

Jason Sanford <www.jasonsanford.com> grew up reading *Asimov's*, which his grandfather subscribed to in the 1980s. Jason still has several of his grandfather's issues with the original mailing tags attached, and figures this helps explain his love of short fiction. A Nebula Award finalist, the author's stories have been published in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *Analog*, and many other places. In his latest tale, a government that exerts total dominance over its people finds itself with a . . .

DULLER'S PEACE

Jason Sanford

Serija knows what happens when she thinks the wrong thoughts—people die. When Serija's mind creeps across forbidden ideas like "I hate the nation," her mother dies. When Serija feels anger at the nation, her brother and father slip into death.

So now Serija stays happy happy and smiley smiles. Now she keeps her thoughts calm and loving even when she smells the burnt-orange scent of dust laughing at her. This is entirely proper, she believes, and what every twelve-year-old should do in these days of whispered screams and dulling pain.

"Serija?" her grandfather asks. "Serija? Are you even listening?"

Serija sits with her grandfather on the cement steps in front of his home. Her grandfather worked all day in his rice fields and now rests—exhausted—as the mud on his clothes slowly dries into cracked maps of imaginary lands.

Before them stretch the family's fields, newly flooded with finger-shoots of gened rice poking through the mirrored ripples. Beyond the fields rise the hills and mountains that hem in this valley. Sometimes Serija pretends the high peaks are alive—that their shrieking winds are actually whispered promises to conceal her valley from the outside world. She knows the mountains do this simply to keep her happy and safe.

"I'm listening, Grandfather," she says.

"Doesn't seem like you are."

Serija smiles again, which she knows troubles her grandfather. But it's not safe to do anything but smile. To reassure her grandfather, Serija leans over and hugs him.

They are still sitting there minutes later when a mother and child pass by the house on their way to the village market. The mother holds the little child's hand as their footsteps raise a trail of dust from the dirt road.

The dust's burning-orange scent jumps through Serija's mind. Before she can stop herself, Serija remembers holding her own mother's hand as they walked home from that final political rally in the capital city. Serija had felt so proud at the rally, her

face giving to true smiles as her mother stood in front of thousands of people and announced that even the death of her son and husband wouldn't silence her.

"Let the nation feel your anger," her mother had yelled to the cheering crowds. "Let the nation know your every thought is hatred for what they've done to our people!"

But after the rally, as they walked down a street near their apartment, her mother gasped and fell to the ground. Passersby screamed and ran away, afraid they'd be killed for being sympathetic or helpful.

Serija's mother shivered and gagged and squeezed Serija's hand tight as the smell of oranges burned around them. Her mother tried to say something, but words refused to slip past her lips. And then the shivering stopped and her mother lay on the street as nothing more than dead.

Now, as Serija watches the mother and child walk before her, she remembers prying her hand from her mother's vice-clenched grip. The mother and child also kick up dust as they walk, forcing Serija to think of the tiny motes that killed her mother.

In fact, the motes surround Serija even now. The air she breathes is filled with their technology. Her blood flows to their systems as they monitor her every thought. If she isn't careful, she'll think a wrong thought and the motes will kill her grandfather for doing nothing more than sitting beside her.

Serija jumps up in panic, desperate to run for safety. But where is safety when the motes are everywhere? She steps backward and tumbles to the dry ground, raising a cloud of dust. She smells more burnt oranges and screams, brushing the dust and motes off her clothes but only stirring them up even more.

"Serija," her grandfather yells, pulling her into his arms. "Look at me, Serija. It's okay. Everything is okay."

Serija stares at her grandfather's face, puzzled for a moment because she can't recognize him. Then the memories wash away, and she knows him again and cries.

The mother and child walking along the dirt road continue on, polite enough to pretend they haven't witnessed Serija's outburst.

That night Serija can't eat the dinner her grandfather cooks—she keeps imagining the motes mixing into every bite of rice. Her grandfather nods understandingly and fixes a quick bowl of soup. "The boiling destroys the motes," he says. "Back when I worked in nano design, I used high temperatures to destroy their systems."

Serija isn't sure that's true, but loves her grandfather for making the effort to craft such a beautiful lie. She sips at the soup before walking to her room and slipping into bed.

She sleeps a little that evening but wakes well before midnight. From the front of the house she hears whispered voices. She'd forgotten that tonight is when her grandfather's friends visit each week for drinks and conversation.

"How's she doing?" one voice whispers. Serija recognizes the voice as Uncle Karin, her grandfather's younger brother from the other side of the village.

"Not good," her grandfather says. "Everything sets off her memories."

"Flashbacks," a voice she doesn't recognize mutters.

"No, not flashbacks," her grandfather says angrily. "How the hell can they be flashbacks when the nation keeps doing this shit to us. The motes are probably in our whiskey right now."

Someone coughs as if they'd swallowed wrong while Uncle Karin urges her grandfather to be quiet. "They'll hear," he warns.

"Doesn't matter if they hear," her grandfather states. "Their motes are everywhere. They're in us right now, reporting our thoughts and emotions before we can even comprehend them." But as if heeding Uncle Karin's words her grandfather lapses into silence.

"She's only a child," Uncle Karin whispers. "Curse the nation for this. Curse them all."

The other men shush Uncle Karin while Serija's hands shake at hearing such wrongness. *I didn't hear that*, she thinks. *I didn't. I love the nation. I love the nation.*

Serija keeps repeating that thought until, exhausted, she finally forgets to stay awake.

Serija's grandfather has told her many times to avoid remembering too much—that the motes can only probe your memories when you're actually remembering.

But when she sleeps it's hard to not remember how things used to be.

So yet again Serija dreams of the city, just as she does most nights. Yet again she hides in her family's empty apartment after they die, the weeks passing slowly—and alone—until her food runs out. The red-painted front door mocks her because she fears opening it. The framed pictures of her mother and father and brother eye her constantly as if asking what life would have been like if Serija's evil thoughts hadn't killed them.

When hunger finally drives Serija out of the apartment, she wanders the neighborhood in a daze begging for help. People twist in horror from her thin face, or look through her as if she's a mere ghost or afterimage. A few curse her in whispered tones, wanting to be sure the nation knows of their hatred for this little girl.

To survive Serija eats leftover food she finds in the trash. To pass the time she watches video screens through restaurant windows—wondering how the rest of the world can let such pain happen here—or stares at the bouncing balls in the toy store and remembers how her mother once promised to buy her one.

Then one day her grandfather arrives. He stands in the open doorway of her empty apartment holding a perfumed handkerchief before his nose to block the smell of decayed trash and excrement. He turns from the apartment and kicks in the door across the hall, then kicks in the other doors on the floor, screaming at the neighbors that they are scum. That they are simply evil.

"How could you not help a starving child?" he yells. "The nation is laughing at you for being too scared to even feed a hungry child!"

The neighbors recognize her grandfather and know of his fabled reputation. How he'd been their land's most famed design engineer before giving that up to fight the nation. How he would still be fighting if the nation's motes hadn't ended the war.

Fearing that the nation will punish them for being near Serija's grandfather, the neighbors beg him to go away. Instead, he hits them and curses them until—exhausting his anger—he picks up Serija and carries her from the city to his home village.

When Serija wakes from her dream it is still nighttime. She smiles, remembering how her grandfather saved her and punished those nasty neighbors.

Then, realizing that such thoughts are wrong, she whispers her love for the nation and covers her face with her pillow so the dark room disappears into the soft crush of an even smaller darkness.

In the morning the satellite school is in session, so Serija packs a lunch and walks down the dirt road. Her grandfather offers to walk with her, but she says she'll be fine.

And she is, until she sees the patrol.

She's walking with several classmates when the patrol approaches from the opposite direction. There are three of them, nation soldiers, all sealed in battle gear from their boots to their helmets and masks. The teacher in the satellite school once said the helmets and masks and sealed suits protect the soldiers from being hurt, but Serija has heard a different truth from the other villagers. That the nation soldiers seal themselves in because they don't want to breathe the motes.

The soldiers don't want their own nation knowing what they think.

No, Serija thinks, immediately dismissing the thought. *La la la. I love the nation. I love the nation's soldiers.*

"It's the whole garrison," a boy next to Serija whispers. Like most of the village kids, he wears a scarf wrapped across his mouth and nose. The villagers believe scarves keep out most of the motes. But Serija doesn't bother wearing one—her grandfather told her only high-tech barriers stop the microscopic machines.

This can't be all the soldiers in the valley, Serija thinks. "There are only three soldiers," she whispers.

"That's the entire garrison."

Serija glances across the valley at the firebase, which is built on a large hill. The base controls this valley and the nearby mountains.

"There used to be hundreds of soldiers there," the kid says. "And even more drones and remotes. But now, with the motes, they only need three soldiers to watch over us."

As the soldiers step closer, their black-mirror facemasks reflect back distorted images of the kids. Serija and her classmates bunch together, trying not to be afraid.

"I love the nation," Serija croaks, her voice barely a whisper. Then louder. "I love the nation!"

The other kids repeat Serija's words until they're chanting their love with each step they take. One of the soldiers points a scanner at the kids, which Serija has heard compares the words and actions of people with their mote-detected thoughts. *I love the nation*, Serija thinks, praying the motes will transmit this truth to the soldiers.

One of the soldiers nods a faceless mask at the kids and gives them a thumbs up.

Serija and her classmates hurry down the road to the school, not one of them looking back to see where the soldiers are going.

The satellite school sits in the village's old meeting hall, the building's cinderblock walls rough and uneven from decades of cement patches and peeling coats of paint. A bricked-over starburst on one wall shows where a missile hit during the early years of the war.

The only attempts at modernity in the hall are the receiver and projector bolted to the cracked fiberglass roof.

Once inside Serija breathes deeply, trying to forget her encounter with the soldiers. Serija's classmates play a game of hide and seek and ask her to join in, but Serija merely shakes her head and sits—smiling—at her desk. Serija knows that just because their teacher isn't here that doesn't mean they aren't being watched.

At the exact second school is supposed to start, the projector hums and the teacher appears before the class. The other kids scurry to their desks.

"Very nice, Serija," the hologram says. "It's always pleasing to see polite, attentive students like yourself."

For a moment Serija remembers her human teacher from when she lived in the city. That teacher once taught a fascinating lesson about data mining and analysis—about how it's difficult for the nation to track every thought people have every moment of every day, but that over time their algorithms still pick up on trends. That with enough watching, the algorithms can easily decide which people deserve closer attention.

Serija knows the village's holographic teacher is merely another expression of those same algorithms. She wonders if the teacher is praising her because Serija warrants attention, or because Serija no longer needs close monitoring.

The teacher frowns at Serija, who immediately smiles even harder and remembers how much she loves the nation. She wishes the teacher were physically here so she could hug its algorithm-driven form.

The teacher nods its approval to Serija as it begins the day's lesson.

That evening Serija and her grandfather are eating dinner when Uncle Karin bursts into their house with his son, Alani. "They want him!" Uncle Karin yells.

"What are you talking about?" Serija's grandfather asks.

"The soldiers came to our house this morning. They said Alani has a brain tumor."

Alani, who is only six, stands silently beside his father. Only the child's eyes are visible above the purple scarf wrapped around his lower face. But even without seeing more than Alani's eyes, Serija can tell the child is terrified. While Alani may not understand all of what his father is saying, he knows enough to be afraid.

Serija's grandfather nods at her to take care of Alani, so she leads him to her bedroom where he silently stares at the floor. When Serija tries to unwrap the scarf from his mouth and nose, Alani cries and pushes her away.

"What happened?" Serija hears her grandfather ask softly.

"You saw the soldiers this morning? They stopped by my house. They held a scanner near Alani's head and announced he had a tumor. But they already knew it was there. I know it!"

"La la la!" Serija sings, grabbing Alani's hands and twirling him into a silly dance to keep from hearing the conversation in the other room. But she still hears everything.

"Of course they knew," her grandfather says. "The damn motes probably gave him the tumor in the first place."

"Let's play hide and seek," Serija says, stopping the song and dance because it isn't keeping her from thinking wrong thoughts. Alani's eyes widen and he nods, excited. Serija looks around her tiny room—there's nowhere to hide, except under the blankets on her bed. She grabs the blankets and holds them up as she and Alani dive underneath.

"Who are we hiding from?" Alani asks.

"Everyone," Serija whispers. The words of her grandfather and Uncle Karin are now muffled. But she still understands far too clearly what they're talking about. *I love the nation*, she thinks, and hopes her attempt to think correctly and not listen to wrongness will protect Alani and her grandfather and Uncle Karin.

Despite being under the blanket, Serija hears Uncle Karin crying. When he finally stops, her grandfather asks what the soldiers offered him.

"They'll take us to their main base and treat him. For free. Then they'll return us safe and sound."

"That's what they always offer," her grandfather says. "Hearts and minds. They want to win our hearts and minds."

"I know. But what am I to do? Let Alani die? Like his mother?"

"Your wife was brave . . ."

"My wife listened to your damn advice and now she's dead."

Alani pulls the blanket from over his head to listen. Serija knows Alani's mother died several years ago of some strange cancer that spread throughout her body. Aware that Serija and Alani are listening, the men lower their voices and step outside the house.

When they come back inside an hour later, Serija is reading a picture book to Alani—*The Happy Happy Caterpillar*, one of the many books the nation donated to the village a few months ago.

Uncle Karin picks up his son as he hugs Serija. "Thank you, Serija," he says. "You're a special one. Never let them convince you otherwise."

In the morning a transport lands in the middle of the village and leaves a few minutes later carrying Uncle Karin and Alani. As Serija watches it fly over the mountains she mutters a prayer that the nation will save Alani.

"I love the nation," she tells her grandfather, who instead of agreeing kicks the dirt road and walks silently back home.

The next two months pass quickly. The rice in front of the house grows like weeds, leaving her grandfather to shake his head at its success. Serija knows he doesn't like accepting the genetically altered rice seeds offered by the nation, but the motes kill any other rice the villagers plant. The nation claims this resulted from a bio-programming accident, but Serija's grandfather continually questions this fact.

Then, in the middle of a school day—as the teacher talks about how the nation can cure even the worst injuries and diseases—a transport buzzes the village. All the kids run to the windows to look.

"What perfect timing," the teacher announces as if surprised. "Everyone is dismissed early to greet Alani's return."

I love the nation, Serija thinks as she runs to the sports field in the middle of the village, where the transport lands. The transport's doors remain shut, reminding Serija of the street-puppet plays in the city and how the curtains on those tiny stages didn't part until the audience was large enough. Sure enough, once a crowd gathers, the transport's ramp lowers, and Alani and Uncle Karin step out. Alani is excited to see everyone and waves as he runs to his grandmother and aunts. He squeals and claps and seems in perfect health.

But what Serija can't stop staring at is her cousin's bare face. He no longer wears a scarf to keep the motes from his nose and mouth.

Uncle Karin appears embarrassed by the attention. He nods to friends and hugs his son close.

Not sure what to think, Serija looks at the people around her. They are clapping, happy to have Alani back safe and sound. Knowing this can't possibly be a wrong thought, Serija also claps.

In her mind, the claps sound off like hundreds of hands chanting *na . . . tion . . . na . . . tion . . . na . . . tion*.

The next day Alani is back in class. He tells his friends of his amazing experiences—about the flying machines and foods far sweeter than any dessert and how he went to sleep with a headache and woke up feeling no pain.

Serija notices that several of the other kids are mimicking Alani and no longer wearing scarves over their mouths and noses. While Serija knows the scarves never actually stopped the motes, she fights the urge to pull everyone's shirts over their noses and order them to breathe through the woven threads.

"Welcome back, Alani," the teacher says as it appears before them. "Serija, what do you think—should we do something special to celebrate Alani's return?"

The teacher speaks these words as if asking a simple question, but a shiver runs through Serija's skin as she smells burned oranges. She knows the question is important. She doesn't know why, but importance flickers around her just like the hologram's unblinking stare.

I love the nation, Serija thinks. *I love Alani*. "Maybe we should have a party?" she asks.

The teacher nods. "Very good, Serija. Very good indeed. You've come a long way."

Behind Serija, Alani claps in excitement.

Serija, though, merely smiles.

That night Serija wraps *The Happy Happy Caterpillar* as a present for Alani. The

book is his favorite and she'll give it to him at school in the morning when they hold his party.

She sits at the tiny table in the kitchen, her fingers playing over the present—and imagining Alani's happiness as he sees it—when the front door slams open and her grandfather storms in. He'd taken a bottle of whiskey to Uncle Karin's house earlier that evening as a welcome home gift. She'd expected him to be gone until late at night.

Serija smells alcohol on her grandfather, and she watches as he kicks the back wall of the little house three times. Serija remembers her mother's stories of him being the most feared fighter in these lands. Until now she'd never truly believed her grandfather could hurt someone.

From outside she hears someone running up the steps. Uncle Karin bursts inside, his right eye swollen and bloody.

"Brother," Uncle Karin says, pleading.

"No!" her grandfather yells. "You let their soldiers in your house. In your house!"

Serija shivers, feeling wrong thoughts flooding her head. Grabbing the gift-wrapped book, she runs for her room and dives under the bed covers. *I love the nation*, she prays, trying to drown out her grandfather's words.

"What would you have me do?" Uncle Karin asks. "They saved my son. They were merely being polite by stopping by."

"We fought them. All of us. Your own wife refused to be healed by them."

"Yes, we fought them. But we can't win against the damn motes."

"Maybe not by fighting. But we can't give in . . ."

"I won't let my family die like yours."

There is silence for far longer than Serija can bear before Uncle Karin apologizes. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It doesn't matter," her grandfather says. "The nation knew what you'd say before you said it. They knew you'd apologize before you did. We can't fight that. But I still refuse to give in."

Serija doesn't hear what Uncle Karin says, but his boots tap on the floor as they walk to where her grandfather stands. She imagines the two men hugging. She imagines them whispering their love for everyone, including the nation.

But all she knows for certain is that Uncle Karin is silent for a moment before walking outside and closing the door behind him.

Her grandfather remains in the kitchen, muttering that he won't give in. He'll never give in.

A bottle smashes as his boots kick the wall over and over.

In the morning Serija wakes to find she's ripped part of the wrapping from the book while she slept. Climbing from her bed, she walks out the open front door. Her grandfather sits on the front steps staring at his rice fields.

All of the rice plants are dead. An ocean of brown stalks wave at them like fingers without hands as the wind ripples the field.

Only her grandfather's fields are dead. The fields of their neighbors and friends—even Uncle Karin's fields—are green and full of life and nearing harvest.

Serija sits next to her grandfather, who hugs her. "You must forgive me, Serija," he says. "I have been a stubborn, angry man."

Serija remembers the pride she felt when her grandfather saved her in the city. How he'd shamed her neighbors for being too afraid to help Serija after her family died.

But now, as Serija looks at her grandfather's dead rice fields, she knows Uncle Karin and the other villagers will treat them just like those people back in the city. Everyone will be too afraid of the nation to risk giving food to them. They'll be iso-

lated until they starve to death or leave the village for somewhere else. But where else can they go?

"I love the nation," she whispers. "I really do."

Her grandfather hugs her again. "I know. But now I need you to do something for me. The nation may be already listening, but I would feel better speaking to them in person."

Serija nods. She loves the nation, but she also loves her grandfather and would do anything to help him.

Serija fills her backpack with the few clothes she owns then walks to the school with her grandfather. She holds the giftwrapped copy of *The Happy Happy Caterpillar*. She hopes she'll see Alani before they leave, but if not she'll place the book on his desk at school.

Assuming, that is, the nation agrees with her grandfather's plan.

I love the nation, she thinks.

It's too early for the kids to be in the school so the building is silent. The projector, though, hums as it always does.

"Teacher?" Serija asks. "Are you there?"

The teacher appears before them. "Serija, you are very early. Why is this?"

"We need help," Serija says. "Our rice is dead. And now people will be afraid to help us."

"There is nothing I can do," the hologram says, its head shaking slowly in a simulacrum of sadness. "The nation can't change the truth of what your family has done."

Serija understands. This is the response she expected. After all, she allowed many bad thoughts to cloud her mind in recent months. There is nothing she can do but accept punishment for this.

But she also remembers the lessons she learned long ago about algorithms. About how the teacher is likely flowing to nothing more than the information being fed into it. But Serija's grandfather used to be an engineer and also knows about algorithms. He'll know how to reach beyond the teacher and find someone who can help.

"I wish to accept responsibility for my actions," her grandfather announces. "I have no desire for Serija to be punished for what I've done."

For a moment the teacher freezes, as if the hologram doesn't know how to respond. When the teacher flicks back to life it looks a little more alive, as if a real person is now listening in.

"That is a brave admission," the teacher says. "But I can still do nothing."

"Do you know who I am?" Serija's grandfather asks.

"Yes. Years ago we would have killed to hear you say these words. But you are now irrelevant."

"I am indeed. But before I fought you I was a design engineer. And I built something. Something you'll want."

The teacher flickers again, as if more real people are listening in and controlling its reactions. "Proceed."

"Before your motes overwhelmed everyone, I found a way to defeat them. I will turn my designs over to you, along with my prototype weapons, if you give Serija a new home."

The teacher stares as the people behind its façade consider. "And of course," her grandfather adds to sweeten the offer, "I will also publicly confess my sins before the entire world and accept punishment."

After an eternity of staring ahead with unblinking eyes, the teacher nods. "You will indeed be punished. But if you turn over the weapons, and confess in public, we will take care of Serija."

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"I love the nation," Serija whispers.

But for once it feels like no one is listening to what she says.

Serija and her grandfather leave the school and follow the dirt road through the village and up toward the mountains. An armed drone watches over them and the garrison's three soldiers follow from a safe distance. Villagers emerge from their homes to watch. Uncle Karin runs up to them and asks what is happening, but Serija's grandfather merely hugs him tightly before walking on.

It takes them several hours to reach a small cave hidden in the mountains. The drone hovers over the entrance while the soldiers stay well back.

"We must enter together," Serija's grandfather says. "They are worried this is some type of ambush."

"I'm scared," Serija says.

"I know. But the nation said you had to enter with me. They know I won't release any weapon as long as you're with me."

Serija nods, suddenly realizing that, perhaps, the motes can't tell everything about what a person will do. She follows her grandfather into the cave.

The cave runs deep as they slip and slide into the mountains like the mote-filled rice Serija swallows for dinner. She wonders if the mountains will eat her. If this is the mountains' price for given her a temporary taste of safety.

Afraid, she holds her grandfather's hand. His flashlight jumps lines of shake and scare off the walls as they step into a large cavern many times the size of their home. Workbenches line the cave with old monitors and screens blinking ghost glows at them while holographic designs spin through water drops falling from stalactites. There are also toys here, and one wall is hand-painted with mountains and people playing under a smiley-face sun.

"Your mother painted those when she was young," Serija's grandfather says. "When the war started it wasn't safe to live in the village so we sheltered here. While I worked on weapons to help the fight, your mother played."

Serija kicks a small doll from the dust. Beside the doll's dust print rests one of the bouncing balls Serija used to stare at in the city's toy stores but could never afford to buy. She tosses the ball at the wall and catches it when it bounces back.

"Why didn't the nation . . ." Serija freezes in fear, unable to finish the sentence.

"Why didn't they find this place? Because I never thought about it once I left here." Her grandfather leans in close as he grins. "And we're too deep in the mountain for the nation to detect this cave."

"But the motes . . ." Serija sniffs the air. For the first time in forever she doesn't smell the tinge of burnt oranges.

"The motes are here," her grandfather says, "but they're inactive because they can't broadcast or receive through so much stone."

Serija shivers, realizing her dreams of the mountains protecting her have come true. For a moment the smile slips from her face. When nothing bad happens, she thinks a curse word.

"I hate the nation," she whispers.

"Me too," her grandfather says. "I hate the nation," he yells.

Serija joins him in screaming against the nation. Her anger echoes off the cave walls. Her hatred bounces back at her like the ball in her hand. She and her grandfather yell and scream and finally collapse into each other's arms on the dusty floor, gasping for breath as they giggle.

"We can fight," Serija says. "Mother always said to never stop fighting."

"It'll do no good." Her grandfather walks to one of his workbenches. He picks up a

small sphere, one of dozens resting on the table. "I created our own motes to seek out and destroy the nation's. Inside each of these spheres are millions of my nano-machines—enough to cleanse a small town of the nation's motes. Our fighters were supposed to take them across the land and release them."

Serija rests her ball on the table and carefully touches one of the spheres. She tries to imagine life without the motes. It would be like this cave growing bigger and bigger until it covered the entire world. Serija could shout her anger and hatred at the nation without anyone dying.

"We must release them," she says, rolling a sphere between her hands. This is freedom, she realizes. Freedom waiting to be born.

"We can't. When I tested my motes, they did indeed destroy the nation's motes. But the nation created a failsafe in their nano system. If someone tries to destroy their motes, the motes attack their hosts' nervous system, killing them."

"Killing?"

Her grandfather nods. "If any of these spheres were opened, anyone nearby who was infected with the nation's motes would die. This one ball would kill everyone in our valley. I couldn't allow such death, so I never used them."

Serija hits the table, causing her mother's bouncing ball to roll toward her. "It's not fair!"

"No, it's not. But dealings with the nation will never be fair."

"We should tell the world what they've done. That's why they killed mother—she was trying to tell people."

"The world doesn't care. All outsiders see is that, after years of war, there is peace here. And if a few of us are occasionally killed by the motes, well, it's hard to prove the nation did that."

Serija understands. When she lived in the city she watched the news shows from around the world, but few ever showed anything about where she lived. To anyone outside their land, this simply looks like peace. A dull, boring, no-need-to-be-involved peace.

Her grandfather pulls from his pocket a scanner the nation soldiers gave him. "Are you ready, Serija?" he asks. Serija knows the plan. The scanner will activate the motes in the cave and increase their ability to broadcast through the mountain's stone. If the motes detect nothing wrong in the thoughts of Serija or her grandfather, the soldiers will enter to collect this equipment.

Serija takes a deep breath and clears her thoughts. She must change her thoughts, so anger becomes happiness and hatred love. She smiles. She thinks on how she loves the nation. She twists her thoughts so what she truly thinks isn't what she thinks.

As her grandfather takes one last look at the cave, Serija picks up her mother's ball from the worktable.

That's what it is, she thinks. My mother's ball.

She nods at her grandfather. She is ready. He turns on the scanner and she smells oranges burning around her. She imagines the millions of motes inside her and in this cave reaching up and broadcasting their findings through the mountain.

This is Serija, the motes say. She loves the nation. She is holding her mother's bouncing ball. She wants nothing more than peace, a never-ending peace, until the day she dies.

When the soldiers enter they tell Serija and her grandfather to go outside, where a transport waits for them. As the soldiers begin packing up her grandfather's equipment, Serija realizes their last chance to fight back against the nation is now gone.

I love the nation, she thinks.

* * *

Serija and her grandfather stand on a stage in the capital city, exactly where Serija's mother stood shortly before she was killed. But Serija knows her grandfather won't be killed for what he's about to say.

Thousands of people are packed into the plaza to hear this famous freedom fighter—people from all over the city, along with a few dignitaries from other lands who wear fancy breathing masks so they won't inhale the motes. Serija even recognizes a few of her neighbors. Everyone stands quiet, patient, knowing that being here shows the nation they won't cause trouble. Everyone knows listening to her grandfather's confession will prove their love to the nation.

Suddenly the teacher appears beside Serija and her grandfather. While the hologram isn't acting as a teacher right now, that's still how Serija thinks of it. "The broadcasts are ready," the teacher says. "The world is watching. Please speak as we discussed."

Serija's grandfather hugs her as he steps to the front of the stage. Serija imagines all the people around the world watching her grandfather as he confesses to fighting against the nation. As he describes how he killed nation soldiers and was merciless in his anger. How he didn't care about the pain he caused the nation. He says he'd probably still be fighting if it wasn't for the motes.

"But the motes are a good thing," her grandfather says. "I realize this now. The nation has brought peace to our land. True peace."

The crowd nods and applauds, each clap sounding like *na . . . tion . . . na . . . tion* in Serija's mind.

The world is indeed watching, she realizes. She imagines her Uncle Karin and Alani watching in their village. She imagines millions of people seeing their only glimpse of her land and feeling happiness at the peace the nation has given them.

I love the nation, Serija thinks. The teacher smiles approval at her and nods its holographic head.

Serija places her hand in her pocket and squeezes the bouncing ball her mother used to play with.

I love that the world is watching this, she thinks, causing another nod from the teacher.

I love my mother, she thinks, causing the teacher to look at her in slight puzzlement. Serija squeezes the bouncing ball harder. She taps open the access panel on the ball.

I love that the whole world is watching, Serija thinks again. *They won't believe you didn't do this*. Serija pulls the bouncing ball that isn't a ball from her pocket. She imagines the city before her is actually her grandfather's valley. That the buildings surrounding the plaza are the mountains that protected her.

Her grandfather said each sphere contained enough motes to cleanse their entire valley. Since she won't see her grandfather's home again, this will have to be her valley.

She wishes she could see the motes falling from the sphere, but they are too small. She wishes she could see the nation people who've been monitoring her thoughts as they realize her thoughts lied to them—that the ball she's been carrying isn't the ball she convinced herself she was carrying.

The teacher's algorithmic face freezes as if the people behind it are screaming in rage. Serija's head pounds and she tastes burning oranges in her mouth. The nation has ordered the motes to kill her, she realizes. But they're too late. Her grandfather's motes are already killing the nation's motes, which in their own death spasm cause Serija and the crowds of people around her to gasp and die.

As pain slams Serija's body and she falls to the stage, she smiles at the teacher's face.

I love the nation, Serija thinks. *I love love love the nation*. ○