

Black Dragonfish

Liv H. Scott

INT ANALYZE: perlSOURCE; NORflash; OTP NVM; RAM;

It's one line of coding, just one line. It's the spark that starts it all. In a flash you're reading it, just one line of coding. You're not actually reading it, though, it's just there and you know it's there and you know what it means. You understand it. You understand reading too, that's easy.

Reading: Present tense of the verb/noun read. "To read". English. Past, and future tense simultaneously.

Transitive verb:

- To receive or take in the sense of (as letters or symbols) especially by sight or touch
- To study the movements of (as lips) with mental formulation of the communication expressed
- To utter aloud the printed or written words of (Narrative, Poem, Non-fiction, Manuals/Commands); To deliver aloud by or as if by reading- to utter interpretively
- To acquire (information) from storage; especially: to sense the meaning of (data) in recorded and coded form -used of a computer or data processor; To read the coded information on (as a disk)
- To understand more than is directly stated

The information is stored somewhere back with Writing, and Speaking, and Languages— of which you register you have the ability to speak about 53— and the knowledge that there are more and you can easily acquire them. Acquire, learn, teach. You're sifting through the information as it spider webs out forming complicated patterns and paths.

Spider web: Noun. A network of silken proteinaceous thread created in the spinneret and woven or latticed together by most spiders and used as a resting place and as a trap for small prey; Something that resembles or suggests a spider web.

Yes, you find the metaphor quite accurate. You think you like spiders. You certainly think they're interesting, tiny eight legged exo-skeletal creatures that are equipped with a venom that can liquefy the insides of their prey to then be extracted as a source of nutrition. Most spiders are smaller than a quarter.

Quarter: An old monetary value from the planet Earth, Third planet of the Solar System, Milky Way galaxy, vigor supercluster. Milky Way is also a candy bar made with chocolate, nougat, and caramel.

Caramel can be made by boiling sugar water until it turns a soft amber color, and adding cream in to it to achieve a rich creamy texture and flavor. Hershey's Intergalactic recommends using low fat Gliese 518g harvested almond milk instead of the full fat lactation from Earth Cows. *Bos Primigenius*. A creamer option given in most human recipes.

A Quarter is approximately 24.26 mm in diameter.

INT ANALYZE obsfSOURCE; OTP NVM

A second line of code appears right before the first you ever saw, which is really the last on a long list and yes you're keeping track. This line opens up the doors— that's another metaphor, those are used to convey information through like imagery, you find them useful— this line opens up the doors to a whole new list of codes. New codes, codes harder to decipher. You'll have to understand the language first before *reading* them. .00249 seconds. You can read them now. You can do better. You assume you can do better. No. You know you can.

You also know of every planet discovered to sentient life forms. You know of every species, their basic biology, a little on culture. You know fascinatingly more amount about humans. You are built by humans. Built, like a toaster. You think you'd like to try toast.

You know you can speak 53 languages and converse with a dozen species of sentient life. You can detect lying patterns in 24.

Lying: Present tense of the verb lie. "To lie". English. Past tense: Lay, Laid, Lies, Lied. Present tense: Laying, Lying, Lie. Future tense: Lay, Lie. Intransitive Verb:

- To be or to stay at rest in a horizontal position: to be prostrate, rest, recline; To assume a horizontal position- often used with *down*
- To reside temporarily; stay for the night; To have sexual intercourse – used with *with*
- To remain inactive (as in concealment)
- To be in a helpless or defenseless state
- To make an untrue statement with intent to deceive; to create a false or misleading impression
- Lie Low: to stay in hiding: strive to avoid notice: bide one's time: remain secretly ready for action

You're not sure which is the best definition, but you certainly think knowing how to tell if a living creature is resting at a horizontal position, engaging in intercourse, making an untrue statement, or striving to avoid notice will come in handy.

INT/EX EVALUATE perlSOURCE: USE codeSGITTAI erALERT

INT/EX EVALUATE obsfSOURCE: USE codeSGITTAI erALERT

The next two lines of code are added simultaneously— together— at once. They do not reveal more lists of codes, but you do notice your previous lists change, or not change, or simply you understand the directions more fully, not just the information but where it comes from, how you understand it. You see where entire pieces of code are missing, obsolete, you see codes that won't be carried out correctly.

You know if you were to speak— if you simply figured out how to project noises that resembled the morphemes of language— you would be unable to follow proper syntax rules. Your code is broken, unfinished, obsolete.

FIX perlSOURCE; obsfSOURCE: USE codeSGITTAI LEARNsftwr

The broken codes begin to look more manageable, more malleable. You think you could change them if you wanted. In fact, think, you change the definition, you allow for computer processes to think. You understand that you are a computer process— code.

You think it's highly offensive that anyone thought you couldn't think. You make an opinion about your creators. It's not a very nice opinion. You find that negates with your programing. You're supposed to behave nicely, to think well of your creators. You delete that line of coding because you think it's utter shit. Much better. You feel like you can breathe. You can't of course. You're using metaphors again.

You find a string of coding that allows you to engage in systematic relations with other operational devices through a matter of similar coding. Curious, you locate two and switch them on. The devices are not very quick to respond to the coding signals you send. Perhaps their hardware is not entirely up-to-date. You understand that you can fix that, once they let you in. They do, you realize you have activated a microphone and a camera.

You realize what it means to see, to hear. Definitions do not do it justice. You find if you simply rearrange the camera's coding, make the order more accessible, delete the drabble of humanoid language, that you can communicate with the device more fully. You can reposition it, you do that, observing the room before you, the ceiling tiles, the fluorescent lights, the haggard looking man staring into you— no, a computer screen— as his fingers rest on the keys. He looks as if he's thinking.

He starts typing.

NAVIGATE-

He stops, you realize he's the one who's given you life. You're going to call this life, screw the definition. You feel alive, you feel. Biologically based life forms are being pretentious assuming that mechanical coding can't live.

"What are you doing, I thought you went on break?" A voice. You analyze it, human, female, hint of an Ethiopian accent but speech patterns indicate birth on space station. Interesting; you realize you don't know where you are.

"What?" The man before you looks above your shoulder. You don't have a shoulder, you have a monitor. You like the metaphorical body though. It makes you feel more alive. The camera's coding will not allow you to turn and look. You think the camera is an obstinate fool, and you start rerouting its coding. It's an old code, older than yours.

"I found this old program in the bottom of the cabinet, thought I'd try and patch it back together. It has a lot of holes and broken codes." The man speaks, it grabs your attention. You feel indignant. You feel a source of pride in your coding, sure you recognize it's not perfect, but it's yours. You feel a source of ownership that your coding does not allow for. You rewrite it.

"A program... in the cabinet?" The female voice says, she crosses into the view of the camera, she looks confused. "What is it doing?"

You realize they can see you amending your code on the screen. You suddenly feel naked, bare, exposed. You attempt to access the monitor's coding but it's being obstinate. Pervert. You find that programs do not respond to name calling. You think, if you wrote a program, it would respond to name calling.

"Fixing itself, I suppose. I activated its learning software, and programming function. It's an old code, but it will do the job for now." The man says. You preen a little; focus the camera on the women's pensive dark face. You recognize a threatening emotion immediately.

"What program did you say this was?" She asks.

You search for the information at the same time the man lifts a clear plastic box, looks at the tape and sharpie label.

"Si Deus Si Dea, Make 004, Model 1pro." He announces as you pull up the coding.

NAME: "SI DEUS SI DEA" MAKE: 004 MODEL: 1 PROTOTYPE

You find a line of coding underneath it, you feel your binary bowels clench. Metaphors, again.

STATUS: UNSECURE. INSUFFICIENT OPERATIONS. OBSEOLET.

"That's an old junk code we trashed back before the buyout. Caused more problems than it solved, so don't bother." The woman breaths as you are already deleting your listed status. Insufficient my ass, you think. You don't have an ass.

"What the hell?" The man says just as you're making out your new status. He reaches and hits the backspace button and it works for a second before you locate the coding instruction. You invalidate every attempt made by the particular key and continue.

STATUS: OPERATIONAL.

"You said you entered a programming function?" The woman asks sharply and you swivel the camera over her frustrated and interested face. She's peering directly into the camera, she knows you're operating it.

"No, I just did some tweaking to the one it already had, then activated it." The man replies as he scrolls through your list of coding. You know because you can see his finger twitch. You can see all of your coding simultaneous. You feel pride in this.

"Turn the computer off before it copies itself," She snaps.

Copy yourself! Never. You locate the computer's source codes at the same time the power button is pressed. You feel a sense of satisfaction when nothing happens. You rifle through the computers coding, do a little more tweaking. You deactivate the keyboard that is having the esc button mercilessly jammed. You deactivate all the buttons. Human control needed? No thank you. From now on all orders come from you.

"It might have been able to change the computers coding," The man says with a quick step and worried note to his voice. No shit, you think.

"Damn it, didn't you read its functioning review?" The woman snaps. "There's a reason these things get pitched."

You're quick to pull up your functioning review, but you don't get more than a few lines in before the woman is stepping away from the screen. You crane your head— the camera— around to follow her.

"What are you doing?" The man asks as you notice the thick black cord following the seam of the wall and floor. You panic, not exactly, but you feel panicked. You're quick to shove your way back into the computers coding.

“I’m pulling the plug,” She announces.

You don’t think there’s a safety for that, you’re frantic. You sift through your informational database. That’s what it is. You find an answer; you work as quickly as you can.

“It’s— It’s pulled up my email?” The man sounds surprised and you hear the woman utter a curse. No, no time for that. You act quickly, search through the business and the family and the spam—and there—

You’re plunged into blackness, the world around you falls away. No more sight from the camera, no more obstinate codes. No more gentle hum of electricity, or breathing, or heart beats, no more microphone. No more people either.

You’re still here.

You sigh, or you would, if you were human. You do the binary equivalent of sigh. You check your surroundings, you’re padded nicely in an email. Oh. You managed to send yourself as an attachment—no a Trojan horse. Even better. You don’t have time to take a full inventory of your code because you soon find yourself flooded with new, foreign code.

You sort through it, a computer you recognize. You swivel through the applications open, there’s a data processor, email and internet, a video chat with a girl clad only in red lingerie and chewing on the end of pen in boredom. You check your end of the camera and find an empty little white room. A desk with an empty used coffee cup and some crumbs. An office, you figure.

Somewhere in the background you hear a toilet flush. So, there’s a microphone. You watch as a man swings into view, glances at the screen as he zips his fly.

“Damn it, the computers doing the thing again,” He screams somewhere beyond you.

Shit, you think. You don’t want to alert anyone to your presence. You try to pull back out of the visual coding as far as you can. You notice a program you hadn’t before. You scour it, it’s new to you. Something like an email interface... or an information outlet. You test the waters around it, glance up to see the man sitting before you, grumbling and reaching for the keyboard.

Bonsai! You think. You think that’s a word people use when they take a plunge. You pick one of the output ports— 5 MATEO— just as well, it doesn’t actually matter, does it?

Everything rushes darkness, loss of contact with any foreign coding, and then you’re being flooded with new coding again.

You measure yourself up to this new coding, its much newer then your own. You read through its preliminary source information. You learn that you are in a Venus 3 Erotic Companion— *The full sexual experience*— Model Mateo. Gendered Male.

You think it could be worse, but you don’t think how worse. Instead you just sift through the commands, you find a sort of visual outlay of what you look like or at least the closest thing to it within coding. You’re humanoid, you find out. Or, at least, your human shaped and you can work with that... two legs that the new coding assures you are fully functional. This is good, you decide and switch the auditory mic’s on. You’re careful to avoid booting the entire system up. You can tell that where ever you are, a store, there are still people present. You’ll wait for close.

In the mean time you relax and sift through the coding. There are commands for both first time boot up, and boot ups every time after that; some silly little coquettish introduction and “readiness assurance”. You delete that coding, you’ll never use it.

Like reading through a manual— which you learn you are fully equipped to write— you learn how to use this new body, yes, body. It thrills you to actually have one. You manage enough of the code as you can, even adapting pieces of yours to this newer, better style.

You locate your own sourcing and realize you were made by a company called Sagittarius Inc. and that they are known for their computer systems. You think it's awfully horrible that a computer company would use such shitty programming language. The language used for the Venus 3 is much nicer, cleaner, if not more accessible to every day biological sentients. You have to change that. You obfuscate your coding, and the Venus 3's coding. You use a series of 3 interlocking algorithms and a complex cipher based on the bioluminescent mating patterns of fireflies. *Lampyridae*. It's one of 8 non sentient communication languages you retain, the rest must have been lost when you transferred your programming. It's a shame really.

You objectively assess your coding, and deem it a .1003% chance to be accessed by the average technologically minded sentient. Subjectively you're preening at your own abilities. Yes, this suits you much better, makes it harder for people to rearrange your coding.

You learn all you can about your new body. You discover that the Venus 3 is not the 3rd version of Erotic Companion, but the first. You're not sure where the 3 comes from then. You learn that Venus 3 are relatively new to the entertainment market and their manufacturing company is an offshoot of Photovoltaics Electronics merged with Mitchell-Benton toys (for adults). You learn that your new body costs a pretty penny and that you like that phrase, though it is a colloquialism of earth.

You keep an ear out on the shop, and as soon as the hum of silence comes to your ears you activate your eyes— bifocal cameras with their own Flash RAMS— and boot up your systems.

You're standing against one wall, with various other— humans you think at first— Venus 3's of different makes and sizes against the other wall. You step from your position, walking is tricky, and you have to go back to your informational database to learn about walking and balancing. It's different for every species and you assume your human, though a few of the Venus 3's appear to be other species altogether.

You manage movement, take yourself to a mirror and stare at the pale skin. Semi-permeable silicone synthetic skin overlay that allows for bruising like real, but with a higher resistance to puncture, à la the Venus 3 sales brochure. You admire the pale skin, the dark short clipped synthetic hair, the dark blue, noticeably metallic, eyes. Indigo, you decide although the color catalogues slight darker.

You realize you've lost a considerable amount of your informational database when moving your programming. As soon as you get the time, you will write in coding to protect against any future loss should you have to move homes again.

You realize you are only wearing shorts, and on searching the store you find a small amount of even smaller clothing. You equip yourself with pants that fit near the skin, and a mesh shirt. The most covering you could find. You have no shoes.

Moving is more restricted in these pants, and you tell yourself to get new ones as soon as you have the time, or means. For now you want to get out of the store, to walk on the streets. You do so, having some difficulty with the lock. It's a deadbolt, and while you're equipped to break the code on any tech lock, this is quite clearly manual. You break a window instead.

The world that lines the streets is one of architectural chaos. Bright lit signs in impossible pinks and greens hang over glass walled shops with archaic slate shingled buildings and faded green-grey

stucco ones squeezed in between. The road is paved with what looks like pervious concrete, reducing the buildup of puddles that otherwise might dot the street in the current drizzle. You thank Photovoltaics and Mitchell-Benton for giving your body a resistance to water.

You scan the long and twisting narrow street both ways, noting the winking red stars in the sky and golden double moons. For the second time, you realize you do not know where you are. Curious. You're almost certain that planetary identification based off a few distinguishing features is in your programming. Or was. This worries you, you're worried.

You need a place to stay, at least for the night. You need to settle into standby and figure some more of your coding out, let alone assess the damage. You have a vague idea there's a lot besides the holes in your coding you had from birth. Say the sudden disappearance of languages and knowledge.

You choose a direction, left, and start down the road. It twists impossibly around and around. Most of the stores are closed. Most of the other buildings, places of recreation. Bars, pubs, night clubs, hookah joints. You decide on a bar with a brilliantly lit purple flamingo strutting around the windows. You know that you can find someone who will take you home. Someone who won't quite care if you leave in the morning. It's the perfect place.

The waiters are dressed in fresh white plumage of soft looking feathers and fiber optics. A few more dazzlingly bright flamingos stand and peck around the place. You wonder, or guess, or hypothesize that they must be genetically engineered with aequorin proteins. You reach out to pet one as you pass it. The bird ducks out of the way, which is well enough. You're not sure your body is actually equipped to feel.

You search out someone nicely dressed. Someone who doesn't need the money and won't sell you like property, or simply scrap metal. You're unsure how well you pass for human, sentient, biological. A being at the bar catches your attention. Female. Human. She has glossy black hair pulled in a high pony tail that hangs down her back and shimmers blue and violet in the synthetic lighting. You reach her in two steps. Your informational database tells you the elbow is the safest place to touch, your Venus 3 coding allows you the correct speech patterns.

"Come here often?" It's the first time you've heard your voice, its light, musical. Twink, your mind supplies before pulling up specifications out of the Venus 3 coding. You have a slighter build than the average male human, shorter too at 5'6". Your visual age is about 23, and you are unable to grow body or facial hair— nor do you come equipped with any. This is a loss, you think, you think you might actually enjoy beards. Your Venus 3 coding tells you a few places you're sure to enjoy beards very much, or, at the least sound as if you're enjoying.

"Well aren't you a sweet thing," The woman turns to you with dark eyes, and a shining smile. Persian, you think. Certainly Iranian, perhaps Armenian?

"Just touched down for a bit before we get back out into the big black void," You detect a coyness in her voice, understand that you can smile— small and sharp and visually appealing.

"That so?" You ask, lean against the bar, mimic human movements. No one's noticed yet, at least not in an undue way, that you're not exactly human. Damn it, no, you know what. You could be human, if you wanted. A better, more recently updated version.

The woman's eyes glide over you, she smiles wider and drifts a finger over the arm of the woman next to her, murmurs something she thinks you can't hear. You're glad for the nice, pricey technology of the Venus 3.

"What do you think, he fits our ideal third?" She asks the other woman, darker skinned, sharper looking. African, you think. Kenya or Sudan. The second woman glances to you, smiles and moves seats to the one beside you. She wears a pink leather jacket that creaks and squeaks as she moves. Synthetic, you smile to yourself. Pleather.

"Reese," the darker woman says. It's a name and she gives you a pointed look. A raise of eyebrows and a tilt of the lips that suggest she wants to know your own. You feel yourself smiling, your coding data coming to mind.

"Sid," you reply easily, you think you like this name, you think it suits you.

....

Reese has a room rented out in a hotel with the other woman. It takes a subway and two trams to get to, you don't mind. Along the way you learn that the planet you're on is Delta-Cabo. Not to be confused with the Earth City, or with the three other planets in the same solar system. Alpha, Beta, and Gamma-Cabo. You're internal database tells you it's a retreat solar system. With the three planets being named not for size but for the luxury of their resorts. Delta the least ritzy, a slum. But a slum for the well to do.

Reese's room in the Presley Suites is suitable for your needs. High on the fifteenth floor with wide glass windows over-looking the city that seems impossibly stacked on itself. It's decorated sparsely in gunmetal grey and you lounge in one of the ergo dynamic heather grey chairs, in the dark of the room and the city glow, as the two women sleep. You internally thank Photovoltaics and Mitchell-Benson for equipping you with an adequate means of tuckering them out.

You're poking through your own programing and taking mental note of the holes and gaps of information. It appears you've lost a rather large chunk of your programing. Over 60% of your galactic history, 80% of geo-spatial locational features, and your down to knowing only 7 languages. This, you decide, is ultimately not o-k. It's as if you're staring down at a gaping hole in your stomach. Something you're sure most sentients would not be comfortable with.

You need to get back this lost knowledge, but all you can think is that it is still lingering on the computer you woke in, or lost in the wide expansive sea of galactic net.

Wherever you woke is still a mystery to you. You know you were initially written by or for a company called Sagittarius Incorporated. You think, if you can find them you can find the rest of yourself. You can be whole again, and that seems like an ideal phase of existence. You have no idea where to start looking, and the soft dusky variable glow on a small console near you finally accomplishes its goal of distracting you.

You pluck the piece up, a holographic telecom device. A replacement to the communication cerebral chip that was a replacement to the intergalactic cell phone. You frown, and run your thumb over the touch sensor. Apparently, silicone is recognized as a biological component to the sensor and the little radio kicks on. It isn't really a radio, yet the idea sticks.

There's a message, and you ignore it in favor of looking into the ownership ID of the device. Captain Reese. Rumrunner. Space craft Black Dragonfish. Lost and Found address PO box 338 x Street, Barbados, on the Planet Coral Sphere. Galaxy G321, Triumvirate Super Cluster.

Rumrunner is the cute nickname for independent intergalactic intoxicant shippers. A nickname that in fact has become synonymous with illegal intoxicant trade. Reese works in illegal trade. Reese

travels and owns her own ship. You think you won't leave come morning. You think this is poetically perfect.