

# World Enough and Time

By David Vickery

There were four of us when we hit Arecibo. Dolohov, Williams, me and Freya, Dolohov's girl. It was a dusty little town and I didn't think much of it.

Dolohov was the boss: tough in all the expected places, but sometimes it seemed he was bluffing. A lot of people made that mistake.

The latest guy to do so was standing at the bar. He didn't change position when we came in, but something about him became more alert.

Freya spoke. As usual her voice was soft and distant, like she was rainbowed out. But she wasn't, she was just herself and despite that hair and that body, you couldn't help wondering whether there was anyone home. I'd often daydreamed about finding out. Williams once told me that she had the hooded lids of a Leonardo Madonna. It sounded nice, but I didn't bother asking who Leonardo Madonna was. I gave up asking about his stuff a long time ago.

"Could we have four rooms," she said. The owner didn't seem to hear, but the guy holding up the bar did.

"The rooms are all taken," he said. Freya looked at him.

"So," was all she said.

"Get out of here, leatherheads," he said. He was bored, that was all. But Dolohov was bored too, and in no mood for pleasantries. He faced the guy through mirrored lenses. Reflecting everything and nothing.

"All we want are rooms."

"You've come to the wrong hotel."

Dolohov sighed. "I'm tired."

"Tired of life, must be."

"Tired of you."

Dolohov wasn't even looking at the guy, just letting his eyes rest on the floor in front of him. But he saw when he pulled the knife. Nice archaic touch. Things really must have been quiet in Arecibo.

Dolohov lifted his hand as though to shield his face from the blade: but by the time he'd completed the gesture, Mr Boredom's teeth were shattered and so was the mirror on the wall behind. He stood for a moment before gravity caught up with him.

The owner looked up at that. "Four rooms?" he asked.

"Please," said Freya.

She signed for us while Dolohov tramped the stairs. Then she followed him up and Williams and I ordered drinks.

“Dolohov’s ace in the hole,” I said. No one expected a kid like him to have the money for prosthetics. His index finger looked normal but fired real bullets, .22. The delivery system was state of the art and silent. “She once said that finger of his was an asset when they made love. I didn’t know if she meant on or off.”

Williams looked slyly up at me through his slanting eyes. Funny what people spend their money on. Dolohov on prosthetics, Williams on surgery and rainbow. North West China in his Western face.

“In caring for others and serving heaven, there is nothing like showing restraint,” he said, and laughed in the Chinese way he’d been cultivating. “Chapter fifty-nine.”

Lee Williams – or Li, as he insisted on – was the smartest guy I’d ever met. He told me he’d memorised the whole of something called the Tao Te Ching, which presumably was what he was on about. Five thousand words. Practically a genius. But it all came to nothing at rainbow’s end.

The next morning found Williams and me out on the street. All the techs had arrived at their sanitised offices hours before. We were waiting for the big boss and generally taking the breeze. Williams was off on his world and I was on mine, thinking about how it would be when I got my hands on that credits gateway. It would be child’s play, but it would be worth it – because for those few minutes I’d stop being a drifter and take on the role of the world’s best tech.

Of course, it would also be worth it because of the credits we’d access. Wafer thin bearer bonds, easy on the pocket. Then Williams would be off to score some more rainbow, I’d be bribing some tech to let me in on more gate secrets, Dolohov would be thumbing the latest prosthetics mag, and Freya, well, who knew what she spent her cut on.

Dolohov came out of the hotel, stretching.

“Checked out the details?”

“Waiting for you.”

“Let’s go then. We don’t want any slip-ups like yesterday.”

We walked over to the credit building, deliberately unconcerned. I was thinking about Webley. Really, we were better off without him; we were specialists and he wasn’t. Inevitably, he’d triggered the alarm, the Custodian arrived, and the next second Webley was no more than a stain on our clothes.

Dolohov and Williams had opened up on the Custodian from two angles, not finishing it of course but slowing it down, time enough to grab the jets and get out of town just ahead of it. Then it was all head down and dust for hours. But there was nothing to fear. The Custodian had stopped us making our withdrawal and seen us off the premises, which is all they seemed to care about. Plus reduced our number by one and thus helped to keep down the appalling crime rate.

I don’t remember much about Webley, except his weakness for gourmet food. He treated Williams and me to something he said was real duck back in Abraham. Tasted like no big deal to me, but he seemed to enjoy it. Anyway, I felt safer with just the four of us, because like I say he was no kind of specialist, apart from with the silverware.

We got inside the terminal, grabbed the tech as he returned from his lunch break and tried persuading him to cooperate. Naturally, all he could tell us was the security logon, we boys of the street not being capable of penetrating anything as sophisticated as a gateway. But they're supposed to resist for a while. Dolohov worked him over with a clinical efficiency and a kind of regret at the pointlessness of it.

That scene is etched in my memory: Dolohov being persuasive, Williams leaning against the door humming some twangy tune, Freya checking out the materiel which included a new EM bomb Williams had put together in a moment of lucidity. I was getting myself in the right state of mind for the next room when two things happened.

The first was the tech's decision to spill the logon, fear and pain giving way to relief in his rabbit features. The other was Williams taking a flying leap across the room as the door was kicked in. Two or three figures were inside before any of us could move. Anarchs, of course. What wasn't black was glittering, including their visors. Bunch of morons. I felt bitter that it was all going to end at the hands of these wasters.

The leader waved us into a group to save on ammunition. "So long, greaseballs," he said.

"Wait," said Dolohov. "If you're going for the gate, we've got the best."

The leader looked him over. "You don't say so. Well, Arkady here is good enough for us."

"Better be sure," I said. "You don't want to lock up the system."

The leader was hefting the gun to his shoulder when one of his sidekicks, presumably Arkady, stopped him. I've heard of Anarchs blowing their own people away for less, so it took courage.

"Wait," he said. A surprisingly young voice. "Let's keep them alive. It's only another few minutes."

The leader wasn't too taken with the idea, but he sure wasn't any kind of tech. He needed us, or me at least, and it pained him.

"Get the logon?" he asked Dolohov bitterly.

"Yes."

The leader turned to the tech and fired. The cloud of blood in the room for the next few seconds made me wonder whether I could compose myself for work. But at least we had a few more minutes, and a lot can happen in that time.

I input the logon that powered up the system for access and opened the door into the gate room. An Anarch gathered up our personal destruction kit and dumped it on the floor of the room, and another shepherded the rest of us against the wall. The leader waved me on. I was heading for the gleaming black box on the left wall when Arkady caught my sleeve.

"Not there," he said. "This one."

He was pointing to a much larger box, centred in the opposite wall. It looked a dull matt but it flickered with an intensity new to me. I remembered that these things were sometimes housed in hick burgs like Arecibo so no one would suspect they were there.

"That's a Federal gate," I said, not without a touch of awe.

Dolohov snorted. "Brilliant. Let's invite an enforcer along."

"No sweat to me," said the leader. "If one comes, we'll take care of it."

That's what I was saying; we've all got to go sometime, but you don't relish going in the company of flatheads. Still, at least I'd have seen the inside of a big one. And in a funny way that made it almost worthwhile.

Arkady took off his visor and gloves. I watched him start the interface and let him go on until the sweat was forming along his hairline, then gently pushed him aside. An Anarch, obviously hoping for one of us to start something, raised his gun for a downward punt but Arkady stopped him. By this time I was in.

The gateway was cool and inviting. It started off with a series of obstacles, puzzles really, even jokes. I disposed of them easily. Then I was into chambers and systems, interconnections, pathways, and the speed and pressure were increasing. A sudden feint; a thrust; traps and pitfalls on all sides, like nothing I'd ever seen before. But I kept going.

The room, the Anarchs, my partners in crime: they'd all faded away, less real than this synthetic empire I'd entered. And suddenly I knew that real joy, something I hadn't felt since I was a kid fiddling with my first security lock. I was taking the gate on at its own terms and riding the wind on it.

Then I was out of the problems, and as the last one fell away it was as though I was in a hall of caverns, enormous, blue, remote. A respite, a reward perhaps for having got this far. Even the simplest gate is more than electrons and silicon pathways: it's thoughts and emotions, and you have to handle it like a human mind, to give and take and build up a relationship. And ESOTERICS like this were something else again, like a thousand split personalities all perfectly adjusted to each other.

There, with sweat bathing me like a river, I knew I'd taken on and come out even with something bigger than I'd ever known. And then in the midst of those blue chambers, time and space themselves were caught up in the dance. My choices were infinite and everything was supremely simple. Even as I thought that, a series of obstacles appeared like towering walls of lead, barring further progress. I knew then that I was inside a SUPERESOTERIC and I was dwarfed by it. Gates are huge and ESOTERICS are almost impossibly vast. But this one was the whole world.

At that point I realised the Anarchs presumably wanted to damage this beauty. I laughed at the thought. And then the Enforcer showed up, alerted I suppose by my fumbblings. It came straight through the wall.

Anarchs were firing and dying all around. The leader, stupid enough to raise his weapon, was history almost before the thing was in the room. Arkady moved towards the console and had a shoulder and part of his jaw scythed away by a laser, almost incidentally.

It might have been desperation, but Dolohov chose that moment to try his party piece. In amongst all that black jagged stuff there was something that looked like a monkey's skull, and inside those glittering eyes you could swear there was intelligence rather than just circuitry. Maybe he thought that a bullet, correctly placed between those eyes, would succeed where all the energy weapons had failed.

Whatever his thinking, Dolohov raised his hands as though in surrender. I was close enough to see him make that tiny muscle flex which commits the firing mechanism. But just before he made his move the Enforcer reacted like lightning

and blew him apart in a choking mist of what had been him. So I guess Enforcers know about prosthetics.

What happened next is still a blur, but I suppose Williams managed to find and throw his EM bomb. Blinding the Enforcer up and down the electromagnetic spectrum. It went wild at that, firing madly but no longer able to aim. Arkady was croaking through his broken jaw "Close the gate!" I was crying stupidly that we wouldn't be able to get back. The Enforcer moved straight towards us and Freya slammed her tiny fist onto the console with us still hooked into its field. And as reality rippled I saw the Enforcer torn laterally and transversely into shreds, complex being to monomolecules in the disinterested wink of a SUPERESOTERIC's eye.

"The softest thing in the universe overcomes the hardest thing in the universe. That without substance can enter where there is no room. Forty-three."

At the sound of Li's voice I opened my eyes. The sun poured down over a landscape of scrub and grass. We were in the shade of fruit trees beside a pool of water.

"Where are we?"

"Might as well ask when are we. I got a glimpse of what we were going through and it looked like a completely free choice. Time and space."

I nodded numbly. Williams continued, "That was no Federal Gate. That was a National, maybe even a Global."

"Yes." I looked around me. Arkady was dying in Freya's arms. I expected to be damaged, but there was nothing obviously wrong so I got up and went over to them. Arkady didn't look like an Anarch, he looked like a kid who'd got lost. He saw me and said something through his ruined jaw. I guessed what he wanted.

"Sure, kid," I said. "You're a natural."

He gave it up a minute later without speaking again but he seemed at peace. Perhaps that's all any of us need, the praise of our peers.

Over the next few days we explored. There was a collection of white houses to the north, cool inside, single rooms. Obviously designed for someone else. We didn't belong.

We were getting by on the fruit. It was like something a medic tech gave me when I was a kid. It was so horrible it was always touch and go whether you'd be able to keep it down.

After a few days of gentle walking we came to a shoreline. It was a lonely place: lots of white sand, the sharp smell of decaying seaweed, sounds of seabirds. On the horizon was a distant land mass.

"Maybe we could build a boat," I said. "Get to that other shore, make contact with someone."

Williams nodded, but he seemed unwilling to move. Only Freya said, "There's nobody there either."

I started to spend more time with Freya after that. I'd often wondered, casually, what it would be like to be on my own with her, but somehow I'd never wanted to try. She was Dolohov's, he was hers. But now...we walked the shoreline together, climbed the cliffs, sat by the pool. We didn't say much.

I sought out Williams and told him about it. He was building a hut out of driftwood, still half-finished after six weeks. But he had made something: a whistle with six airholes in it. He was playing it intermittently as we talked.

"She's certainly something to look at," I said.

"You're right. I wonder what her real name is?"

"Why not Freya?"

"A Norse goddess? Strange choice."

"What do you mean, Norse," I said, breaking my rule. He smiled.

"You don't know much, do you."

"Not much about gods and legends, no. I can't see the use of it."

"It's at least as useful as your specialist knowledge, here," he said. Which I had to admit was true. But it gave me a pang to think I'd never interface an ESOTERIC again. Like Williams without his rainbow or, yes, Freya without her Dolohov.

We made love exactly a week later. We'd been sitting close, watching the sunset, and our cheeks touched. Something like the old thrill ran through me, although it was different too, and I stroked her face. She looked at me with those unfathomable eyes.

"So," she said.

She gave herself as though spreading out on the wind. I think we both felt at peace after that first time. I readily forgave her for calling out his name in passion. I figured that, like the single tear on her cheek, it was something dragged out of her.

A week later I tracked down Williams again. He was sitting in his still-unfinished hut, watching the sky, playing his whistle. A forlorn yet serene sound.

"I've seen them," he said happily.

"Who?"

"Chinese. Real Chinese."

I didn't like the sound of that. I think I lost my temper or panicked for a moment.

"There aren't any Chinese! There never were any here. Can't you understand, Li? No Chinese. No Americans. No French. No Chinese."

But he just smiled placidly at me. And said: "Without going outside, you may know the whole world. Without looking through the window, you may see the ways of heaven. The further you go, the less you know."

I thought, that clears everything up, and I got up to go and find Freya. Even as I was walking away I could hear his voice saying softly, "Forty-seven."

But later I calmed down. Li's happy, chatting away to Chinese philosophers, carrying his library of wisdom in his head. He doesn't even need rainbow any more. And I'm happy too. A week or so the fruit started to seem better, and now I've really got the taste. Almost a familiar flavour, like something out of a childhood dream.

We're going to move into one of those white houses, which could almost have been designed with us in mind. I've got Freya, whose secret self is as elusive even as that SUPER I once took on. But I've got much longer to seek it out here: all the time I need, in fact. And when she smiles at me, which she does on rare occasions, it's better than all the blue caverns in the world's biggest gate.