

The World Will End, Said the Cat

by David Larsen

"If you touch that, the world will end," said the cat.
"Just so you know."

In the darkness, it was hard to be sure, but Raff thought it might be a calico cat. Its voice was high and quiet and raspy, as though the cat badly needed to clear its throat.

"If you don't touch it, the world will also end, of course." The cat started licking one of its front paws.

There is no right response when you meet a talking cat guarding a large glowing egg in the middle of the night. Raff was a little breathless anyway from the climb. Māngere Mountain is not really a mountain. It comes by the name because it's a dormant volcano, and volcanoes always get called mountains – but Raff had come up the steep way before plunging down into the main crater and climbing the sudden little hill in its centre.




Here, there was a little dimple in the earth – a mini crater at the heart of the main crater, like ripples in a pond. People sometimes did karakia there. Raff had been planning to lie in this smaller crater and watch the stars turn until he felt tired enough to sleep. Then he would go back home and slip quietly into bed. His father told him he couldn't go out at night in the city, the way he did at his mother's, because this was Māngere, not the deep back country. There were street gangs.

Raff had been pretty sure he wasn't going to meet any gang members on a volcanic cone at two in the morning, and he had been right. He was not finding being right especially comforting.

"Cats can't talk," he said to the cat. It didn't seem a very clever thing to say.

The cat clearly thought so, too. "Since that penetrating analysis will be disproved by any response I might make, shall we chat about the end of the world instead?"



In the flickering light from the egg, which was the colour of spring leaves, the cat was mostly an outline, though there were hints of its markings. Its eyes picked up the green light and threw it back. Raff tried to tell himself he was dreaming, but the night air was cool and sharp, full of faint night smells and distant sounds – he could hear a blurring motorbike somewhere off towards the airport – and he knew that he really was awake. He'd read about people thinking they were dreaming when something strange happened, and it was a weird little shock under the bigger shock of the talking cat to discover that those books had got it wrong: being awake isn't a thing you can be unsure about. This was really happening.

"Why is the world going to end?" Raff asked.

"That depends on what you do next," said the cat in its mewling little voice.

"You said it would end whatever I did."

"Yes, very good. But was I speaking of the same end, and was I speaking of the same world?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Raff, pleased to find that he was now annoyed enough not to be afraid.

"Let us suppose," said the cat calmly, "that this is a moment when things can change. Perhaps I was sent here from somewhere else. Another universe, perhaps. Perhaps there are many of them. Perhaps universes are like little bubbles in an endless sea of foam. Let us suppose that in some other bubble of time and space, on a planet very like this, people learnt to open gateways from their bubble to another. Are you following me?"

"You're saying you are from a universe where cats can talk."

"Curious you assume no cats can talk in this one ... but yes. Or rather, no. I am not an ordinary cat, even where I come from. I was made. I am an emissary."

"Is that like what – an ambassador?"

"Not quite. An ambassador is a useful fiction. A man or woman pretends to be a government and another government pretends to believe them. An emissary is just a messenger. I was sent to find someone, which I have done, and to –"

"Wait," said Raff, "you mean *me*?"

"And to offer them a choice of futures. Yes, I mean you."

"Why me? What futures? Why *me*?"

"You because you happened by. The choice goes to the person who turns up. I was not expecting anyone before dawn, I must say. And certainly not anyone so young."

"I couldn't sleep."

"Ah. Well, sleepless boy, now you have a choice to make, and all the sleeping people of your world will be bound by it. Listen closely."

The cat stood and leant down until its nose was almost touching the egg. Its face in the unsettling light looked strangely vulnerable. "You see this? The people who made it call it a Pandora, though in some places it's known as a griffin's egg." The cat sniffed delicately at the egg, then sat back on its haunches. "If you touch the Pandora, it will hatch. It will send little tendrils down into this hill to tap its geothermal energy. You do know we're speaking on top of a half-asleep volcano?"

Raff nodded.

"Within a week, the Pandora will have used this energy to reshape the rock on which we stand into a great gateway. The gate will lead to a new universe. People can freely travel between this world and that to trade, talk, fight, learn new ideas ... After thirty days, the gate will blink and open onto a different universe. Every thirty days, a new universe."

"How will that make the world end?"

The cat made a peculiar little sneezing sound. It took Raff a moment to realise it was laughter. "There are two very different futures in front of you, sleepless boy. You may have the risks and the rewards of endless universes, or you may have the safety of the Pandora gate never existing. You may not have both." The cat yawned. "To touch or not to touch. A world of possibilities dies when you make your choice no matter what you choose. I admit, it's a slightly dramatic way of putting it."



"What do you mean, the risks?"

"In the history of your world, how many bad things have happened when people from different places have met?"

"Do you mean wars and stuff?"

"Wars? Hardly wars. Wars require more time than thirty days. But yes, violence does occur from time to time. Raids. Slave taking. Torture, and other atrocities. Plagues can spread if the new world's biology is sufficiently similar to yours. A subtler danger is learning things you would rather not and finding you can't unlearn them. We call this cultural destabilisation."

"So I shouldn't touch the egg."

"There are cures for every possible disease somewhere on the other side of the Pandora gate. There are whole new kinds of art, great works by the Shakespeares and Beethovens of other times and places. There are technologies that can stop climate change. There's every possible human thing and inhuman thing as well. There are worlds where the moa and the dodo never died."

"So I should touch the egg."

"I didn't say that." The cat settled down comfortably on all fours. "The choice is yours."

In the darkness, the egg glowed like soft green fire.

**illustrations by
Alexander Martin**

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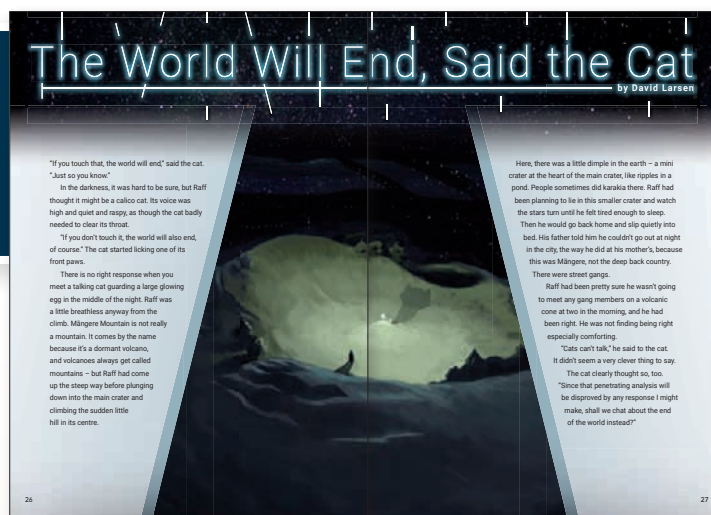
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