the barflies smiled; the rest just made way and looked elsewhere. The man was still in her sight, heading back the way they had come. This was going to be easy, after all.

Daria turned her cassock twilight blue. She timed her pursuit so that she caught up with her quarry in the passage under the bridge. He stopped and turned to face her. Daria pushed him hard in the chest. There was a crack as his back hit the wall. Daria's knife was in her hand. He held her gaze. Again, time stopped for Daria. Then she realised he was talking to her.

“Please ... let me die ... another day.”

The tip of the knife pierced the skin over his heart; blooded trickled down his shirt front. Nausea welled up inside Daria. Still his eyes held hers. Time stopped once more, and Daria's befuddled brain ratcheted up a slide show of her working life, from her first priest to the foreigner who had not wanted to pay back a favour the Mafia had done him, even though he had gone to live in Sicily. She realised that the man was speaking again.

“You know ... I want to live ... more than you do.”

She was not going to argue with that. She slipped the knife back inside her cassock, for the time being, then broke his gaze by grabbing his right arm with both her hands and dragging him out of the tunnel to the water's edge. Her kick into his bruised chest was only hard enough to send him flailing backwards into the river.

Daria stood watching him for a while, breathing long and hard. When she saw he was swimming towards the far bank, she whispered to her cassock to turn regulation green and, keeping to the deeper shade of the archways, walked swiftly in the direction of the city centre. She was still hungry.

Chapter 2

Her First Priest

Sicily, 2022.

The code of honour disdained attacks from behind, but this was a priest so Daria was prepared to break it. On his first circuit of the cloister, she satisfied herself that it was him; on the second, she struck. As he passed, she moved fast and silently out of the shadows in his wake. The breviary flew from his hands as she applied the full nelson; it caught flecks of his blood as she smashed his face into the finely carved, time-worn pillar. He made no sound as Daria forced him to the ground. She lay on top of him, smelling his fear, waiting for a note of another odour that would give her the strength to finish the job. Fleeting, Daria wondered if he knew how this would end, while her mind raced back to how, for her, it had started.

Calabria, 2016

He was God's representative on earth, and so it was right for her to love him, truly, fully, deeply as she loved her one true Lord. And as the Lord loved her, so it was right that he, too, love her, and that they express their overpowering love with every fibre of their interlocking bodies. The days of her early adolescence were thus suffused with joy and meaning.

Despite her parents' coldness and the harshness of her second-rate teachers, the world seemed a wondrous place.

He had urged her not to speak of their love to anyone else – “the unfortunates”, he called them – and Daria had kept that promise. Yet her friends felt the glow of her blossoming happiness, and a few sensed the source, though they put it down to a run-of-the-mill crush instead of an all-consuming mutual passion.

It was Veronica who sowed the first seed of doubt. Veronica was not even her best friend. She was a few months older, decidedly prettier, far more self-confident. And fond of recounting improbable experiences with “men”, on whom she deemed herself an expert.

They had stopped in the park on the way back from school so that Veronica could practise her smoking. She was good at moving the cigarette languidly to her lips, but then had trouble getting the smoke in and out of her mouth quickly, before it made her cough. “It’s the only thing I won’t swallow,” she would comment.

That day, unusually, she seemed interested in Daria.

“Father Francesco seems to like you,” she whispered, leaning forward to add weight to her confidential tone. The mention of his name set Daria’s heart pounding. What to reply?

“Do you think so?”

“Not half! He drools at the sight of you. Mind you, he drools over anything in a skirt, if it’s short enough. Dirty old man.”

Daria was appalled. How could anyone, even Veronica, be so malicious, so mistaken?

“He loves us all.”

“And you in particular, is it? Don’t make me laugh!”

Daria felt the bile rising within her. What should she do to this ... heathen? Let God punish her. It was not for us to take over His work. Besides, He would do it far better than she ever could.

Veronica looked at her tongue-tied friend with pity. A crush on a mature man would set back her development; the boys would sense she was weird and keep their distance. Not necessarily a bad thing: she might even keep –

“My God, you haven’t?”

Shock ripped the mask of sophistication from Veronica’s baby face.

“Oh no! Daria, why?”

Why deny it?

“The love of the Lord .. love ... body and soul.”

“Yeah, right, your body and every other little virgin’s that he can con into his cloister. You think you’re the only one?”

Veronica saw from Daria's face that she did. She strove for a way to help her. Best make her see the truth now, before it was too late, before she got knocked up. She was old enough, damn it.

"You want proof, I'll give it to you. *Cazzo!*"

Veronica's fingers jerked away the cigarette which had burnt down on to them. She saw Daria was crying.

"Jesus wept, this is real pain," she said, flapping her scorched fingers. "I'm off home. Miss Father-fucker, learn to keep your legs crossed, advice from one who knows."

As she stomped off towards the unfailing balm of her mother's over-concern, most of the pain Veronica felt was for Daria.

The mobile phone that Francesco had lent Daria vibrated in her purse. This time the messenger was not him, though the message was. A sick feeling spread throughout Daria as she scrolled through the photos Veronica had sent her. She did not recognise the girl – someone perhaps younger, and certainly plainer, than Daria. The penis looked like Francesco's, but perhaps they all did. The out-of-focus body resembled his, though it could just as easily be someone else's. In fact, it could not be Father Francesco, because he'd sworn he was hers alone! Her fingers hurt as she jabbed the buttons: "Nice try, Veronica".

She saw neither her friend nor her lover for nearly a week. Then, on Saturday afternoon, when Daria was busy with her maths homework, her phone vibrated and Veronica was back in touch.

"I'm downstairs waiting for you. Let's go!"

"Where?"

"You'll see, kid. This time you'll really see."

Daria closed the phone and left it on her bed. She went out through the kitchen without saying anything to her parents in the living room. Down below, Veronica was revving her scooter. They did not exchange a word as Daria clambered on the back of it. Veronica felt Daria's strong fingernails digging into her shoulders as they accelerated away.

Veronica drove through the dusty town, then out along the road that hugged the coastline and narrowed as it rose from beachside to cliff. She pulled into a small car park behind the "Trattoria Belvedere".

“From here, we go on foot. Quietly. Got it?”

Daria nodded and followed her friend. She knew where Veronica was taking them. Some two hundred metres beyond the restaurant stood a long-abandoned holiday cottage, a relic of the days when their bustling little town had been a picturesque fishing village on the tourist map. As they approached, Daria prayed that it would be empty. Even though Veronica’s voice came in a whisper, it startled her.

“You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve seen here.”

Daria stared at her levelly.

“I’ve never believed your stories. Any of them.”

It seemed a reasonable lie. Veronica’s face hardened.

“Well, this time, seeing had better be believing. Now shut up.”

Veronica halted them at the threshold, where a front door had once been. She gestured Daria to listen. Daria heard nothing but the pounding of her blood. Then a kind of squealing, and a heavier, more regular sound. Veronica propelled her through the entrance. Daria felt her feet dragging her towards the end of her short happy youth.

As she came into the second room, two faces, one above the other, rose to stare at her, each displaying a different shade of horror. The lower face belonged to the girl in the photos. It screamed when it saw the kitchen knife twitching in Daria’s right hand. The face above it, partly obscured by the girl’s hair, was Francesco’s. Emotion drained from it as he pushed down on the girl’s back to prise his body free of hers and raise it from the mattress. Daria’s eyes fixed on his glistening penis as he strode towards her. Her hand clenched on the knife, but a glancing blow from his elbow sent it flying from her hand – the first and last time someone would disarm her so easily – as he passed. He was out of the front door; Veronica had disappeared. Then the back of his naked body, receding, appeared in the window in front of Daria. The figure broke into a run, stumbled, regained its footing and its poise, went on as though it had a spring in its step. Daria’s ears were battered by Father Francesco’s scream as he leapt into the void beyond the cliff-edge. It sounded for all the world like a scream of defiance.

Sicily, 2022.

Daria realised she had been repeatedly hitting the man's head against the flagstones. He was dead. But this was a knife job. She drew the stiletto from its scabbard inside her boot and plunged it deep into the priest's back. She would leave it there for the Church. They had paid for it, after all. Calmly, Daria pulled off her mask and her outer coverall. She primed them to disintegrate and threw them into a corner as she slipped back into the shadows, circumnavigated the cloister and stepped through the main door into the empty street, an early-rising tourist shielding her eyes against the bright Southern light and looking forward to the sights the new day would bring. Somewhere close by, a bell summoned the faithful.

Chapter 3

Breakthrough

Giving up was hard. Every time Daria thought she had got it cracked, circumstances conspired against her.

Shantha found it hard to assess how her guest lecture at Rome University's Philosophy Department had gone down. Her husband had done his usual competent job as her interpreter, for his love of opera and wine had sparked a lifelong study of Italian. Yet although the faculty had been welcoming beforehand and complimentary afterwards, the questions they and their students had put suggested they either had not understood her arguments against post-modernism or else felt such rigour was politically incorrect.

That all became irrelevant when the call from Colombo told them the civil war had robbed them of Bala, the last survivor among their children. Shantha's heart stopped. When it began, with effort, to beat again, the paralysis had moved up to stop her tongue.

She did regain the power of speech, but the words flew fitfully from her brain and tripped awkwardly from her lips. Aravinda knew he could never take her back to Sri Lanka. Home had become hell, and cold exile was better than burning. The carefree life he had lived was over. From now on, he would care for Shantha and keep their bodies and souls together somehow.

There was no work for them at Rome University: an occasional visiting lecture, yes, but they were foreign, much too foreign for a teaching post. Nevertheless, a Roman colleague found a place for them to stay, in a country house up in the north of Italy, not far from the city of Turin. There, they earned their keep by doing odd jobs, a little domestic work, which gradually expanded to all the jobs, all the domestic work.

The owner, an elderly lady as alone in the world as they were, was grateful, looked after them when much of the north broke away from the rest of Italy to invent the racist nation of "Padania". She paid the young bloods in the village to keep the "ethnic cleansing" squads off their tracks, saw to it

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