



Maquech

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Published: 2008

Type(s): Short Fiction, Science Fiction

Source: <http://futurismic.com>

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Maquech

The jewel encrusted beetle walked slowly across the table, dragging its golden chain behind. It was bigger than any other maquech he'd ever seen before and more richly decorated.

Gerardo put down the eyeglass.

"It's not my usual purchase," he said.

"It's rare," Mario replied. "This is the last one my grandfather made before he passed away."

"Monkeys are the thing now. Everyone wants a monkey."

"But it doesn't need a lot of food or water," Mario protested. "That's a benefit."

"Do you think my clients worry about things like food or water? Listen, I sold five ostriches two months ago. People want large animals now."

It was a lie. He sold fish and birds and maybe a reptile or two. He could not afford extravagant purchases like ostriches.

"I need the money," Mario confessed. "I want to go to Canada."

"What for?"

"I want to see the polar bears before they disappear. Before all the ice melts away."

Gerardo stared at Mario. Who the hell cared about polar bears? Unless Gerardo was importing them he didn't give a damn about them or the ice. Canada was far away and there were more pressing problems right now, like how he was going to afford that month's water bill. Up went the bill and for a small trader of exotic pets there was always competition, taxes and bribes to pay, food to buy for the animals. If he didn't sell them quickly he'd have to keep the beasts for months on end and spend tons of money on their care.

And then Mario came and talked about looking at polar bears? Christ on the cross. They were probably better off without so many of them anyway. He tried to calculate the amount of food one of those things must devour each month and shook his head.

"Look, I can't give you much," Gerardo said.

#

Gerardo put the maquech in the terrarium together with the bits of wood Mario had given him. The maquech fed on the bacteria of

decomposing wood, so at least it wouldn't cost too much to maintain. He recalled the piranhas he'd bought last May. Hungry, ugly little things. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Gerardo looked at the maquech and wondered who might buy this one. He'd seen people wearing a maquech on their lapel or their dress but usually they had tacky plastic faux-jewels on their backs. This little insect had been painted and decorated with semi-precious stones. It was not a cheap bug and he needed to make a good sale.

He went through his list of regular clients, discarded all of them and kept coming back to a single name: Arturo de la Vega.

He'd never sold anything to Arturo but if there was a buyer in Mexico City it was Arturo. He was disgustingly rich. While everyone else was worrying about getting running water that week, how to purchase a kilo of tortillas, the eternally high levels of pollution and the assholes trying to express-kidnap you, Arturo spent insane amounts of money on exotic pets. Arturo de la Vega had a roof garden with a pool and palm trees in a city where people ran behind the water trucks, filling barrels and *tinajas* twice a week. Arturo de la Vega drove a car when everyone else had to walk, or at best be carried on a litter down Reforma.

If you managed to sell an animal to Arturo de la Vega you were in the big leagues.

But Gerardo had never sold a thing to him. He was too small, too unknown, too much of a provincial newcomer.

He drummed his fingers against the table.

He took out the camera and snapped a few pictures of the maquech.

#

He normally did not dream. There was no space in the cramped apartment for dreams, filled with the stench of the birds and fish.

That night he dreamt of rivers and quiet, dark places where the sunlight turns green with the colour of the trees.

#

Three days later the monthly offering period for Arturo de la Vega opened up. It was only a one day window and Gerardo had to line outside the reception office for many hours prior to that. He stood baking under the furious sun and watched a man with cages strapped behind his back walk by. Mechanical owls blinked their multi-coloured eyes at

Gerardo and shook their metal wings. There was a water-seller across the street yelling the same litany over and over again.

“Water. Fresh, pure water.”

He closed his eyes and he thought of the murmur of a stream.

Somebody shoved him forward and Gerardo snapped his eyes open and walked forward, one more step towards the building’s entrance. A long time later he stepped into the lobby and placed his submission package, nothing more than a few snapshots and an introduction letter, on the narrow cedar table.

Then it was back to his apartment, down three flights of stairs. He couldn’t afford a floor aboveground with glass window; not even a window with metal shutters. Sunlight was costly.

Gerardo fed the fish and the birds first. Then he turned to the maquech.

The insect walked from one end of its terrarium to the other.

“What are you thinking?” he asked the maquech.

The maquech stood very still.

Gerardo stood still too.

He didn’t talk to the animals. It was not his thing to coo and smile and babble over an animal like it was a baby. He fed them. He housed them. He sold them. That was it.

Nothing less and nothing more.

#

It was water day. Four hours of running water. The luxury of a warm shower was something he looked forward to the whole week. He hummed and closed his eyes and thought of blue-green waterfalls.

As he stood in the shower, head bowed under the spray, he heard a loud pounding.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and opened the door.

A courier held out a letter for him.

“From Mr. De la Vega,” the man said.

Gerardo tore open the black envelope. Inside was a card with an address and a date. An invitation to Mr. De la Vega’s apartment. An invitation to show him the maquech.

He’d done it.

He was going to De la Vega's home, to parade his maquech in front of him like a real trader.

Gerardo froze as he realized the wooden or plastic cages where he normally stuffed his merchandise wouldn't suffice. He needed something grand and elegant that would display the maquech like an elaborate brooch.

Perhaps a red velvet box lined in silk with appropriate breathing holes. At once he began to panic, considering the price of this custom-made, urgent item.

But then he looked at the maquech with its golden chain, the painted back, the tiny stones in the centre of the composition. A breathing mosaic. A walking jewel. It was beautiful. It needed a beautiful setting.

#

The room was black and bright as polished obsidian, the floor and the walls reflected and distorted Gerardo's image as he opened the box and held it up for De la Vega to inspect.

The young man glanced at the maquech, just a little glance and looked up at him.

"What on earth is that?"

"*Zopherus chilensis*," Gerardo said. "In Yucatan they call them maquech and wear them as a brooch."

"It's alive?"

"Yes. Live-jewellery. It is decorated with ..."

"Pablo, did you select this?"

A man in impeccable white wearing a matching white hat stepped from behind De la Vega's right, a little silver tablet in his left hand.

"Yes," said the man.

"What for?"

"It's a curiosity. I haven't seen one since I was a child."

"It's ugly," De la Vega said and waved Gerardo away.

#

He considered tearing off the jewels from the insect's back. There were bills to pay and the maquech had been an extravagant purchase at a time when he couldn't afford it. Not that Gerardo could ever afford much.

"Stupid, slow bug," he told the maquech as it walked on the palm of his hand. Or maybe not stupid, merely indifferent. In Yucatan they said

it could live for many decades, even centuries. Maybe after hundreds of years walking in the jungle things such as humans and their games were of little importance. Of course these were just legends. Stories old people tell. He didn't believe them.

But as the maquech began to crawl up his arm he thought what time might be like for a quasi-immortal creature, sitting under the jade shade of the trees.

#

Gerardo was thinking of black eyeless fish and cenotes when the phone rang. The cenotes melted away as he punched a key.

"Yes?" he asked.

"It's Pablo, Mr. de la Vega's assistant. I need you to come tomorrow to the apartment and bring your insect again. He wants to have a second look at it."

Pablo's voice had a hint of metal as it poured from the phone, crisp and sharp and bright. Gerardo swallowed and leaned forward.

"I'm sorry?"

"Tomorrow at five. You got that?"

"Yeah, sure."

"See you then."

Gerardo punched another key and sat back. The maquech took a step with each tick of the black minute hand of the clock on the wall. The heavy jewels on its back made it slow. Or maybe it did not care to move quickly. There was all the time in the world for it to reach its destination.

#

Pablo, the man in white, was wearing grey this time. His fingers danced over the tablet and he spoke with his measured voice.

"They use them as love talismans. The Mayans said there was a girl that was turned into that insect."

"The Mayans thought a princess' doomed lover was turned into a maquech so he could remain close to her heart," Gerardo said, correcting the assistant. "The Mayans thought it was a symbol of immortality."

Pablo glanced up at him, his fingers frozen for a second.

Arturo de la Vega did not reply. He sat in his obsidian room, holding a glass between his fingers. He did not look at the insect that Gerardo was

holding up in its velvet box for him to examine. Instead, Arturo set down his glass on top of a black, lacquered table.

"I don't enjoy insects," he said. "I don't find them interesting. They're too small, too common, and they don't live very long."

"A maquech can live three or four years in captivity. Maybe even more with the proper care."

"That's not very long."

"Do you purchase your animals based on their longevity?"

"Normally longevity is not an issue."

"Four years is not a short period of time."

"It seems short to me."

"Then you shouldn't have called me. I can't make it live forty years just for your sake," he said, and he knew it was a rude remark but he could not help himself. Arturo had made him wait for two hours before he deigned to see him and he was tired, with this curious sensation of levity, as though everything that might happen was inconsequential.

"Do you smoke?" Arturo asked as he took out a white gold case and plucked a thin black cigarette.

"Sure," Gerardo said, although he had not smoked in over five years. He couldn't afford it.

Arturo made a little motion with his hand and Pablo stepped forward, lighting their cigarettes. Up close, Pablo's eyes glinted a synthetic blue-silver. Modified. Beautified.

Arturo puffed twice and smiled.

"I'm not completely indifferent to your beetle, Gerardo. But I'm not completely interested either. I've got other traders showing their goods to me and they have very impressive merchandise and they are much better known than you. Does he come recommended?"

"No recommendations," Pablo said with his beautiful, beautiful voice and Gerardo wondered if that too had been modified. "But talent springs from the oddest place."

"I do have a knack for spotting talent," Arturo said.

"Mr. De la Vega made Yuko Saitou an overnight sensation. Her two-headed koi are all the rage."

"Synthets," Gerardo said.

"We buy many, many things."

There was a pause. The smoke of the cigarettes curled up, towards the glass ceiling and Gerardo shifted his weight feeling suddenly pinned under the men's gaze.

"How about a test?" Pablo asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"Try on the beetle. Wear it."

"That's not such a bad idea," De la Vega said.

"Now?"

"I have a party on Friday. Come back Friday. We'll see how it goes."

#

The maquech smelled like old wood. Beneath its jewels it was the colour of wood and if Gerardo closed his eyes it felt like it was a leaf moving upon his hand, stirred by the breeze.

He opened his eyes and let the beetle back into its terrarium. He turned on the TV and clicked through the channels and there was the news and talk about crime rates, and the soap operas, and the late night variety hour pop-star sensation.

Gerardo tried to concentrate on the TV and the images flickered in dazzling colour but seemed as insubstantial as ghosts. There was nothing remotely interesting to watch inside his box of an apartment with its concrete lid.

He turned off the TV and sat in silence.

He thought he could hear the rain falling, far away.

#

A woman walked with a leopard on a leash, a teenage boy wore a snake-skin jacket and a real snake around his neck. Men wrapped in silk and feathers, with fish scales glued to their face drank out of amethyst glasses. Women in dresses made of iridescent butterfly wings smiled at him.

And then, among the sea of revellers, Arturo walked forth with a jaguar's skull upon his head and a cape made of animal bones and he smiled at Gerardo. Pablo, black suit and black hat, served as his shadow.

"So good to see you. So good. Are you having fun?" Arturo asked.

"It's a very grand party."

"It is. Have you brought it then?"

Gerardo opened the velvet box and held it up. Pablo slipped forward and took the box, took the maquech, and placed it upon Arturo's shirt, fastening the golden chain. It shone like a star. It shone brighter than he'd ever seen it before, as if to please Gerardo, and people circled Arturo and fawned and sighed.

Pablo, who was still next to Gerardo, smiled a tiny, calculated smile.

"Will he buy it?" Gerardo asked as the star moved away and was lost from his sight.

"He never knows what he wants," Pablo said. "But he likes real things and real things are scarce."

Gerardo was quiet and then Pablo took out his tablet and walked away. "Luck of the draw," he said, without turning to look at him.

#

A couple of hours later Pablo walked to Gerardo and handed him a card.

"Mr. De la Vega wishes to purchase your beetle," he said.

Gerardo nodded. He did not know what else one was supposed to do in such situations.

"Come back sometime," Pablo said.

"The maquech," Gerardo muttered. Pablo's blue eyes swept over him, a question mark. "It'll need to eat. There's some wood it needs."

"I'll send someone."

He was escorted out of the party, to a black car with tinted windows. He had never been in a car. Well, nothing like a real car. Once he had sat in his uncle's beat-up *bochito* when he was a kid but he hardly remembered anything about that ride.

Now he went down Reforma, down the only car lane, fast like a silver bullet. And he thought he'd never, ever forget that moment.

#

Gerardo walked down three flights of stairs into his windowless apartment.

There was something missing there. But everything seemed to be in its place, all the papers remained where he'd left them, each bird sat in its cage, each fish swam in its tank.

When he walked into the kitchen he saw ants were feasting on a sandwich he had left on the table and he tossed it in the garbage.

He turned on the TV and there was a report about riots due to increases in the cost of the tortilla. Somewhere in Santa Julia two men had been shot for stealing hoarded water. In the colonia Roma, Mexican freshwater turtles were being served as appetizers at a fine restaurant. He turned it off.

There was something missing.

He grabbed the terrarium and started putting the pieces of wood into a bag so he could courier them to De la Vega. And as he did he realized what was missing: the smell of old wood and jungle. The smell of the maquech.

That night Gerardo did not dream of rivers.

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Author's Note: Thanks to entomologist Dr. Aristeo Cuauhtémoc Deloya Lopez and his information about the maquech, which was invaluable in the writing of this story.

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