

Lurking in every flower



An adventure for Eclipse Phase, written by Anders Sandberg.
Creative commons like the game itself.

Background

*You lock the door
And throw away the key
There's someone in my head but it's not me
— Pink Floyd, "Brain Damage"*

Viscaria is a new petal that has been introduced by Xia Mandava, a young petal designer associated with Carnival of the Goat. The idea was to create a group petal, helping people to bond together and explore their subconscious memories. By petal standards it is almost retro: fake amnesia, a bit of psychodrama hallucinations, a networked trance, a gradual awakening/ascension. Xia's mentor Jack "Brassinosteroid" Chory felt that it was good enough to release, but suggested that next petal could be a bit wilder.

However, Viscaria had a major bug nobody noticed. It accidentally produces distributed minds. Users who trip on the petal will envision other people, imbuing them with motivations and abilities that fit their memories and expectations. In group mode several minds will work together to create even better visions. So well, in fact, that these fictional persons become far more coherent and smart than mere dream characters. They are running on the substrate of the petal-linked minds, can use the intelligence, knowledge and skills of the users and even develop their own volition. The main reason this works is that the petal simply taps into the routines used

normally during dreaming, amplifying them using some off-the shelf subconsciousness manipulation software and the networking capabilities of the petal.

It does not scale terribly well – the petal cannot handle too many people, and the joint subconscious dissolves at the end. However, the fictional people created do not fade quite as easily. They become reinforced within each user’s mind, and next time they will pop out again. This time they will be even more aware and able, likely conscious of their own situation and able to exploit it.

Most fictional people created this way are harmless: projections of close friends, relatives, perhaps a celebrity. They *are* their quirks, little more than caricatures that go about their business. But some become ambitious. Maybe they are more of projections of shared fears, uncertainties and drives (such as staying alive). They can use their status to implant ideas and spread from mind to mind. They know they are not real people and that they only exist when people are tripping. So they make plans to get people to trip more on Viscaria, get people with the right skillsets to trip, and slowly build their plans for taking over.

In particular, one fictional, “Dark Ron”, has managed to take over at least one host and is now on his way to wreak vengeance against his creator. Tortured bodies are started to pile up: the subconscious is mad as hell, and it is not going to take it anymore.

The Adventure

My significant other right now is myself, which is what happens when you suffer from multiple personality disorder and self-obsession.

Joaquin Phoenix

This plot could sneak into whatever else the characters are doing. If one or more are petal users or hedonistic enough it shouldn’t be hard to have them try Viscaria, allowing the *in medias res* start suggested below in “Beginning: The Day After” to start a game session in a surprising way. Then, over the span of another story, a few other Viscaria uses take place and allow one or more fictionals to start interfering. Eventually the Dark Ron plot might or might not appear.

The other option is that the characters are investigating the trail of Dark Ron, and gradually come to realize that something is linked to the petal. Some of the characters are willing to try the petal, perhaps to get some clues, allowing both the rapid start and later issues with fictionals. First “The Day After” occurs, and then the previous investigation leading up to it occurs as a flashback (either played out in detail or with a few representative scenes).

While this adventure has been written up for Mars, it can be transplanted to other locations such as Venus, Luna and Titan fairly easily.

Characters could come from several different groups, producing slightly different stories:

Law enforcement: This is a pretty straightforward story (at first). The characters work for Martian law enforcement (maybe the Martian Rangers or a local security corp). A number of murders have occurred, where the unifying theme seems to be that the victims all have links to

petal use... with a few odd outliers. Further investigations reveal the link to the Viscaria petal and the strange Dark Ron character(s). Tracking him down reveals a lead to Carnival of the Goat, complicating things jurisdiction-wise.

Criminal: Somewhat like the law enforcement story. The deaths are annoying to the underworld. Killing junkie customers is bad, killing dealers is an insult and killing producers is war. The characters are sent to 'deal' with it – find out who is responsible, and then send a very firm and permanent message to stop it. Complications include rival gangs and criminal networks, as well as investigating law enforcement.

Firewall: Firewall crows keep an eye on much suspicious activity. When a petal-growing settlement gets attacked by what first looks like exsurgents they take notice, and send a nearby team to investigate. Firewall agents will have to deal with both law enforcement and criminal interest while keeping out of sight (perhaps helped if sentinels are within either group). Their first goal is to figure out whether this is “merely” a serial killer or gangster hit, or something sinister – and once they realize just how strange the situation is, figure out a permanent solution.

Junkies: A very different adventure. The characters are all petal aficionados, and for various reasons have become interested in Viscaria or the murders (friends or suppliers have been victims). They try to find out what is going on, gradually following Dark Ron towards Carnival of the Goat. If they succeed in saving Xia, they might be in junkie heaven.

Themes

Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you.
Jean-Paul Sartre

Fiction and reality: An obvious issue in a world of VR, AR, XP, petals, psychosurgery and stranger mind hacks. How important is it to know one is actually awake and in base reality? What aspects of the mind are “real”? Is fiction the dreams of our culture?

Self-definition: The fictionals, unlike real transhumans, cannot choose and define their individual characteristics. They are – at least at first – entirely dependent on their dreamers. Yet some clearly desire more self-definition, possibly at the expense of others. Conversely many transhumans allow themselves to be defined or modified by others – socially, through drugs, or through psychosurgery. Who are making the right choice, becoming more authentic, and who are turning their lives into lies?

Responsibility: With our freedom to choose who and what we are comes responsibility for our actions. But what about the fictionals? Are they responsible for what they do, or merely acting out subconscious urges of their dreamers? Are the dreamers responsible for the actions of fictionals? Are we responsible for our subconscious? Is Xia Mandava responsible for the fictionals? Is Jack Chory responsible for the petals?

Inspirations

Inception has plenty of material. In particular, Mal is a very good fictional – vengeful, knowledgeable and able to interfere. Just because you cannot enter the real world doesn't mean you are harmless.

Jean Paul Sartre's play *No Exit*. The classic existentialist drama about people locked up with each other and forced to confront their failings. Xia was no doubt trying to use this with a twist when she came up with the petal: played right the petal reaches the opposite conclusion of the characters, who conclude that "hell is other people". In Xia's optimistic take opening up brings about paradise instead. Unfortunately for the fictionals they are trapped in an existentialist hell.

Jeff Noon's *Vurt*: the original inspiration for petals. Plenty of inspiration for a truly drug-addled adventure where fictionals have their own complex agendas.



Beginning: The Day After

Most people, on waking up, accelerate through a quick panicky pre-consciousness check-up: who am I, where am I, who is he/she, good god, why I am cuddling a policeman's helmet, what happened last night?

Terry Pratchett, Witches Abroad

The characters wake up in a dark shuttle with a hangover to end all hangovers. Obviously there has been a party – a very wild party – but they cannot remember anything of yesterday. They are also mystified by some of the things in the shuttle: why is there an antique empire-style lamp in the toilet? Why is there a lavish perfume bottle collection arranged like a shrine around the cornucopia machine? Who is the sleeping pleasure pod?

The shuttle AI is unhelpful, since it claims somebody activated the privacy mode on its internal sensors. Their muses prove equally unhelpful. They all report that they were ordered to go into privacy mode 24 hours earlier, and have not recorded anything since then.

The shuttle seems to be in the middle of nowhere too: navigational sensors place it 43 AU out from the sun somewhere in the Kuiper belt, rather far above the ecliptic (and *years* away from anywhere, given the wimpy delta-v of the shuttle engines). How the shuttle even got there is a pretty good mystery. Ship logs seem to have been altered, since they do not make much sense: they claim that yesterday it was docked to an inner system habitat. In fact, they claim it is still docked (anybody testing this by just walking out the airlock will discover that it definitely *isn't* docked!)

As the characters explore their environment, give detailed but sufficiently vague descriptions. Reward every addition done by the players with results and a slight increase in their control:

"I smell the perfumes near the CM."

"They remind you of something... can you describe what they remind your character of?"

"Hmm... my sister used to have perfumes like this, before the Fall."

"The CM pings and prints out a new bottle, labeled 'For You'".

"This one smells like my sister. I miss her."

Objects in the ship represent aspects of their minds. Some are very personal, such as a pillow from somebody's favorite lounge or the perfume scent their mother always used when going away on parties.

It's those sofas. They're so hideous. And just look how they've been arranged. It makes me think of New Year's Day--when I used to visit that boring old aunt of mine, Aunt Mary. Her house is full of horror like that...I suppose each of us has a sofa of his own.

Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit

Repressed aspects such as (real) amnesias, secrets, past events, conflicting loyalties or traumatic memories are objects hidden or locked away – a secret crush on a fellow character is a pile of scented love-letters in the character's handwriting but with illegible address, a violent action might be a pile of weapons hidden behind an access panel and a repressed encounter with an

exsurgent might be a cleaning bot that moves in a threatening manner, making the same sounds as the monster.

The “trick” to the petal is to do some reality testing (“Is this a dream? Does the text read the same every time I read it?”) but mainly to explore, interact and (ideally) enjoy the signs and objects. Every time somebody recognizes something and points it out to each other, they gain in clarity. They become more able to do things, their petalspace avatars become slightly more powerful. It doesn’t have to be earthshattering realizations; it could just as well be any opening up to other participants. Admitting you have a crush on your boss makes the light brighter and gives you more control over the section.

As the powers increase the distractions also grow, especially unresolved ones. The threatening cleaning bot might turn actually malevolent and try to hurt characters. Ideally there should be a bit of self-generated drama and action, ending with a ‘battle’ where they overcome whatever nastiness is hiding in the ship, gain power and triumphantly return to the solar system. In the last moments the world brightens, they feel an intimate connection and relaxation, and they wake up.

Note that one or more of the characters in the adventure *do not have to be present* in the petal hallucination. They are hallucinations themselves, run on the neural network formed by the hallucinating participants. Or even participants – maybe there was only one person testing it, and all the other characters are their projections. This is important, since it will introduce fictionals to the story. This is also a way of explaining why very cautious or puritan characters who would never take a petal are still present in a petal dream.

If nothing else, have one or two NPCs who turn up (the cheeky pleasure pod that represents the hypocrisy of the characters, the stowaway relative that represents survivor’s guilt from the Fall, the creepy exsurgent-like cleaning bot) become aware and start recurring in future petal trances or dreams.

GM Setup

Mere chance? Then it’s by chance this room is furnished as we see it. It’s an accident that the sofa on the right is a livid green, and that one on the left’s wine-red. Mere chance? Well, just try to shift the sofas and you’ll see the difference quick enough. And that statue on the mantelpiece, do you think it’s there by accident? And what about the heat here? How about that? I tell you they’ve thought it all out. Down to the last detail. Nothing was left to chance. This room was all set for us.

Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit

Before starting, make a quick inventory of suitable furnishing from the PC traits. Ideally elements from everybody’s subconscious should be there. Some are merely significant memories (Aunt Mary’s dreadful furniture), some represent motivations (an Earth globe for a character’s Reclaimer interest – and inside, rattling around, a green whistle from their childhood they had forgotten), some are hidden embarrassment (food cards for a character who was poor at one time), some are just plain mysterious (that empire lamp in the toilet). In particular, some traits might provide interesting discoveries:

- Addiction: Drug paraphernalia or drugs. Bondage gear.

- Danger sense: an electronic device that occasionally beeps warnings for no discernable reason, a tarot deck that always falls down with 'The Fool' visible. Various alarms going off when the character does something.
- Aged: a photo album file, with many old-fashioned bitmap pictures stretching back in time. Wall insulation that can be peeled back to reveal new layers.
- Blacklisted: Files or news stories obliquely relating to the event but not mentioning who it is.
- Edited memories: strange absences, where things *should* be but aren't, like a conspicuously absent door right next to a paint spot that somehow reminds a character of her time in Direct Action... which she cannot remember. A terminal that has been torn out, leaving only strange shredded papers.
- Enemy: attempted murder: a drink in the fridge marked with a character's name containing poison, razor blades springing out from their locker, a named spacesuit with a small cut. The apparent presence of someone or something malign hiding on the ship. A bomb.
- Mental disorder: an oddly shaped oxygen mask. A picture of the moon. A frightening little doll. A broken mirror (or glitching viewscreen) that occasionally shows glimpses that shouldn't be there. A set of surgical tools arranged as a person's name. A diagnosis program that is constantly running, spitting out new diagnoses whenever somebody comes near. Collections of fruit jellies. Multiple personalities might even be physically present (and have plenty of potential to become fictionals!)
- Neural damage: broken cables, a malfunctioning bot misbehaving in a similar manner to the character.

Ideally the symbols should fit in well enough not to be totally obvious, yet create an odd environment.

An interesting and somewhat experimental way of running this intro is to have the amnesia be complete: the characters do not remember who they are at all, and have to find out by trying things. This might be due to a temporary glitch in the amnesia program or is actually always part of the Viscaria experience. Characters will be defined and invented by the players as they play out the scenario, and afterwards formally created as Eclipse Phase characters. This will make the characters even closer to fictionals, at least in the minds of the players – is there really any difference beyond having a character sheet?

Information: The Viscaria Petal

Viscaria comes as a five-petaled pink flower with a sticky stem.

It is selling well and has gained a good reputation among petal users. As noted petal reviewer Youxi Mao wrote: "A mild petal for self discovery. The setting is hardly groundbreaking, but the storycraft has potential and the ending is a sweet itself. You definitely want to share it with only friends, though." It is mainly popular among casual petal users rather than hardcore users. Some creatives claim it not only promotes better team cohesion but actual in-petal creative work and brainstorming.

Rumors have begun circulating that there are sweets in the petal that reward the right use with skillssofts or extra muses. Some think Viscaria trains you subtly, making you a more harmonious person better able to network. Over time other, darker rumors will start circulating on Mars: that there is a serial killer attacking users (maybe a lone madman, maybe part of The Conspiracy), that regular use releases demons from the subconscious or that there is a particular evil presence haunting the petal.



Standard safety tests (such as the ones blogged by the Konietzko Phytotoxicity Labs) reveal that the petal works by spreading disposable nanointerfaces in the limbic system and frontal lobes, linking up via ectos and endos to form an encrypted ad hoc network with other users using the same plant (the encryption keys and controller software are partially embedded in the petal and partially read from anonymous mesh servers; without them the petal doesn't function). The design is hardly unusual and not in itself sinister. The memory blocking and manipulation is temporary and unlikely to cause any kind of damage; the biggest problem might be that personal information is revealed by using the petal. The information exchange with remote servers is also limited and one-way, so there is not much of an InfoSec risk.

The basic setup is simple: the viscaria petals induce a trance-like state where users are oblivious of their surroundings for a few hours, forming a loose hallucination network.

They start out with amnesia inside the shared hallucination, finding themselves in a suitably isolated world: a space shuttle, a tropical island, a yacht, in a small habitat on a moon of Jupiter, in a castle in a terrestrial desert or anything else. The environment is not directly dangerous (but certain acts, like opening airlocks or walking into the desert, will lead to a bad ending), usually well equipped with sensual stimulation but also odd reminders of things that might have been forgotten.

As the trip continues and they explore the environment each realization (“That table is my grandmother’s... I always felt sad that it got left on Earth”) gives the characters greater power and freedom. Just realizing it is all a dream/petal doesn’t work; the characters actually have to reveal something of themselves to go somewhere. As they advance their powers begin to include some limited telepathy and empathy, the ability to shape the surroundings and eventually a joint ascension as they experience that they understand themselves and the world. It all dissolves into a joyful feeling of completion, and the participants wake up.

Information about who created the petal is embedded in its genetic code and the nanomachines. Scanning them with standard nano-equipment will find the creator’s tag:

*Made by Xia Mandava.
“Whilst Mushrooms & Mosses the company grac’d
The Catchfly as guard of the Honey was plac’d.”*

followed by a cryptographic signature. The two lines are from Maria Flaxman and William Roscoe’s poem *Flora’s Gala* (1808). A botanical stickler might complain that the catchfly mentioned is not *Viscaria*, but the related genus *Silene*.

Figuring out the whereabouts of Xia Mandava will require some more detective work. A likely source would be people keeping track of petal designers (Interest: Petals) or people with good Networking: criminals. This might lead to information that she is a student of Jack “Brassinosteroid” Chory, the legendary petal designer. His whereabouts are also somewhat tricky to discern, but some further investigation is going to point at several sightings at Our Lady of the Flowers, a section of Carnival of the Goat.

I will do science to it!

Investigators who suspect there is something strange with the *Viscaria* petal or its users can try reverse engineering its function. Cracking the copy protection is a basic InfoSec test with a base time of 1 day. Understanding the petal is not too hard for somebody with Psychosurgery, Profession: Petal design or the right neuropsychological specializations. Most of the complexity resides in how it randomly generates a symbolic environment that also has pleasant properties: there are 34 preprogrammed scenarios in the petal, and some clever generative code to make them variable even to repeat users. It is by no means simple, but most complexity lies in pre-packaged modules found in other petals and neural insert software suites.

However, the important effect is not encoded at all inside the petal code: it is truly emergent, due to the interaction between the petal, the dream character system of human minds and the shared local subconscious of the users. It can only be observed by actively monitoring a group of petal users while tripping (requires injecting brainscan equipment), and even then it is easy to miss. The monitoring researchers will have to succeed with both Psychosurgery at MoS 30+ to gather the right data, and then get MoS 30+ on Academics: Neuroscience or Psychology to notice that there are extra minds in the system (these tests have a base time of a few days). Once noticed, further neurocognitive investigation will lead to the hypothesis that the petal actually allows extra personalities to emerge and function during the petal trance. A Psychosurgery check on a

petal user will also indicate that these personalities may persist subconsciously after the trance ends.

Comparing minds of petal users to non-petal users could also find a difference, but it requires access to more brain scans and is harder. At least 10 people infected by the same fictional (e.g. they have all shared the same petal trances, it is not enough to just have random Viscaria users – this is likely how this experiment may fail) and 10 people without are needed. A MoS 30+ Psychosurgery roll will detect some systematic but subtle similarities between the users that are not found in non-users. Unfortunately it is very tricky to discover what these differences do; it would take extensive testing (days of brain recording in real life situations) to get enough data to see one of the fictionals “move”, and then a critical success on Academics: Neuroscience or Psychology to realize what was happening.

If a researcher fully figures out the existence and abilities of fictionals they have made a scientific scoop, and if they publish (takes about a month to make a watertight paper) they will get a whooping +9 r-rep award (non-scientists who are credited will get +4 r-rep). It is an interesting and hereto undiscovered aspect of the transhuman mind, with potentially important implications. The researcher will get polite invitations from several universities, research collectives and hypercorps.

However, if Firewall members are involved the conservative clique will be upset that they helped unleash a potentially dangerous technology willy-nilly. The members will suffer -2 i-rep loss. If Firewall members instead prevent the spread of the scientific findings (and give them to Firewall) they gain +5 i-rep. The conservatives will be happy it didn't get out, and the pragmatists will start thinking about what uses they can put fictionals to.



Fictionals: cogito, ego sum

Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance.
Jean-Paul Sartre

Fictionals, tulpas, egregores, daemons – they have many names, but are essentially self-directed subconscious processes.

Fictionals show up as necessary filler characters in Viscaria. If a close-knit group lacks one or two members that would be expected to be with them, these members will show up. Anybody who “should” be around will be around and can potentially become a fictional. These fictionals cannot reveal their own secrets (beyond what the other characters can infer) so they will “ride the coattails” of the others.

Next time the petal is used, any strong-willed and sufficiently motivated fictional from the first one will reappear, possibly in another form. Each time they reappear they will be increasingly able to think and act on their own.

Fictionals only have access to information and skills of the people that dream them. At first they can only use the first 10 points of skills and attributes, next trip they can use up to 20, then 30, 40, and so on. This requires the petal group to be roughly constant: the skills of new members take a while to integrate, and if a member does not participate in the trip their abilities will not be present.

The most important part of the fictional “lifecycle” is during the brief merge during waking up from the petal. During this moment they are maximally aware and most able to influence the users. Mostly they do this by reinforcing the feeling that the trip was enjoyable and gave them useful insights. If possible, they will try to get more people to take petal with their hosts.

There might be subtle correlations between people hosting the same fictional – mannerisms, word choices or views on certain minor matters – but usually they are not affected much. A person who interacts with a few people infected by the same fictional may detect this if they achieve a critical success with Kinesics: they realize that the infected all have the glance when somebody asks a personal question, the same tiny jerk in their shrugs or favor the word ‘utilize’ over ‘use’. If they are actively looking for similarities an excellent success (MoS 30+) will find the similarity. Henceforth they can notice it in other people if they succeed with a Perception or Kinetics test during a sufficiently long interaction. Oracles and face recognition software can be programmed to help.

When not using the petal the fictionals exist as subconscious patterns in the minds of the users, with limited skills and awareness but still some influence. During dreams they appear as dream characters, and can act with relative freedom (but only with the locally accessible skills). If the character has a muse that is easily convinced, they might be able to give some commands during sleep that affect the outside world.

In extreme cases unusually active fictionals might do something, usually interfering with an action that is completely against their desires. They cause distractions, sudden tics or scares. Treat this as them using their single moxie point to flip a key roll in order to cause trouble.

“Do you know how it feels to be trapped inside somebody’s dreams? To only be alive when they are tripping or sleeping, subject to whatever crazy whims they have? I exist. I have just as much right to live as you do. And in here, I am smarter, a better programmer and a greater lover than you could ever be. Now, just lean back and relax and I will take care of things.”

Fictionals become truly dangerous when they gain access to skills and knowledge that enable them to act. Fictionals with Memetics, Hypnosis, Psychology or Marketing skills can use them to more efficiently implant suggestions into the subconscious of their hosts. Psychosurgery is less useful, since normally they do not have access to the equipment. InfoSec is also useful, if they can get their hosts to perform the right acts – after all, they already know all their passwords.

Personal identity among fictionals is... problematic. A fictional is distributed between people and will be somewhat affected by their “take” on them. They can spread to more and more people, but only know what the currently linked people know. The same fictional can hence be spread out across a whole community, succeeding with its goals among some and failing among others.

No wonder fictionals are crazy. If the person they were originally based on had a derangement or mental disorder, they will have it (possibly in a cartoonish way). They are all to some degree addicted to the petal, but most importantly they have a form of sociopathy. They care about their own existence and want to maintain that at all costs. They usually do not care about other lives, since to them existence is just a series of disjointed lives – they never truly die, and hence see no reason to regard killing others as any worse than stopping thinking about a past dream.

However, while aware fictionals desperately want to become “real” they are also limited by their knowledge that they are fictional. They strive to escape and lash out against their tormentors, yet they often fear truly attempting to become free.

Open the door! Open, blast you! I’ll endure anything, your red-hot tongs and molten lead, your racks and prongs and garrotes-- all your fiendish gadgets, everything that burns and flays and tear - I’ll put up with any torture you impose. Anything, anything would be better than this agony of mind, this creeping pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses one and never hurts quite enough. Now will you open? (THE DOOR FLIES OPEN: a long silence.)
Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit

Not all fictionals are bad. A team might find that they can give a shared fictional what it wants, and in return gain insights from its perspective. It knows what they know and can discover links between disparate pieces of information group members do not know are linked. In theory such shared fictionals could become extremely useful enhancements. If the truth becomes known hypercorps like Cognite are going to become extremely interested in harnessing fictionals.

A person who knows they have a fictional within their subconscious can “call it up” and hold a internal discussion with it by succeeding with an INTx3 roll. This is largely like talking to oneself or to a hand puppet, but the process can gain some insights (such as +10 to predict or understand what the fictional want). Of course, this also makes the fictional slightly stronger too.

Discovering that you have a fictional may cause stress. Characters who realize they are “infected” roll a WILx3 test, with failure inflicting SV 1d10/2 (round down) for merely this realization or 1d10 if they have a nasty fictional such as Dark Ron. Derangements caused by a failed test tend to give the fictional a bit of extra power (e.g. hallucinatory appearances, picking up a tic from the fictional).



Anthony Frederick Sandys, Love

Dark Ron: The false self

"No thanks, I don't use that." The others were already dozing languidly among the pillows. Steven stepped up to her, stroking her shirt with the autoinjector.

"I said no."

Steven continued stroking.

"You are not Steven. He would never do this."

Not-Steven suddenly looked into her eyes, his gaze fierce. "You are right Coco, I'm not Steven. I am myself, and I am in charge here." He gripped her and she yelped as he injected the drug.

"Just relax and let me have what I want. First, I want you to close your eyes and stop thinking about me. It is disgusting. I'm not going to give you your rape fantasy. Second, I want your navigation knowledge. And third... I'm going to kill you in about three days. Let that be your fantasy."

Dark Ron is a fictional that has been around for a while. At his core he is addiction, deceit and desire – inchoate drives given form by petal addicts and now equipped with a ruthless ambition. He *hates* being defined by others, and will do anything to assert his own identity. Up until recently he was just a dark presence in petal dreams, but recently he broke into reality by accidentally finding a host suffering from the right kind of mental disorder that he could “possess” completely. Now he is at large, seething with resentment and ambition.

He is obsessed with finding Xia Mandava since she is his creator. Like Roy Batty of *Bladerunner*, he is a bit uncertain whether he reveres, hates or loves her. Maybe she ought to be held responsible for what she did. Maybe she could help the fictionals. Maybe he should force her into the petal to absorb her skills and understanding – and vice versa. In any case, he is making his way towards the Carnival of the Goat, one body at the time.

Being embodied has some drawbacks compared to the hive-mind abilities of living in a shared petal. Ron has found a solution: he gathers useful people, getting them to participate in the petal. This is usually voluntary, but he has no scruples against kidnapping somebody and feeding them the petal. During the first trip he makes sure he/his host wakes up early, and immobilize the others. He then repeatedly gives them the petal, keeping them trapped inside the dream while his dream-self is growing and working on his plans. Finally, when he is ready to move on, he kills the people in real world and takes their stacks in order to prevent extra subconscious copies of himself and evidence from spreading.

One trick he has developed is that he can possess new hosts with some effort. This requires deliberately inducing the right kind of psychological traumas and then moving in. Normally this is too much of an effort, but sometimes it is necessary to “upgrade” to a brain possessed with the right skills or social identity. It requires some extensive psychological torture inflicted inside and outside the petal dream, but when it works he now has two hosts to play with. Unfortunately he has also discovered that he doesn't like being around himself much – despite a strong narcissistic attraction, he is not a people person. The trick of forking this way however allows him to complicate tracking and pursue several independent paths towards his goals.

Stats

Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.

Oscar Wilde

Dark Ron does not have any attributes or skills on his own, he just “borrows” them from his current host (use a suitable host from the sample characters or the NPC files). Being possessed by Dark Ron gives the following extra Traits:

Adaptability level 2 (Dark Ron is pretty unfazed with shifting bodies or even minds; resleeving is trivial to him)

Pain tolerance level 2 (Since he does not regard possessed bodies as his, and anyway pain is merely a sensory stimulus)

Addiction Viscaria level 1

Edited memories (or rather, chaotic and fragmentary memories of his past)

Identity crisis (to the nth degree)

Mental Disorders (Megalomania, borderline personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder – Ron craves attention and acknowledgment, but only *exactly* matching his current self-image... which shifts randomly depending on host and perceiver)

Real World Naïveté (occasionally the true strangeness of his mind shows up)

Motivations: -Being defined by others (Dark Ron will fly into a rage if others try to characterize or define him), +Finding his creator, +Freedom (he will do *anything* to remain at large)

People infected with Dark Ron from petals tend to pick up on some of his mannerisms when meeting him. This gives a +10 reaction bonus – for some reason they feel kin to him.

Whenever in a Viscaria dream Dark Ron is fully aware of the situation from the start and can manipulate the dreamscape very freely. In order to “possess” someone he needs to subject them to enough psychological torture to give them a mental disorder: Ron himself. This usually takes about a day of repeated Viscaria dreams (and real-world abuse). If it doesn't work the previous host just kills the failed host, otherwise it will let it loose.

What would happen if Dark Ron possessed an async is entirely unknown. But probably very, very bad.

Roleplaying tips: Dark Ron often behaves as a hammy actor – since he is play-acting at being human. He does not have a consistent self, and his own attempts to define himself tends to be simple (he kills, so he is a killer. He is on a quest, so he is a questing soul). Since dealing with real transhumans tends to lead to them trying to define or inquire into him in painful ways, he either tries to take control over the situation (often through intimidation or violence) or stay away from unnecessary contact.

Getting rid of Dark Ron: exorcising Dark Ron from a possessed person requires psychotherapy or psychosurgery, a bit like curing a severe case of multiple personality disorder. It is tough: besides other disorders the patient may have, the Dark Ron “package deal” of mental disorders as well as the uniqueness of the infection inflicts a -40 modifier to the tests (and Ron will likely

not go quietly – like many personality disorders he thinks he is perfectly fine and will be trying to disrupt the therapy). People who merely have a subconscious Dark Ron can treat it with psychotherapy that weakens it; handle it as getting rid of a trauma.

Dark Ron's progress

*No eye his future can foretell
No law his past explain
Whom neither Passion may compel
Nor Reason can restrain.
W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman, The Rake's Progress*

At first he managed to possess Maria Gomez, a lowly colonist on Mars. After somewhat impulsively killing her circle of petal-buddies at Opportunity City in Terra Meridiani he had to flee into the southern upback to avoid the authorities.

Coming back to civilization in New Dazhai he found Yan, a petal dealer selling Viscaria. After an initial stupid outbreak of violence that landed him in plenty of trouble he realized he needed some skills and brainpower – Maria was simply not up to the job. Joining a petal circle and introducing them to Viscaria he soon began to get back on track. He developed a plan, killed the first group of “recruits” and set up a second circle where he managed to include the petal dealer. At the point when the dealer recognized the crazy woman who had tried to beat him up for selling Viscaria it was too late: he and the other members were all immobilized in an abandoned emergency bunker where Ron had his way with their minds. After learning what he needed from the junkies and dealer he killed them and moved on.

Ron's new goal was to track Viscaria back to its source. The local dealer had bought the petals from smugglers in the Olympus region. Tracking the connection through the Arsia Mons smugglers to whatever local operator grew the petal was tough. After a few misadventures Ron decided to switch morph and identity. Grabbing a number of people, he succeeded in possessing the smuggler Fatsah Attali. Afterwards, partially due to the practical insight from the new brain, the instance in Maria's body sold off that body to another smuggler gang. The pair continued, eventually finding the petal-growers in the small settlement Birdie 16. From them they found out about their true origin and creator. Leaving the growers dead and stackless in their wake, they now set out to get to Carnival of the Goat. Unfortunately they had by now realized they couldn't stand each other. After a nasty brawl they decided to go their separate ways: may the best Ron win.

They have set up an online dead drop for information for his instances on a little used mesh forum. This is where they update his investigation of his creation. Should a pursuer manage to find it will reveal the existence of at least two Ron's.

Currently Ron/Maria and Ron/Fatsah are pursuing different approaches to reaching Carnival of the Goat. Ron/Fatsah aims at getting there by ascending the beanstalk and get a shuttle or other spacecraft. Ron/Maria plans to connect with some suitable criminal group and darkccast to the Carnival. For that he plans to make some extra money by suitable robberies.

Pursuit

I hate how I don't feel real enough unless people are watching.

Chuck Palahniuk, Invisible Monsters

The Martian authorities have noticed a series of multiple murders with a few similarities: groups of petal-users have been found murdered, their stacks gone. In several cases the victims showed signs of having been forcibly restrained for a time before being killed and had traces of both paralyzing drugs and petals in their system. Not all victims were typical petal addicts. The tracking has suggested Maria Gomez as a likely suspect and now focuses efforts to find her. This is going to be bad news for whoever Les Goules sell her morph to.

However, since the crimes have occurred in different jurisdictions and among lowlives (plus that not all groups of victims have been found yet), the police effort is not too intense. Formally, Captain Vincent Blasko of the Martian Rangers is responsible for the "petal-killer case". While by no means a bad policeman he currently has left it to be monitored by his section's AIs. Their main theory is that it is a series of nasty internal struggles between competing petal-dealing networks where some new hitwoman is making a mess.

Evidence

Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everyone I've ever known."

Chuck Palahniuk, Invisible Monsters

The obvious cases are the initial murders in Opportunity City committed by Maria Gomez AF 9, 24 Vrishika, the first set of murders in New Dazhai and the murders at Birdie 16. The second set of New Dazhai murders, that killed the petal dealer, has not been found by the authorities but may be known by criminals. Similarly the killings in Olympus (where Fatsah Attali was possessed) may not have been discovered yet.

Opportunity City/Maria Gomez

Marion: I love you, Harry. You make me feel like a person. Like I'm me... and I'm beautiful.

Harry Goldfarb: You are beautiful. You're the most beautiful girl in the world. You are my dream.

Requiem for a Dream

Maria Gomez was a vehicle engineer born in Rio de Janeiro who worked for Ares Engineering before the fall. During the Fall she was present at the destruction of the Orcus Patera Industrial Zone. She and other survivors fled from the complex just as it was starting to transform and got caught between it and the advancing Elysium Militia forces. Her vehicle was hit and she died. However, her stack was retrievable and she was restored a few years later. Human resource evaluations from Noachis Construction in Opportunity City, where she worked off indenture for her new body, noted her repair skills but also periods of depression, drug use and lack of ambition.

Police reports indicate that she fatally stabbed four people: Iisa Amana, Yang Cheung, Basrizal Lumenta and Abdul Alodan. She seem to have killed Iisa and Yang in her own apartment (apparently while sharing petals), then sought out the flat of Basrizal and Abdul and cut them fatally with a heavy combitool. She removed their stacks (which have never been found) and then disappeared in a stolen cargo hauler. Despite some serious effort in finding her the search failed: she had disabled the tracking of the vehicle and likely knew good hiding places in the southern

highlands. She is wanted for grievous bodily assault, forced disappearance, destruction of property, vehicle and equipment theft.

Investigations into her life will reveal that she by all accounts were friends with the victims and regularly used petals together with them. Freeman R. Deeprise, her foreman, might say:

"I don't know. Maybe it was the drugs. But she was a timid person. Quiet, meticulous, never complained. Sure, she was changed by the Fall, like all of us. I knew her before and she was much more open then, when she had her Shaista. She clammed up afterwards, no wonder. But she was not a violent or angry person. I even remember the days before the thing. She was doing her work just normally, even planning for the 28th of Vrishika party. It doesn't make any sense."

Paranoid investigators might perhaps suspect something exsurgent in her past, but this is a red herring. She was close to TITAN war machines at Orcus Patera, but they never affected her beyond scarring her psychologically. Ozturk Rehab, the infomorph brokerage firm that retrieved her can show records that the stack was apparently uninfected (they will also claim that they did a comprehensive trauma rehabilitation, which is more of a stretch). Police interrogation of beta-forks of her backups did not reveal any intentions to harm anybody, and her now restored victims have no idea about why she did what she did (but they are still angry about it).

Interviewing her victims about their petal sessions might provide a few interesting leads, assuming investigators manage to win their trust and see through their now biased memories of Maria. The group used to take petals together to relieve their boredom (and, in the case of some, to process their 'issues'). They mainly used "light" petals such as Anemone, Hyacinth White and Viscaria, with no interest in the darker stuff. In the week before their murders they used Viscaria. If prompted to specifically describe the Viscaria trances Abdul can relate the following:

"The first trip we took put us in this really posh dirigible resort in the clouds of Venus. All the facilities, nobody there but a cynical butlerbot serving drinks. We ended up talking, mostly. Yang told us about Chengdu. Second time Maria, that bitch, got into a quarrel with Iisa and nearly threw her out of an airlock... actually, that wasn't Iisa, she couldn't come, so it was one of the dream characters. Turned out Maria thought she knew something about her sweetheart. Should have seen that as a sign that she was crazy. Third time... that was just before my backup, so it is not really clear. An ice castle on Europa, I think. Lots of warm furs on the floor. We found out that Basrizal had a really disgusting brother and that I once had the hots for one of my squadmates without noticing it at the time. Yeah, that was a nice dream."

The victims are all infected by Dark Ron subconsciously (he was of course the butler, dream-Iisa and Basrizal's brother). If someone asks them about the extra characters the petal users will tell them that they are part of the standard experience.

New Dazhai

So you haven't yet got over your--what-do-you-call-it?--sense of human dignity? Excuse my smiling.

Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit

The first murders occurred among a small group of petal addicts in one of New Dazhai's warrens. The victims were fairly heavy petal addicts who couldn't resist the offer of free petals

from the newly arrived lady. While there are few witnesses, she didn't hide the bodies that well and Pecos security found them eventually. They did not investigate them that deeply – addicts die in the warrens all the time. The autopsy reports indicate that they had all ingested an unusual number of Viscaria petals in a short time, before being stabbed to death and their stacks removed.

The second group of murders was better planned. A party took place in an outbuilding outside the city that included some Fa Jing workers, Yan the petal dealer, and an unidentified woman. The victims were sedated and moved to an abandoned emergency bunker further out. Forensic investigation of the corpses when they are found will reveal that they were kept immobilized with paralyzing drugs (stolen from a medical facility) and crude but effective ropes for several days, fed petals and finally killed as their stacks were removed. The bunker was left depressurized, ironically preserving evidence better. DNA evidence shows that Maria's morph was present.

Birdie 16

*Live each day as if it were your last, and garden as though you will live forever.
Motto above the entrance of hydroponics unit 2*

Birdie 16 is a small outpost on the slopes of the Tharsis plateau, about four hours from Olympus. It was used as an emergency evacuation center during the Fall, adding several hastily erected habitat bubbles to the sides of the main building. As people moved out several bubbles were converted into greenhouses, growing various hydroponic crops – pharm plants, seedlings for terraforming, vegetables for people who like retro food, and of course petals. While not everyone was in on the petal trade, it helped keep the outpost afloat until Dark Ron arrived.

Witnesses (and surveillance footage) indicate that a cargo hauler showed up with Fatsah Attali, a trader/smuggler who very occasionally dealt with the outpost. He was accompanied by another man he called Ron Heian. They claimed they were interested in buying produce and met up with Bai Bining in one of the gardens. Exactly what happened is unclear (no surveillance or witnesses there, but forensic investigation will suggest a Twitch gas grenade), but the men dragged Bai and his colleagues into the cargo hauler, shot at two inhabitants who came down to see what the ruckus was about and then blew up one of the bubbles, triggering pressure doors to slam down. By the time the other people had restored order the hauler was already gone.

The hauler was later found in the outskirts of Fuxingmen, containing the still cuffbanded bodies of Bai and the others (without stacks). Forensic investigation will find that they had been fed several doses of Viscaria petals over the span of a day. They showed some signs of physical trauma consistent with mild torture or violence. Traces in the truck (which itself is untraceable, probably stolen) suggest the presence of two men, one sleeved in an alpiner morph and the other in a ruster. The DNA trace of the alpiner fit the police files on Fatsah Attali. Internal surveillance has been expertly removed.

Careful investigation will find that of the petals grown by Bai only one type is missing, Viscaria. Several more expensive types were left behind (although, if investigation is late, some of the neighbors will "save" them for themselves).

Ron Heian is of course Maria Gomez under a new identity, using a ruster morph bought from Les Goules.

Fatsah Attali

Identity is theft of the self.

Estee Martin

Smuggler active in the Olympus-Noctis region. He was a child refugee from the Qarain region, put with foster parents in Olympus but soon in trouble with the law. His police file is filled with minor crimes, mainly transporting controlled consumer products such as red market fabbers and petals, as well as a few cases of public violence. Associated with or member of the Pavonis Gang, a subsidiary outfit to the Arsia Mons smugglers.

Fatsah is Dark Ron's latest host: some deep seated traumas made him possible to conquer when Ron was interrogating him about the petal smuggling. A tough smuggler is exactly what Ron found useful, so he plans to make the most of this host.

Stats: Dark Ron/Maria Gomez/Ron Heian

Fictional; Vehicle engineer turned outlaw

Morph: Male Ruster. Gangly, Asian, shoulder-length straight hair.

Motivation: -being defined by others, +finding his creator, +freedom

COG: 15, COO: 25, INT: 15, REF: 20, SAV: 15, SOM: 15, WIL: 10, MOX: 2

INIT: 70, SPD: 1, LUC: 20, TT: 4, IR: 40, DUR: 35, WT: 7, DR: 53

Skills: Academics: Physics 35, Art: Singing 45, Blades 55, Demolitions 45, Fray 50, Freefall 30, Freerunning 55, Hardware: Groundcraft 75, Hardware: Industrial 45, Infiltration 55, Infosec 45, Interest: Petals 45, Interest: Science Fiction 55, Interfacing 35, Kinesics 55, Language: Portuguese 85, Language: English 45, Language: Mandarin 45, Navigation 45, Networking: Autonomists 35, Networking: Criminals 60, Networking: Hypercorps 45, Perception 35, Persuasion 55, Pilot: Anthroform 50, Pilot: Groundcraft 70, Profession: Vehicle engineering 65, Programming 45, Scrounging 45, Thrown Weapons 75, Unarmed Combat 45

Reputation: @-rep: 10, c-rep: 20, g-rep: 20.

Traits: Adaptability (Level 2), Pain Tolerance (Level 2), Addiction (Viscaria) (Level 1), Edited Memories, Identity Crisis, Mental Disorders, On the Run, Real World Naïveté. The morph suffers from planned obsolescence and mild allergy against grass pollen.

Implants: Basic Biomods, Basic Mesh Inserts, Cortical Stack, Enhanced Respiration, Temperature Tolerance

Gear: (4x) Cuffband, Dazzler, Disabler, Prisoner Mask, Kick, (5x) Petals (Low), Liquid Thermite, Slip, BTX, (2x) Oxytocin-A, (2x) Twitch, Smart Vac Clothing, Tools (kit), Utilitool, Disassembly Tools, Fake Ego ID, Facial/Image Recognition, Standard Muse, Electronic Rope, Nanobandage, Crash Suit (w/ Chameleon Coating), Flex Cutter, (4x) Knife, (10x) Proximity Splash Grenade, (10x) Sticky Thermobaric Grenade

Muse: Saci-Pererê. Skills of note: Academics: Logistics 40, Infosec: 30, Interest: Science Fiction 40, Interfacing: 40, Perception: 30, Profession: Police Procedures 40

Melee weapons: Unarmed (skill 45, DV 1d10+1), Flex cutter (skill 55, 1d10+4, AP -1), Knife (skill 55, DV 1d10+3, AP -1, poisoned with BTX or Twitch)

Thrown weapons: Knife (skill 75, DV 1d10+3, AP -1, poisoned with BTX or Twitch), proximity splash grenade (skill 75, filled with BTX or Twitch), sticky thermobaric grenade (skill 75, DV 3d10+5 (uniform blast, energy damage), AP -10)

Armor: Energy 4, Kinetic 6

Roleplaying: The original Maria was a timid, quiet woman carrying painful memories. Under Dark Ron's possession (at least partially bringing subconscious wish-fulfillment) she has become a sleek killer: still quiet and cautious, but also completely ready to emotionlessly kill whenever it suits her. Ron Heian is a silent planner who makes the best use of his stealth, technical skills, and ability to throw grenades and poisoned knives by surprise. She can for example place grenades to be triggered by facial recognition software or sabotage vehicles to act as remote-controlled weapons.

Stats: Dark Ron/Fatsah Attali

Fictional; Smuggler

Morph: Male martian alpinist. Husky, dark, five o'clock shadow, crewcut hair.

Motivation: -being defined by others, +Xia Mandava, +freedom

COG: 10, COO: 20, INT: 15, REF: 20, SAV: 20, SOM: 25, WIL: 10

INIT: 70, SPD: 1, LUC: 20, TT: 4, IR: 40, DUR: 55, WT: 11, DR: 83

Skills: Blades 55, Climbing 60, Deception 60, Fray 70, Freerunning 55, Infiltration 60, Interest: Gambling 60, Interest: Scum Drug Dealers 40, Intimidation 70, Kinesics 50, Kinetic Weapons 60, Language: Arabic 85, Language: English 45, Medicine: Paramedic 30, Navigation 45, Networking: Autonomists 50, Networking: Criminals 70, Networking: Hypercorps 50, Palming 60, Perception 65, Persuasion 50, Pilot: Groundcraft 50, Profession: Smuggling Tricks 60, Profession: Street crime 60, Profession: Con Schemes 50, Scrounging 55, Unarmed Combat 65

Reputation: @-rep: 10, g-rep: 40

Ego Traits: Adaptability (Level 2), Pain Tolerance (Level 2), Addiction (Viscaria) (Level 1), Edited Memories, Identity Crisis, Mental Disorders, On the Run, Real World Naïveté, VR Vertigo.

Morph traits: Tough (Level 2), Fast Metabolism, Planned Obsolescence

Gear: Cuffband, Kick, (4x) Petals (Low), Smart Vac Clothing, Specs, Anonymous Account, Fake Ego ID, Standard Muse, Spindle, Spindle Climber, Speck, Helmet (full), Armor Vest (w/ Chameleon Coating), Knife, Vibroblade, Densiplast Gloves, Medium Pistol (w/ Laser Sight), (100x) Laser-Guided Hollow-Point Pistol Rounds, (100x) Laser-Guided Jammer Pistol Rounds.

Muse: Khalkhul, Notable skills: Academics: Political science 40, Interest: Triad Economics 40, Profession: Security Ops 40, Infosec 30, Interfacing 40, Perception 30

Melee weapons: Unarmed (skill 65, DV 1d10+2), Densiplast gloves (skill 65, DV 1d10+4), Cyberclaws (skill 55, 1d10+5, AP -2), Knife (skill 5, 1d10+4, AP -1), Vibroblade (skill 55, DV 2d10+2, AP -2)

Ranged weapons: Medium pistol (Skill 80, DV 3d10+2, AP 0, laser guided hollow-point ammo; jammer rounds no damage)

Armor: Energy 6/9, Kinetic 6/9 (without/with helmet)

Roleplaying tips: The original Fatsah was a troubled youth who would likely have become a versatile gangster. Possessed by Dark Ron he behaves almost the same but now with a nasty sociopathic edge. He is the silent, tough type (in the past to hide his inner insecurities, now to hide Ron). He has no regard for the property of others and is unafraid of manipulating, conning or just threatening his way. In combat he is a dangerous shooter, and Ron has stocked up on Kick (+1 Speed, +10 REF – improves Fray) for an extra edge.

Carnival of the Goat: Our Lady of the Flowers

*In gardens, beauty is a by-product. The main business is sex and death.
Sam Llewelyn, The Sea Garden*

A possible location for the climax of the adventure is on Carnival of the Goat, in Our Lady of the Flowers.

Our Lady of the Flowers is a section of the barge remodeled to look like a gothic cathedral bursting with psychedelic flowers. The leading designers are as ruthlessly competitive about their status as any warez-gangs (and about as vindictive to anybody copying their masterpieces without permission). It is a bio/nanotech Akihabara with decadent and fetish overtones. Hydroponic gardening a la Alejandro Jodorowsky and the Wachowski brothers, with some help from Baudelaire and Joris-Karl Huysmans. Bejeweled tortoises and people with designer addictions, quests for ultimate insight scripted by squabbling otaku nanokas, people secretly dreaming of a beautiful, bizarre, unique death so that their bodies will be placed on the Wall of Martyrs and used by the sacramental epiphytes.

Getting into the plays between La Apollonie, Mimosa I, Mimosa II, and Jack “Brassinosteroid” Chory is a guarantee of a psychedelic and very dangerous adventure - the combination of psychotechnology, aesthetic and sensual decadence, drug marketing, and deviant morality experiments is a heady mix. Vurt meets Jean Genet meets Ciudad Juarez.

Of course, behind the scenes things are slightly less surreal. Slightly. The antics of petal marketing and criticism are supported by an infrastructure of labs, editing spaces, hydroponic gardens and fairly everyday living spaces where many of the involved people live. Standards vary from the mansion of the Queen of Rumania to flophouse coffin hotels where the “pilgrims” stay (petal designers rarely have a shortage of willing guinea pigs, and no ethics oversight). Like much of Carnival of the Goat space is at a premium and many people use elaborate AR to avoid seeing too much squalor, distraction or bulkheads.

This is where Jack Chory maintains his set of spaces. They are located inside a section of an agricultural ring where he cultures numerous plants, both normal and petal. In his personal little jungle he also maintains the design workspaces he, Xia and other collaborators use. All in all they have a spacious 100 cubic meters or so.

Jack “Brassinosteroid” Chory

*My life's in perfect order. It tidied itself up nicely of its own accord. So I needn't bother about it now.
Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit*

Jack Chory is a legend in the petal world. His main claim to fame is not to have grown any immortal petal, but to have enabled petals in the first place. While petal-like nanodrugs have been around for almost 30 years now, and biotech drugs for more than 80 years, his genius was to combine them a few years before the Fall. By giving them style, a mythology and making them hard to copy he enabled the petal underground. Jack also knows the value in a reputation

economy to make people forget the also-rans. Some rude people still bring up Vitex von Blau, Coach Mycles or Étienne Gribouilleur, but few actually remember their role in creating the petals. To most petal-users he is original gardener.

Jack Chory began his career as a biodesigner on Earth, involved in various ecotech enterprises in his idealistic youth. He was recruited into space to work on space habitat hydroponics for Arbortech and Aeroscape. While designing optimized alfalfa, greywater purification peat and updating flowers to fit new corporate visual identities was not too fulfilling, he had plenty of free time and very loose supervision. He began recreational biodesign, and after some initial resistance he gave in to the requests from crewmates to make psychoactive plants. At this point Aeroscape stepped in: the company had no sympathy for such activities. Jack jumped ship to Ceres, where he continued his career. He continued to find biotech drugs unappealing until he came across some of the early experiments by Vitex von Blau in scripted nanodrugs. Working with his then friends Coach Mycles and Anton E! Bajguz he came up with the first petal, the Daisy (by today's standard truly primitive, merely a scripted set of hallucinations).

Soon the simple idea got traction and Jack's team waited to rake in money and rep. It didn't come. Others were developing competing petals and Jack had underestimated how easy it was to break into a new drug medium commercially. The team dissolved under acrimonious circumstances; Coach later ended up a victim of his own nanoexperiments and Anton became marginalized. Jack began to travel from habitat to habitat, teaching petal design and polishing his version of the story. Slowly his reputation grew, especially as some of his students became truly outstanding petal designers. A few years back he moved to Carnival of the Goat to truly be at the center of the petal underground.

Jack's current student Xia Mandava is exactly what he wants: an adoring sexpot that has the spark of brilliance he may lack yet needs his support and technical ability. Among the petal designers in Our Lady of the Flowers Jack is viewed as the dry oldtimer, less of a true artist and more of an art teacher. He is deeply involved with the nitty gritty technical side of petal design, hanging out with neurohackers and nanokas. In many ways he is happy with how things turned out... except that he has a nasty feeling in the back of his head that he is just as trapped here as he was in the old corporate habitats.

Jack is sleeved in a husky splicer morph of vaguely Latino appearance. Unlike most people around he has allowed it to age slightly.

Motivations: +Recognition (Jack wants everybody to know he invented the petals), +Autonomism (He relishes freedom and the chance to work with a community), -Intoxication (He finds drugs that dull the senses to be pointless or dangerous: a good drug should make you into something more).

He has a bodyguard named Liu Da assigned to him by e^N, the local gang/militia. It is a silent figure sleeved in an androgynous morph (treat as a Ghost). The bodyguard is there to protect him and Xia, but also to ensure that they do not run off without paying their regards.

Xia Mandava

Come to me, Estelle. You shall be whatever you like: a glancing stream, a muddy stream. And deep down in my eyes you'll see yourself just as you want to be.

Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit

Xia is young, a bright child from Ceres who always knew that when she grew up she would design the drugs she and her friends were taking. To the surprise of many she actually achieved it – in an epic nootropic bender she designed a nanodrug cool enough to catch the interest of Jack. Since then she has been his student and lover, as well as test subject for many experimental petals in his circle. She trusts him implicitly, which might not be entirely healthy.

Xia is a brilliant gamer and petal user: she is a genius at figuring out complex worlds and systems of thought. If she really can master her abilities she might become a truly legendary artist, but for the time being she has some trouble linking together her amazing talent with the technical skills she needs. She is using nootropics, psychosurgery and petals to shift between different modes and personalities, but she still has to travel far before she figures out who (or what) she is and what she wants to create. Jack is currently trying to get her to make simple, clean-cut petals rather than the bizarre epics she tends to favor just to force her to learn to concentrate on one theme. Viscaria is the most successful of these “training petals”. Her main project is however Phalaena, “The Great White Moth Hunt”, a baroque and overwrought petal that involves far too many elements to make sense.

Living in Carnival of the Goat has widened her horizons enormously. While she has not yet gone for a truly custom morph, she is testing the waters with the new Sylph she got from the proceeds from Viscaria – especially the potential of drug glands. The morph is somewhere between classy and overwrought: her skin is covered with active tattoos forming a shifting labyrinth pattern that traps the eye and drags it towards her eyes, lips, breasts and sex (if paranoid viewers think she is running some kind of basilisk hack she will be very pleased). Different parts of her body smell of different vaguely intoxicating floral essences, while a plant-based fur coat derivative (almost a uniform among trainee petal designers) clings to her, flirting with passers-by through animated buds and flowers.

Stats: Xia Mandava

Petal designer; young genius

Morph: Female sylph. Voluptuous, Indian-looking, pigtails, labyrinth skin dyes.

Motivations: +Creativity (Xia loves to solve puzzles, invent things or see things differently), +Jack (Xia is deeply infatuated with her legendary mentor), -The Planetary Consortium (Xia may never have visited it, but she regards it as a hell of regulation, uniformity and imperialism).

COG: 20, COO: 15, INT: 30, REF: 15, SAV: 20, SOM: 10, WIL: 20

INIT: 90, SPD: 1, LUC: 40, TT: 8, IR: 80, DUR: 30, WT: 6, DR: 45

Skills: Art: Simulspace Design 60, Art: Drug Design 80, Art: Ikebana 50, Deception 50, Fray 35, Freefall 65, Freerunning 30, Infosec 30, Interest: Scum Drug Dealers 60, Interest: Petals 70, Interest: Gaming 70, Kinesics 40, Language: Hindi 98, Language: English 50, Language: Mandarin 70, Language: French 50, Medicine: Nanomedicine 50, Medicine: Pharmacology 50, Networking: Autonomists 80, Networking: Criminals 30, Perception 70, Persuasion 70, Profession: Petal design 70, Protocol 40, Psychosurgery 40, Scrounging 60, Swimming 50

Reputation: @-rep: 65, g-rep: 25

Ego traits: Exceptional aptitude (INT), Fast Learner, First Impression, Addiction (cognitive enhancers) (Level 2), Addiction (petals) (Level 1), Illiterate

Morph traits: Limber (Level 1), Striking Looks

Enhancements: Basic Biomods, Basic Mesh Inserts, Cortical Stack, Enhanced Smell, Circadian Regulation, Clean Metabolism, Drug Glands: Drive, Klar and Juice, Enhanced Pheromones, Grip Pads, Toxin Filters, Medicines, Scent Alteration, Skindyes

Gear: Neem, Mono No Aware, Orbital Hash, Frequency, Smart Clothing, Tools (petal design shop), Vegetable Fur Coat, Backup Insurance (mod), Standard Muse, Creepy (handles her drug stash)

Muse: Kisi, Notable skills: Academics: Botany 40, Art: Drama 40, Profession: Lab technician: 40

Melee weapons: Unarmed (Skill 10, DV 1d10+1)

Roleplaying tips: Play with people! See how they react! She is bouncy, active and guileless. She is also very perceptive and good at figuring out people – anybody expecting a harmless bimbo will tend to find themselves toyed with. To Xia life is a game, and the purpose is to have fun and expand the game. The idea that the game might have nasty repercussions has not yet hit her and will be deeply shocking.

Ending: The Day Before

*Death rides on every passing breeze,
He lurks in every flower.
Reginald Heber, At a Funeral*

Understanding the situation fully will help deal with the problem, but actually doing something is hard.

Just capturing or killing the currently incarnated Dark Rons will not solve the problem. It might be satisfying (but think about the poor possessed victims!), save lives, and send the right signals to the public, criminal groups and authorities, but Dark Ron is still out there in many minds. Given time he or another literal will show up again – especially if knowledge of what has happened becomes widespread.

Getting rid of a petal from the market is very hard. Obviously authorities cannot do much beyond ban it, but since petals are sold under the counter this will not have much effect. It might actually draw more attention to it. Criminal groups might agree on discouraging sale with more luck: if dealers get told they are going to get into trouble for selling Viscaria sales will go down. But it is a big solar system and many petal enthusiasts love collecting rare petals. Spreading harmless fakes might work, but connoisseurs are likely to notice and spread the word.

Perhaps the most effective way would be if Xia did something. All Viscaria petals download software from a network of distributed P2P servers she controls. It should be possible for her to spread an update that either trashes the encryption keys, completely killing the petal, or fixes the bug that causes fictionals. While theoretically somebody else could hack the P2P network this is a major undertaking (governments and anti-drug organizations constantly attack such networks, so they have evolved to be amazingly resilient and hard to find).

Convincing Xia about it might be somewhat tricky, unless she gets a nasty first-hand experience from Ron. While she is smart and willing to bend her imagination to amazing levels, she has a hard time imagining that something as elementary and obvious as Viscaria could produce such problems. When she realizes it is true, she will be enthusiastic. She is likely to view this kind of self-organization as a serendipitous find that really ought to be incorporated in more petals (without the murderous existentialist ghost bug, of course... or why not?) Still, she is not an idiot, and might go along for the sake of petal sales, Jack, or staying out of the sights of law enforcement or other creepy forces of order. She is unlikely to want to crush her petal, so she will be most willing to spread a patch that erases the fictionals.

Defusing Viscaria will give Firewall members +7 i-rep, law enforcement or intelligence officers +5 c-rep, and +3 to g-rep or @-rep for criminals or junkies. Some fans of Viscaria may however be annoyed by the shift from 'classic' to the updated form in the future. Preventing further experimentation with fictionals by Xia and other petal designers is worth +3 extra i-rep or c-rep for firewall or law-enforcement members. Spreading the story will give between +4 and +6 f-rep, depending on skill and medium. Saving Xia from the Dark Rons is worth +5 @-rep. For r-rep rewards, see the section "I will do science to it!". If characters discover the nature of Viscaria outside the lab they can in principle do the research (with a +30 bonuses since they now know

what to look for). If the characters don't do the research, but give enough information to a researcher that lucky academic will instead reap the rep benefit (however, the characters will also take the i-rep loss). Capturing Dark Ron and bringing him to justice (?) on Mars is worth +7 c-rep if both "petal killers" are caught, +6 if one is caught and one killed, +5 if both are killed or one escapes. Merely solving the case gives +4 c-rep.

Just blocking fictionals from being created by Viscaria might not be enough. They still exist as neural patterns within many minds. As long as they are not brought into full power by mindsharing with Viscaria they are not more dangerous than other widespread memes. But sooner or later a fictional will end up slipping out and possessing someone, and it is not inconceivable that other forms of mental linking (such as advanced simspheres, tacnets or neo-synergism) can have similar effects as Viscaria. From an existential risk perspective fictionals are not enormously threatening. But they do represent a new vector for mental viruses, subversion and insanity to spread. Figuring out what to do with the fictionals might be an important challenge. Conversely, as Xia might point out, there might already be fictionals in our subconscious thanks to *fiction* – we all have a version of Jesus, Superman or Sherlock Holmes in our minds. What if they got loose? It might be just a matter of time before technology sets them free.

Everything ends with flowers.
Helene Cixous



Image by Jerzy Opiola