



THE
Trillionist

a futuristic novel by

Sagan Jeffries

THE Trillionist

Sagan Jeffries



EDGE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY PUBLISHING
AN IMPRINT OF HADES PUBLICATIONS, INC.

CALGARY

The Trillionist
Copyright © 2013 by Sagan Jeffries
Release: Canada: Fall 2013 / USA: Fall 2013

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing
An Imprint of Hades Publications Inc.
P.O. Box 1714, Calgary, Alberta, T2P 2L7, Canada

In-house editing by Ella Baumont, Brian Hades,
Susan J. Forest and Matt Hughes
Interior design by Janice Blaine
Cover Illustration by Jeff Lee Johnson

ISBN: 978-1-894063-98-2

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without written permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing and Hades Publications, Inc. acknowledges the ongoing support of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts and the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing programme.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Jeffries, Sagan
The trillionist / Sagan Jeffries.

ISBN: 978-1-894063-98-2
(e-Book ISBN: 978-1-894063-99-9)

I. Title.

PS8619.E4447T75 2013 C813'.6 C2013-900451-3

FIRST EDITION
(M-20130820)
Printed in Canada
www.edgewebsite.com

Dedication

To the memory of Carl Sagan,
author of my favorite sci-fi book, *Contact*.

Prolog

GRAVITY SQUEEZED him into his seat and a deep throated growl filled his ears. He could barely breathe.

A voice crackled over the communicator, smooth, professional. Inside his helmet the amplified sound of his own breathing was offset by the steady rhythmic thumping of his heart.

“We have liftoff!”

The power of the massive three-stage rocket beneath him threatened to tear itself apart.

There was a moment of lessening roar and relative lightness as the first stage fell away. Then the rumble and shake of the second stage ignition, thrust, and eventual jettison, leaving the third stage to begin its slow burn, boosting Sage Rojan to where no Tidonese had gone before.

His home planet was miles below and the sight of the arching horizon and the star-splashed blackness beyond caused Sage to catch his breath. Memories flashed: his mother’s teary final goodbye, his father’s proud smile, and a lingering kiss from Tamara, who, as corny as it sounded, was always in his orbit and seldom showed any fear of the unknown.

He squeezed his eyes shut; waiting for the moment when the supreme Artisan noticed his presence in a place he had no right to be.

Chapter 1

NINETEEN YEARS EARLIER...

GENOSA ROJAN LEANED OVER the wooden bassinet that held her son and tucked the newborn's soft blue blanket tighter around him. The hairs on the back of her neck pricked.

The doctors had told her that an infant couldn't focus; would only see a blur of motion until the neurons in the vision center finished making all the necessary connections. But she was sure his emerald green eyes followed her every move, and had done so right from the moment the doctor had placed him on her deflating belly, even before his umbilical cord was cut.

"You're doing it again." Thaddeus leaned over to get a better look at their son, Sage. "Shrinking from him." The child's eyes shifted focus to his father. "He's just a fast-developer. Takes after his old man. I could read when I was three, you know."

Genosa turned the knob on the new Sound Box radio, something she didn't have when she was a child. Like so many other things, which, even if radio had been invented years earlier, her mother wouldn't have allowed in their house — dismissing such things as frivolous.

Genosa Rojan was doggedly determined that her son would have every possible convenience, from the soothing sounds of the radio to his warm woolly covers.

The baby watched her intently. "Three years, you mean. He's only three days old. Watch this." She picked up a plastic rattle from the bottom corner of the bassinet and shook it a few inches from the infant's eyes. Immediately, Sage's gaze locked onto the

toy. His pudgy arms stirred under the blanket and he abruptly and unerringly reached out to seize the handle. When Genosa didn't let go, the baby's grip tightened — she could see his tiny knuckles whiten — and he tugged at it with surprising strength.

"That's some kid," Thaddeus beamed. "I got him a welcome-home present." He produced a tiny knitted cap, with a stitched-in design of a spinning atom on its front. "When he's old enough he can be my assistant at the physics lab."

"That might be sooner than you think," Genosa said. "Glad I know diddly-squat about your new spinners. It's absurd that things are made up of invisible particles going 'round and 'round each other. All of them held together by some magic force. Speaking of which, just try to take the rattle away from him."

As she spoke, the baby's gaze left the rattle. His bright, deep-set green eyes went first to her, then to her husband. His little knuckles turned pale again.

"Did you see that?" she said. "I think he understands what we're saying."

Thaddeus' arm went around Genosa's waist and pulled her to him. "You've just got new-mom heebie-jeebies," he said. "Come on. Let the kid sleep so he won't be worn out when your folks get here."

"Sleep?" she said. "I haven't seen him take more than a five-minute nap since he was born." But she let her husband draw her away from the bassinette. She knew it was wrong, but she preferred not to have to look at her son for too long.

From her baby's first kicks, Genosa felt her unborn child would be a boy. At birth they named him Sage Iden Cosimo Rojan, respectively meaning wisdom, wealth, and bringer of order to all. When the nurse slapped the baby's bottom to start the breathing reflex he let out a cry that made the doctor jump.

Genosa relaxed into her husband's embrace. *Maybe I am just a nervous first-time mother. I've got a healthy son. His bits and pieces seem to be where they ought to be. And if he's stronger and more focused than other babies, how is that a bad thing?*

• Ω •

"They're here." Thaddeus had been peeking out through a split in the drapes. Now he closed them in a gesture of irritation.

"Thaddeus," Genosa sighed as she reached around him and fully opened the window coverings.

Her mother and father climbed down from the old family roadster. They were farm folk who had never quite warmed to the university physicist she'd married. Nor had Thaddeus grown to like them. She'd once overheard him at a faculty cocktail party refer to his in-laws as 'bumpkins.'

Though they struggled financially to make ends meet, Genosa never begrudged the love Thaddeus had for his collection of science books— or whenever he brought home new gadgets like the recent plug-in toaster. She didn't mind electricity making her life somewhat easier. She'd seen more than enough of the old times; hanging by one's fingertips to ancient ways and superstitions. As a youngster, she had tired of chores such as having to prime the pump to draw water from the family well. But mostly now she hated the way her parents disapproved of Thaddeus, making snide comments, seeing him as a dreamer who'd be better served to keep his head out of the clouds, as they put it.

Grandma Beth stepped briskly past her son-in-law, not even saying 'beya' to him and instead headed straight for the bassinette. "Gorgeous," she said, as she hoisted Sage into the air for an all-round looking-over.

"Careful, Momma!" Genosa cried. "He's easily stirred up."

"You always were a worry wart, daughter." Her mom smiled and put on a baby voice. "Grandma knows what she's doing." Beth went eye-to-eye with Sage, holding him right up to her face. "You're a tough little guy, aren't you?" Sage looked straight into his grandma's gaze. Again, a shiver went through Genosa. Beth handed the baby to his grandpa. "What do you think, Charlie?"

The old man took the infant in his work-hardened hands. The baby's eyes locked onto his. "He is sturdy, all right. He can help me on the farm when he's big enough to know which end of the mule gets hitched to the plow."

"Oh, Papa..." Genosa looked guiltily over her shoulder at Thaddeus, sitting back in his chair, fuming.

"Genosa, you know my stand on the matter. This city-slicking is best left to you jalopy lovers," her father went on, "Personally, I hate that noisy contraption of an invention. I still miss the old buggy. Never had to start a horse with a hand-crank. Ridiculous."

"It is inventions like that that keep Orlandia at bay," Thaddeus grumbled.

"Well they must not be doing a very good job, even us country folk heard about last week's raid. Another coastal town burned

to the ground." Her father shook his head. Sage started squirming in his grip.

"Here, let me, Genosa why don't you serve us some tea," said Beth, taking the baby back into her arms and settling herself onto the couch next to her husband.

"Price of fuel's gone up thanks to them no good pirates. I've already paid more for that beast's fuel than I ever paid to buy a new horse." Her father hooked a thumb towards the roadster.

Thaddeus shrugged, "The Royal Navy's spread thin, the pirate raids are bound to slip through, but still they refuse to attack us outright. It's because they wouldn't stand a chance against us on open ground. Orlandia doesn't have automobiles or combustion engines. Even the King's talking about developing a landing party of war machines to stop them once and for all. It won't be long, you wait."

Sage's tiny fingers had been wrestling with the brooch on his grandma's blouse, and he managed to undo the clasp. The sharp pin dug into his hand and he started howling.

"Now look what you've done," Genosa bustled back into the room glaring at Thaddeus as if her husband's words had sparked the chaos, "Give him to me." Genosa took the baby. "Feeding him's the only way to calm him down when he gets like this."

As she said the words, the crying stopped and the baby turned his head towards her, reaching strategically for a button on her blouse.

"Is he eating well?" asked Grandpa Charlie.

"I can barely keep him satisfied." Genosa freed a breast and the baby latched on.

• Ω •

"Have you been eating onions or too much garlic?" Thaddeus watched Sage toss and turn in the crib.

"He just doesn't want to sleep." How could Genosa be any more plain? "If I put him down he cries. If I pick him up he cries. If I leave him alone he cries."

"Let's just go to our room." Thaddeus looked as exhausted as she felt. "He'll eventually cry himself to sleep."

Genosa and Thaddeus lay awake until the crying subsided. Later, when it was time to nurse the baby, Genosa tip-toed over to Sage's bassinet and, instead of hearing the normal relaxed sounds of breathing, saw he was whispering to himself.

Her body trembled with relief as her milk flowed, and she softly sang a lullaby to the baby she wanted so much to love. But the song only seemed to enliven him. It would be another long night of walking him up and down, singing, talking — to wake exhausted at sunrise for more of the same.

No.

Tonight, she'd try a different strategy. She took him outside into the warm summer air. "See? That's our house, needs painting," she said, as much to keep herself awake as to soothe Sage. "There's the wooden fence your daddy built. Those are our saucer magnolia trees." She caught the fragrance of the pinkish blooms. "And next door, that's our neighbor's house. Pink, like our flowers. Crazy, don't you think?"

Sage's head swiveled and his eyes followed where she pointed.

She carried him, following the path to nearby Baxbury Bridge, traversing the slow-flowing waters of the Jalin Canal. The old bridge showed its age, weathered boards creaking as she crossed. "Porturn has hundreds of rickety old bridges above the canals. Did you know that? They're so beautiful. You're lucky to be born in such a subtropical city. See? I know one big word."

But the baby ignored her. Instead, he looked up into a sky filled with glowing stars. To Genosa, his gaze seemed millions of miles from her embrace. He pointed to the reflection of the moons in the canal waters and giggled.

Unbelievable. A happy moment.

Then, his little arm reached as if trying to touch the three crescent moons in the dark eastern sky and he screamed in frustration at his lack of success.

"Come little one," she said. "You can't touch a moon. Not any of them. They're too far away. Now, let's go home. It's time for sleep."

Sage wailed again, demanding to stay under the stars.

"Okay. Have it your way, my stubborn one," she said as she stepped softly on tiptoes down a few rungs to a gondola docked on the water's edge below the bridge. She knew the gondola's owner wouldn't mind. A swirled moustache of a man, she often saw him taking his wife to market days, poling his burgundy craft through the labyrinth of waterways.

In the gondola, she lay down on the bottom of the boat, allowing herself and Sage to feel the motion of the water beneath them. The inviting perfume of flowers floated over them as she

snuggled Sage close in beside her to keep him warm, making sure he stayed well wrapped. The rocking of the waters soothed the baby. Yet he was preoccupied, looking up as if trying to count the multitude of stars.

A light breeze touched her hair and slid across her skin. A soft murmur came from her baby, as if Sage whispered to the twinklers above, and she thought she saw one star pulsate. But, she was far too worn out to focus. She drifted, her thoughts troubled, as she wrestled with the desire to love her strange demanding child.

• Ω •

It was getting late. The fingers of Thaddeus' hand pressed pen into paper. "Dackt," he said aloud. "I'm not getting anywhere with this." Without realizing it, he'd been outlining the same word, 'Bang', for quite some time. *Such a stupid way to describe the origin of our universe*, he thought. *I can't believe everything just flew out into space and then coalesced out of the cooling gasses. Still, the sun, Sintosy, blazes away, a hot fireball keeping us warm.* "Bang." he muttered. "Utter insanity."

Thaddeus knew he should have been heading home but the deadline for his Tidonese Science Journal article was looming, and he was fumbling with fitting the workings of Sintosy into the Bang Theory — to which he gave little credence. "It's as dumb as the Flat-Tidon Theory used to be," he said to himself. "I don't know why I agreed to write this article. If I had a larger telescope I'd probably disprove it."

The late hour demanded his conclusion: '...and Sintosy is millions of years old.' But no sooner he had written down the words then he scribbled out the word 'millions' and jotted 'billions' in its place. *I might just as well go out on a limb*, he thought, *heretics are no longer burned at the stake just because they have crazy notions. Maybe someday I'll be able to actually see light coming from stars billions of light-years away.* Thaddeus looked at his watch, "Dackt, I'd better call home."

• Ω •

The phone rang ten times before Genosa had the energy to answer. Thaddeus asked if dinner was ruined.

She heard exhaustion in her own voice. "It's in the oven. Come home. I'm at the end of my rope."

She hung up. Today she felt as though she'd been through a war. She hadn't had more than a few hours of sleep in a row since the baby was born. She had planned, before Sage was born, to get back into shape as soon as he was settled, but the baby hadn't given her a break. The only blessing was that the constant stress had seen her post-partum weight drop.

• Ω •

Thaddeus lugged his briefcase through the kitchen door, letting the screen door slam shut behind him. He removed his coat, and rubbed a thumb across her moist cheek. "Oh, Genosa. Is it that bad?" He spoke as if he was afraid to know. "I'm sorry. The faculty has me glued."

She knew what he thought. Sage was just going through some phase. *It's only been two months. Give it a chance. Sure.*

"I..." She didn't know how to say it. "I... locked Sage in the study."

"What?"

"It's just... you're not here!" she sobbed. "You don't know—"

"But we got him a jumper." He took her hands and sat with her at the chrome kitchen table. "I thought—"

They had bought Sage a standing jumper — a harness suspended by springs from a tubular frame — which was intended to help a young child strengthen his legs prior to walking. They hoped he could bounce away his over-abundance of energy.

"He used it for a while, even seemed to enjoy it. But, then he started to do twirls. He got the harness caught around his throat. He would have strangled to death—"

"Oh, Genosa..."

She almost laughed; a crazy laugh. "Weird thing is, he was smiling a devilish smirk as I tried to untangle him."

"You're saying he enjoyed nearly killing himself?"

"I don't know what I'm saying." She threw her hands up in the air. "I'm too tired to think. As soon as I had the harness straightened out he did it again. I had to put the jumper away. He had such a tantrum. It almost sounded as though he was screaming words."

"Genosa." Thaddeus frowned at his hands on the table. "I think you're under a lot of stress—"

"Don't patronize me. Listen. Sage grabbed a chair, stood and pushed it toward me. A two month-old standing and moving a

chair?" The tears welled up in her eye again, and she couldn't hold them back.

Thaddeus put his arms around her and she sagged against him. "It's all right," he said. "We'll do something. Sorry, I didn't know how rotten it was getting. From now on I'll try to be here more. Take the load off you."

She kissed him and wiped at her tears. "You want to help?" she asked. "Lie awake tonight. Listen to him whisper in his sleep. Then tell me I'm not crazy."

"I will," he said. "And you're not crazy, just tired."

• Ω •

Thaddeus slipped from under his covers down to the floor, and crawled, staying lower than the side of Sage's crib. There he lay and listened, feeling somewhat idiotic, like a kid playing spies.

Faint sounds came from the crib. He peeked above the mattress. Sage was grappling through some sort of dream; tossing and turning in his crib, flexing and extending his arms and legs. He made sounds like words; but Thaddeus could understand none of them. One instant it sounded like a conversation, next it resembled a rant of exclamations. It went on for an hour or more.

Thaddeus woke, lying on the floor beside the crib. In the dull light before dawn he looked up to see his son's fixed gaze on him. As though the baby studied him. Shaking off the unsettling feeling, he crawled back into bed. Genosa was awake. "You're right," he whispered. "There's something strangely odd about our kid."