

## **Fragment 01 - written by Alexandra Iuga**

### **The beginning of a journey...**

They say that in a lonely forest lives a mighty beast. She has green skin, thick scales, a long tail that always moves – even when she’s sleeping. They also say she has a lot of hair, red claim some while black others, unwashed since time immemorial and long but somehow spiky. This beast has a very peculiar diet, she only eats one-year-old hens, while still alive and fully feathered. In the countryside, all good farmers are well aware of when their hens are turning one and spend the whole night guarding them, their underwear trembling all along as they are in fact more ready to run than defend their hens in case the beast appears. Still, they must preserve appearances.

She has a name, of course, Zmeoaica (it comes from “Zmeu,” a bad guy in his own right, plus the Romanian suffix “oaica” which means she is a female and his mate) because like any respectable female beast her identity is naturally relative to her male counterpart. She is for real I must tell you. There’s even a Wikipedia page about her, although, of course, her description there doesn’t quite fit the one I just told you. Nonetheless, everyone knows Wikipedia is a not reliable source, they never allowed us to use information from there in University, so you’re much better off believing me.

So, to come back to my initial idea. I’ve heard about this mighty beast, well, to be honest, I knew about her my entire life, but somehow lately I got more and more fascinated by her. I’d catch myself staring in the horizon wondering what it’s like to have everyone fear you, to know that kids run when someone mentions your name, to

know that good men shudder to think about you being close to them. One day I just couldn't go on with my life anymore. I'd be in my office and someone would ask me to fill in some data in Excel, and I wouldn't quite hear them because I was imagining how they would all react if Zmeoaica broke in through the front door right then. Or I would go to buy some food from one of those large supermarkets (you can make your pick, I've been in all of them for such is the nature of spending free time these days) and suddenly hear some respectable woman shout at me because I was stuck in the middle of the cheese aisle recreating a scene in which Zmeoaica decides to move into the big city and has to shop right here in my supermarket. Do you think she would give the cottage cheese a try?

But what really got to me was this one thought: Zmeoaica would never spend her days writing in Excel and checking emails, wasting two hours on a tram every day just to do that. So, I decided to find her. How can you find Zmeoaica you must be wondering now? After all, she's just a mythological creature. I used that exact question to ask Google and, no surprise, I didn't find much. Turns out Google doesn't know everything. But I've heard rumors and especially something my friend said caught my attention. She mentioned a magic window in the mountains. All I had to do was find it and walk through it. That's how I embarked on my journey.

That was no easy journey I can tell you that, but I did find it. Oh no, I'm not going to tell you how. If you're truly interested and dedicated, you've got to put some effort into it and do the journey on your own. After all, this is not one of those "how-to" books. So, as I was saying, I found the window. Cut straight into mountain rock, neither straight nor round; you could see through it a blue sky and the sun and the moon both at all times. Looking through it resonated with such strength inside me that

I almost forgot to cross. Eight days passed until I finally made the step and crossed to the other side. I bet you're dying of curiosity to know what was there!

I'll tell you what it was. It was hunger. For eight days, I had nothing to eat, doing nothing but stare into the infinite, so you can imagine how famished I was. My own stomach was growling like a monster. And there was nothing but acorns and chestnuts and the hens. The damn hens were everywhere! At every corner, there it was, a white or red or bare necked hen cackling away. The landscape itself was painted in red, copper, and yellow. You could say that autumn came, except it looked more like autumn was there all the time. A place that seemed more real and more unreal than anywhere else I'd been until then. Still in the mountains, I walked and walked until night came, when I gave in to my tired legs and made a nice fire. Of course, in this place, I knew how to lit a fire, and I proceeded with roasting the chestnuts I'd been collecting all day. They smelled delicious and not only for me – the hens went crazy over the smell. Yes, you guessed right, I ended up sharing all my chestnuts with these hungry hens, which, afterward (happy and satisfied by the dinner), gathered around me and helped me sleep between the warmth of their bodies.

In the morning, they were all gone. That was the day I entered the forest. The lonely forest where the mighty beast lived. I walked for seven hours and rested for three, and, then, she was there. I found her: Zmeoaica in all her glory. Or not so much glory because, damn, was I disappointed! First of all, she didn't roar or bellow or try to eat me. There was no saliva dribbling around her mouth, and she had blond long hair that would've made any hair-care commercial girl very jealous. In any case, she did have a tail and her skin was green, but she smiled and said, "Good day, traveler!" and "Welcome to my humble abode."

After listening to her deep beautiful voice, I said, “Please, tell me that at least you keep Cosânzeana (See Wikipedia here) as your slave.”

## **Fragment 02 - written by Roberto Perez**

“Can there be slaves beyond an open window?” she asked me. “Wouldn’t that contradict the very essence of the concept?” Then, for a second, I saw a glimpse of that something which makes those standing in front of her fear for their lives.

“It is more to say, dear traveler, that a slave would need a savior to protect and save her. But, let me tell you, we do not take kindly here on people who think so much of themselves.” Her tail moved with every syllable she spoke, and her perfect hair was more intimidating than the fangs of a giant wolf. “Be whatever you want to be here, but do not pretend you came to save anyone other than yourself.”

My whole life, I thought I understood what it meant to be or not to be something. To be this thing or to be that other thing. I’m sure you think you understand it too. And I thought I knew Zmeoaica, I knew who she was. Yet, now I’ve seen her, I’ve talked to her, and I’ve heard her, and I understand how definitions limit our reality. So, let me tell you, it is not a modest task to try and understand that which doesn’t exist in our world. She is not to be feared (or maybe she is), but do we dare not fear?

Let’s approximate: at least a bit of what I’m saying must be true. Think about it, if something doesn’t exist for us, does it stand a chance to be truthfully represented into existence? Zmeoaica has many unique qualities, besides the colour of her hair,

yet they are all redundant for us if all we see is something to be dreaded. She could have a voracious jaw and daggers for tusks or a sweet mouth, as sweet as the sweetest apple, as red as the reddest cherry, it would make no difference in how we see her, it would make no difference for us. When you're looking for a monster, you see a monster.

Maybe I was the exception. I wanted to find a monster, and I found her instead. I don't know anymore if I have a right to make a judgment upon my own disappointment. Disappointment is just as slippery and deluded as expectations.

But let's just return to the story and leave philosophical musings to the philosophers. Of many things we talked that night, Zmeoaica and I. I shared my life with her. I've put my heart on her wooden table, and we dissected it together. We never mentioned slaves, Ileana Cosinzeana, or any other good-tempered, pretty princesses again, yet I still had my curiosity. I wanted to learn something about her, too. At least some of the myth must've been true, isn't it? So, I asked what the deal was with the one-year-old hens, and she told me there just wasn't a better way of making chicken soup. Besides, that was the only recipe she knew. But I suspected there was much more to it than she was letting through.

"You have interesting tastes yourself," the monster said. "You eat what the hens eat and cross borders of other worlds as easily as walking into your bedroom. I wonder if you even know what you are here for." To this day, I don't know whether her words were wise or simply arrogant, but they annoyed me all the same. "I think it's time for you to shrink, to curl up in a beautiful ribbon made of animals and wait for the moon to rock the glowing flowers around you." And just like that, she left.

You think I understood what she meant by that? I didn't. So all that time waiting for her, imagining what she would look like, behave like, be like was for nothing. For a few comments on culinary preferences and a bunch of insults thrown at my face. Is that what people cross windows for? Why we risk everything when we try to break the bonds that bind us to the stupid rules of our world?

I didn't sleep for a second that night, almost undisturbed in my shock while thinking about everything that I'd encountered there. However, as in any great story that has the chance to happen outside of supermarkets and in real magical realms, strange noises unveiled a secret that would still take me a long time to understand myself. In a clear in the forest, close to the bushes where a few funny colored berries grew, shadows were dancing like rubber ducks swimming on a bathtub. I could hear a beautiful voice and the lyrics of a song in a language I didn't understand. So, of course, I went to take a peek, for I did not travel and starve for so long only to be sleepless under the trees while mysteries unrolled.

There it was, in front of me, the kind of image that had my feet going while trekking up the mountain in search of adventure. The kind of image that had me dreaming over Excel docs and took me to distant lands while performing the most ordinary tasks. There, in front of my very eyes, was the blond-haired monster dancing on her tail, like a green leaf blown by different currents of air on the street. And, surrounding her, countless hens that imitated her every move, like a living reflection. They were all there but, at the same time, they were somewhere else. It made me think of saints in ecstasy floating in the air. The words and the music grew louder as if someone was turning up the volume on invisible speakers. And, within the mass of the dancing bodies, I saw a hen lying lifeless on the grass.

I can tell you I've never seen anything like that in my life. It surpassed every possible expectation, and it would have made you at least shudder, I'm sure of that, to be in the presence of such a magical affair. Zmeoaica was moving faster and faster, becoming a glowing light surfing through the cleared sky, and I felt hypnotized. I tried to find her eyes, but she was moving too fast. No one seemed to notice my presence there as if I were completely irrelevant. Then, finally, I felt the strength of her gaze upon my skin, and it all came to a halt.

The dancing stopped. The singing ceased. Nothing was moving anymore in the clear of that forest until I heard the squeaking voice of an exhausted hen. It was the dead one. The one that lied among the rest of them. Looking at Zmeoaica with grateful eyes, the young bird had come to life again.

### **Fragment 03 - written by Steve Wilson**

The hen stood slowly, as if finding her feet for the first time. Her gaze, befuddled as it was, paused upon me for the slightest moment before looking upwards to the now still form of Zmeoaica.

"Thank you, Mama," the little hen wheezed as she spoke, "I never thought you'd sing for me."

Zmeoaica revealed more teeth in what I could only assume was a smile, "My smallest children are the ones that grow the strongest."

The other hens clucked and crowed in an amazing outburst of enthusiasm, a state that I did not really understand.

“You do not yet know the importance of your being here, like our traveller friend who has witnessed your return. But worry not because in time all will become clear.”

Zmeoaica’s voice was so gentle it could have soothed the most fractious child, but the constant movement of her tail made me think that there was something else to be considered.

I knew that there were so many questions that I wanted to ask but at this moment they all eluded me. Instead, I gazed up at her face. It was a dichotomy of horror and beauty and I became strangely enchanted by it.

“What, my lady, will become clear?” My voice trembled as I spoke, and I became annoyed at my ridiculous weakness. Me! Sounding scared! I’d faced a boardroom filled with stupid old men that thought they understood the 21st-century business world, while here I stood before a monster and some chickens!

In the back of my mind a voice arose. Subtle at first but growing in strength as the words began to grow depth.

“Are you that stupid? Did you not witness that dance? Hear THAT song? Are you so silly that you cannot believe the spectacle that has just taken place before you? Child, open your eyes and see what has happened and think before you speak.”

I gazed upward into the hypnotic eyes of Zmeoaica. She was watching me with an intensity that I had not endured since university, when my tutors had paid close attention to every word and phrase used during a presentation. In a business environment, I knew that I had the abilities to withstand an onslaught of ridiculous questions, but, here and now, I felt like a child at school who didn’t know the answer the teacher was expecting.

“Tell me, traveller, have you seen the terrifying beast that the tales speak of? Or have you learned a little of yourself and the greater world that surrounds your own?” Her voice was so soft, no sonnet was ever spoken with more intensity, and yet there were barbs buried deep within her tone.

With great effort, I broke her gaze and looked down at the small hen. She seemed to be no longer interested in our conversation and was scratching around for grains that may have been left by the others. It was as if the dancing and singing had been nothing to do with her and she was just going about her normal business.

I kept my will focused on her until Zmeoaica tossed her beautiful hair in a manner that spoke of great impatience, “Well traveller? What do you say?”

When I looked up into her beautiful, savage, eyes I knew that my answer would have a great many more consequences than any response that I had ever given before. So, I did something that I had never before done when asked a direct question, I paused.

And I waited until I could feel the tension begin to grow around me. For the first time in my adult life, I reveled in the rising tensions before responding. I paused and smiled up at the monster that wasn't so monstrous before speaking in a clear tone.

#### **Fragment 04 - Written by Catalina Condruz**

Suddenly, my smiling Self fell somewhere behind me... I felt dispossessed of thoughts and emotions, dispossessed of the whole life that until then I've experienced as being mine: the sense of “I.” As if my Self was already living far from the present

moment in a place and time I didn't belong to anymore. I got, then, a terrible feeling that my own Self was running away from me. And from her. I couldn't stop it, and the sense of unreality made me shout weird sounds at the beautiful blonde beast in front of me. I realized it was she who soaked the life from my body and resurrected the dead hen by stealing my own, beloved Self. It was she who turned me into a piece of nothing, sheltered by a huge cliff of nothing, in a time of nothing. That beautiful and fascinating window, hidden in the heart of mountains, was nothing but a tricky gate to the land of nothing. All was swallowed by nothing.

"I'm mine, I'm only mine... give me back to me, you horrible beast," I yelled at her with the last of me. But no answer came back to me. To "me" who, after all? It was a matter of time until a bitter emptiness fell over me... I mean, over the rest of "me" left behind. I was drowning in its boundlessness, without hope and direction, when this deep emptiness moved from the cold outside inside the entity I've become now. An entity without substance -- an entity that once, a long time ago, used to harbour a self.

I couldn't move at all. I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't see anything more than a winter landscape, hardened, frozen, and eternal in a painful way. The truth is the only thing I was feeling was the shudder of eternity. It was cold and harsh, like a rugged rock scrubbing my skin. Everything around me was frozen, even Zmeoaica and her henchmen, the silly copper hens she loved as her children, even when she made them into chicken soup. I closed my eyes in a state of shock, being unable to manifest any human feelings. I was stripped of individuality, left only with my mind. And all people know that "to be" means more than to have a mind. I was no longer a part of this world. Behind my closed eyelids, my mind started to display random

images from my life. In the background, the song of Zmeoaica could be heard... it was the healing music of my lost Self.

I couldn't help asking myself (or the nothingness) what was the meaning of that song and dance. How was it possible to bring back to life a dead being? Why did she leave me without Self, without life, stuck in a state of matter in which I was only a silly being putting questions in vain? Was I worth less than a hen?

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Maybe Zmeoaica wanted to show me what it was like to be dead... and that was why I found myself running desperately after my Self, without the slightest chance of catching it. After all, isn't this the real death we must experience in order to live: to lose our Selves in nothingness?

Maybe Zmeoaica wanted to teach me that I can't live this life without knowing how to live its opposite: death.

Maybe Zmeoaica wanted to show me that dispossession was not so bad at the end of the day because, only after becoming dispossessed of everything, one can understand that life it's not about what you have, but about who you are.

Maybe Zmeoaica put me through this ritual to show me that life and death are just different sides of the same coin. There's no reason to fear them because truth means duality and opposition, and, only by transcending them, we can reach the highest level of our being. And you can't do this from a chair in front of a computer, editing an Excel file.

Maybe.

## Fragment 05 - written by Ludovic Coutaud

Maybe... Maybe...

Just when I am processing this heavy word, in a boom felt in a split second, I am sent back in front of that magic window. As if the whole time spent there was a dream. Was it a dream? Or a manifestation of that creature I wanted to see. My interpretation of that legendary monster or did it mean something else?

Everything is peaceful. I stand here for a second, feeling the breeze of the wind, with no monster able to come get me. Maybe, simply, this chapter happened to teach me my deepest fears. I let a small grin appear on my face. Suddenly, a first drop, a second, a third. It starts pouring harshly, like it would on a tropical island. Nowhere to hide. I run under the nearest tree, even if it is commonly said to prevent from doing when thunder strikes. Still, I couldn't stand the sense of droplets on my face.

When thinking that, two strong ones bombard! I must find another refuge. I keep walking and I discover a little path, made by men, a sort of promenade for hikers, marked by the color yellow. It seems secure I ponder.

The last thought I had before coming here was a simple yet complex 'maybe'. Is this a sign of the rest of my journey? A direction for me to figure out the real reason for my voyage? Lots of questioning though my heart knows all the answers, it's true, it does. This solitude starts to weigh even so I feel quite light. My walk is smooth, I do feel neither hunger nor thirst. I notice the rain stopping gently.

Unaware, I hear a 'cackle' resonating in my head. This whole thing is still unclear. My walk seems slower. There is sunshine visible on the horizon. I stop. The cackle sound in my head is louder. My steps, slower.

‘Nancy! Where are you? My sweet Nancy?’

That voice, I know that voice. It’s a familiar sound I have once heard before.

‘Nancy, dinner is ready!’

I find myself responding spontaneously with a high-pitch voice: ‘I am on my way, I should be here soon’. Here soon, that sounds like a lie as I do not know where I am truly going. Not only do I not know where I am going, I look up and see that strange window again, ‘have I been going all around that mountain, in a circle?’

I cannot see my reflection in the window. I sit, bone-weary.

I remember, today must be December 15th, the day of the passing of my sweet sister Susan. I am in true dispossession of myself, alone, thinking only of you my dear Susie.

‘Welcome to my humble abode, dear traveller. It is nice to see you found your way back to our safe place. Do you still think so much of yourself? Have you understood who you were, finally?’

That voice. It is her voice.

‘Come with me, I am here for you.’

A tear finds its way on my cheek, relieved.

This whole time...

I came to find my sister.

This whole time I was on a quest to know and comprehend your missingness. I wanted to know how you died. How it felt when you died. A year ago, exactly when you left me.

I realize, a one-year-old hen... The lying lifeless hen... It was me.

Of course I am unable to manifest human feelings, I am one of the hens now.

My denial is over. I am ready.