

THE TOWER OF THE MOONLESS

Written by Silvia Bernardi

“What I’d like to know is this” she said
“are the stars made of gold paper,
or is gold paper made of stars?”

Mary Poppins, Pamela Lyndon Traver

Chapter 1

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"What are you doing here?"

Marnie's mouth fell open, and the pin she'd been using to measure the hem of her brother's pants tumbled down, into the folds of her robe and then onto the yellow carpet.

It bumped into the box, and the pins spilled out; retrieving them all would be tough, and snagging more from the seamstress on Alley Alemagna would be even tougher.

"Can I come in?"

Peter's head poked through the doorway, and then his body appeared. It seemed to have grown all at once between the end of summer and the beginning of fall.

"Yes, but don't disturb us. Michelino's pants are too long, can't you see? Can I send him out like this? Just buttoning his shirt is a challenge, you know."

Marnie huffed, but Peter knew she was actually enjoying herself deep down.

"Hi, Michelino." Peter stepped into the room, and the little boy gave him one of his bright-eyed looks. Whatever Marnie had told her younger brother to keep him sitting still on that stool was working.

Peter sat down on the bed and watched her continue her work.

"There we go!" she exclaimed with satisfaction after fiddling with the pants for a couple of minutes. "Now let's take these things off; I'll fix them up and you can put them on before we go out, okay?"

Marnie jumped to her feet, dishevelled and wrapped in a bizarre robe – was that really a golden dragon she'd sewn onto the back? – which she'd certainly found at the flea market she'd been sneaking off to on Saturday afternoons.

Underneath, she was wearing a green and blue chequered dress which, if Peter remembered correctly, she had made the previous summer by copying the pattern from a high-fashion magazine.

"So what are you doing here?" she asked Peter again, blowing a strand of hair away from her nose.

'How beautiful she is' he thought. 'And how unbearable!'

"I've come with my mum, who's downstairs talking to your mum right now."

Marnie didn't even look at him and went back to her work.

"And you two... are you getting ready for tonight?"

"Yes" she mumbled, having apparently stuck a stray pin between her lips, "for that deadly boring farewell party for Professor Delcorvo."

Peter sighed: he adored Tellurio Delcorvo! An emeritus professor of astronomy, specialising in the study of galaxies and variable stars, in recent years he had devoted himself to the newest planet in the solar system, Pluto, and its moons. That evening, Tellurio was to officially retire from his university career and said he would finally enjoy his retirement, fly-fishing, a few classical music concerts and reading books that had nothing to do with planets, stars, elliptical or spiral galaxies.

Peter would have loved to go to that event: nothing to do with Delcorvo could possibly be a deadly bore!

"Marnie, I hope you have a good time."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe not."

She – Marina Roverè, daughter of Nilo Roverè, Tellurio Delcorvo's right-hand man – had absolutely no idea of the trail of fortune she was leaving in her wake.

"Well, but there's the tower of the Moonless in the university building" said Peter.

Ever since they were children, they'd loved listening to the grown-ups tell legends about the tower – stories of the astronomers who'd observed the cosmos through the telescope from up there, of the bizarre and unsettling figures who'd roamed within its walls, and of the treasures that might be hidden inside. Peter and Marnie had never set foot inside it.

"Come off it, that dilapidated tower's closed off. It's a danger!" said Marnie, rolling her eyes. "My dad says bricks are falling on people's heads; they've even put up scaffolding."

"But Tellurio has his study up there. It can't be that dangerous."

"Tellurio's an old blockhead who always wants to do things his own way!"

Old blockhead or not, Professor Tellurio Delcorvo had set up his headquarters in the tower of the Moonless: a place which, according to Nilo, was full of oddities.

Peter watched as Marnie tucked her hair behind her ears and carefully felt the back and sides of her neck. He thought back to when, as children, she used to draw dozens of outfits, accessories and decorations on pieces of card, which she would then use to dress

her cardboard dolls. But it was he who had to cut them out, one by one, whilst she carried on creating her tiny wardrobes.

After years of dressing up paper dolls, she had now started dressing herself and her brother, much to the dismay of Professor Nilo Roverè.

"Marnie's bits and bobs, always in a mess" Nilo would say whenever he found scraps of fabric and buttons scattered about by his daughter. "That girl ought to be concentrating on algebra and Latin!"

Marnie left the dressing gown with the dragon on the bed and ordered Michelino to clear off: Mrs Crispini, that nasty piano teacher of hers, would be arriving shortly, and she wanted to find her all ready, sitting on the stool with her back straight.

"Peter, we've got to go: if I'm late, that two-hundred-year-old witch will make me fly as punishment" she said, brushing past him and, with a quick sidestep, avoiding him. "See you at school."

She took her brother by the hand and left the room.

Chapter 2

Peter stood there dithering like the pendulum clock in the hall.

Things that, until a few months earlier, had been completely normal – spending hours in his room chatting after studying, lying in bed and telling each other horror stories, playing *The Mummy of Ramses*, cheating at the Game of the Goose, challenging each other to a game of draughts and managing to make a triple checker – had now, for Marnie, slipped to the very bottom of the drawer of interesting things, into that blind corner where you can't retrieve them even if you stick your whole hand in and stretch out your fingers.

Women, what creatures! His father always used to say that when his mum did something he would have done, said or understood differently. "What a character!" she would exclaim with a smile.

Mum would laugh, then do things her own way, and Dad was happy all the same.

Now Mum laughed less, or perhaps it was Peter who didn't make her laugh that much after all. Dad was really nice, whereas he was just his son, and Mum was full of worries.

Getting by as a widow on a maid's wage, the rent going up every year, and the maths teacher who'd asked whether, once he'd finished middle school, Peter was planning to enrol in sixth form. High school! What nonsense.

Marnie would be going to high school. One day, perhaps Michelino too, if he ever decided to start talking.

Peter, would not.

He picked up a white card with a gold border lying on Marnie's bedside table: the invitation to the party! The one he wouldn't be going to. He turned it over.

Invitation for Mr Nilo Roverè, Mrs Eloisa Santarosa Roverè and children.

Nilo Roverè, Marnie and Michelino's father, was the protégé of Tellurio Delcorvo, the man who would undoubtedly be appointed that evening as the new professor of astronomy.

Tellurio was Marnie's godfather and had always been a regular visitor to the Roverè household.

He, Peter Peace, had also been a regular at the Roverè household for as long as he could remember: his mother had worked for that family since she was a girl; she and Eloisa were close friends; he and Marnie had been born a month apart; and when they were just

over a year old, the war had broken out and they had all been evacuated to the countryside, to the Santarosa family home.

The two children had spent years playing hide-and-seek, curling up inside tents, chasing each other through the streets, letting the neighbouring farmers' cows out of their barns, racing to see who could get to the washhouse first, drawing intricate mazes with chalk on the cobblestones of the square, and then, once back in town, looking out for one another in class.

She would stand up to anyone who called him "that fatherless little louse", whilst he would defend her when she was teased for not being able to do her maths homework and when they called her "the idiot's sister".

Michelino didn't speak, mind you, but he certainly wasn't an idiot. Once he'd heard Eloisa tell her mother that until he was three, Michelino had said a few words, then he'd stopped and become the silent creature he was now. Loved by everyone, yet unlike anyone else.

Eloisa always told him that the Roverè house was his home too, and he really did feel it was his to some extent; and how much he enjoyed spending time there with Marnie, Michelino and, yes, even Tellurio Delcorvo.

Whenever the professor came to the Roverè house to work with Nilo, the two scientists would shut themselves away in the study to explore one issue or another: for Peter, it was the perfect opportunity to ask if he could sit in on their discussion. Nilo might well have preferred not to have a bunch of brats underfoot, but Tellurio always went along with it, and never failed to spice up the afternoon with tales of when he'd beaten Niels Bohr at darts in a beer hall in Bavaria, of the secrets Enrico Fermi had confided in him (and which, as they could well imagine, he couldn't reveal), of the thoughts he devoted daily to his friend Ettore, whom he always referred to simply by name, and whom he was certain was by no means dead, though he did not wish to dwell on this point either. He was certain that Einstein's physics was opening the doors to the future, and that within a few decades quantum physics would provide many answers to those who took the trouble to ask the right questions.

Nilo shook his head, as if to shake off the thousand lives his mentor had lived in a single lifetime, which were buzzing around him.

Peter loved those suspended hours when the professors sat at their wooden desks: he would sit there, listening to them, silent and upright as a coat rack.

He didn't understand much of what they were saying, but he didn't want to miss a single word – the name of a fixed star, a galaxy, a ring or a moon – not even an 'x', a 'y' or a number raised to the power of two written on the page.

Marnie often came round too, but she'd start drawing clothes using pattern pieces, and when she got fed up with cutting them out, she'd pass the card to him by sliding it across the table, and then Peter would get to work with the scissors, all the while pricking up his ears.

And that evening there was a party to which only the teachers and their families were invited, and he was neither one nor the other.

It was better to occupy himself with something else, before his thoughts became muddled.

He moved Marnie's sewing box aside and grabbed the latest issue of *Frosting and Flour*, the most famous cookery magazine around. He smoothed out the corner of the pages that had been crumpled, forming an annoying little triangle of paper.

Eloisa never missed an issue, and he loved reading the *Star Frosting* supplement, dedicated to astronomy and written for those who knew nothing about the subject.

Peter turned to the centre pages.

There they were: the eight pages of *Star Frosting – astronomy, astrology and cosmology within reach of a fork and spoon*. A column written and edited by the journalist Maria Snow Nebula, a cosmologist, amateur astronomer, astrologer and explorer of the night sky.

Beneath the headline 'The Recipe for Relativity' was Maria Snow Nebula's face, smiling and full of life. Peter noticed her hair styled in precise waves, the gleaming teardrop earrings hanging at either side of her face, and her heavily made-up lips. He wondered what her voice sounded like. He imagined it to be soft, just as she appeared to be. Professor Delcorvo knew her; on several occasions she had told him and Marnie about the projects they were developing together.

Maria Snow Nebula – cosmologist, amateur astronomer, astrologer and explorer of the night sky – was his idol: no one could explain astronomy quite like she did! Peter adored the way she wrote; it was as if he could hear her voice – yes, she must have had a beautiful voice, clear and full-bodied, just like her earrings! – reciting her own articles.

For example: who else would have thought of describing the theory of relativity in ten steps, as if it were a recipe?

Frosting and Flour was a magazine for housewives, domestic workers and ladies of all ages who would leaf through the peninsula's most famous cookery magazine whilst waiting their turn at the market or at the hairdresser's, or whilst spending the afternoon over a cup of coffee and pastries, only to discuss it with their friends whilst queuing at the greengrocer's or before a game of burraco.

My dear astro-lovers, imagine that the cosmos is a bowl, wrote Maria Snow Nebula, and imagine that a gentleman called Albert Einstein decides to stir up all the ingredients inside it.

Peter read all ten steps, chuckling to himself.

Put like that, it all seemed so simple! And he could learn it too, even though he'd never go to sixth form or university, just as he wouldn't be going to Tellurio's party that evening.

Peter looked out of the window and realised it had started to snow: just as his thoughts were beginning to grow hazy again, Marnie's voice rang out like a trumpet from the stairwell, ordering him to come down.