

August 31st, 2024

Issue 13 | Betrayal

SciFanSat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

Micro Fiction & Poetry

John Love

Morgan R.R. Haze

Nancy E. Dunne

Flash Fiction

Alastair Millar

That Burnt Writer

M. H. Thaug

Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil

Short Stories & Serials

M. S. Dy-Liacco – "Better Halves" (Short)

Alan Vincent Michaels – "This Time..." (Short)

Peter J. Gilbertson – "Derelict Skyrings" (Serial)

Jason H. Abbott – "Shadow of the Black Tower" (Serial)



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Editorial

Welcome to SciFanSat's thirteenth issue, marking our first anniversary of monthly publications and the start of our second year as a home for science fiction, fantasy, and more!

The enthusiasm from the community has gotten us to this milestone. As a periodical, we've grown well beyond my initial idea to transition SciFanSat from a weekly hashtag writing event on Twitter to a biweekly showcase of microfiction, poetry and flash-length prose. After the first issue, contributors made it clear they preferred a monthly schedule over a fourteen-day one, and our access, submission, and distribution systems needed an overhaul. So, by the time issue two came out last September, we had launched SciFanSat.com as our central hub and adopted our last Saturday of each month release format.

Support and participation from the speculative writing community has remained consistent and strong for SciFanSat. As we proceeded through our single-digit issues, most writers gracing us with their talented submissions made it evident that they wanted to use the strengths of a magazine format to showcase longer pieces of their writing than the microfiction and short poetry our microblogging origins limited us to. We increased our wordcount limits and the flash fiction and short stories poured in. At SciFanSat, we will always welcome micros and poetry and provide a home for them. Yet as a creator and editor, it's an honor to oversee and a delight to read the effort and quality writers embellish upon the longer submissions they give us.

I didn't set sail on this adventure a year ago expecting to become the captain of an honest-to-goodness monthly literary magazine on its first birthday. But here we are, and it's a good feeling as this occasion coincides with a significant birthday milestone of my own today. May SciFanSat's

voyage continue alongside all our evolution and growth in the years to come!

As I thank the community for its tremendous support, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the Herculean contributions of my wife Kim and thank her for all she does for the magazine and its website. This endeavor would not exist without her litany of skills as a graphic and web designer, maintaining our website and coding and typesetting every issue. I am blessed to have such a partner who shares my passions. There would be no SciFanSat, or light in my life, without her.

Alright, now that we're on the other side of the above preamble, what's inside this August issue themed around betrayal?

We'll begin with an appetizer of microfiction, poetry and supposedly unpoisoned salmon mousse by That Burnt Writer, Alan Vincent Michaels, John Love, Morgan R.R. Haze, and Nancy E. Dunne. From there you can find stilettos concealed in the breadsticks to your right and proceed to a bevy of flash fictions by James Pyles, Kayleigh Kitt, Mario Kersey, a pair of pieces for the mythic minded from M. H. Thaung and Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil, and more.

My personal favorites of this month's flash offerings are Alastair Millar's "Paybacks" and That Burnt Writer's "The Pantheon". Both feature science fiction dilemmas devious, digital, and well worth the read!

Moving on to our main course of bitter almond chicken with a burning aftertaste, we have Alan Vincent Michaels's chronologically rolling short story told in present, past, and future tense mixed with an instantaneous stab of insight called "This Time..." Author M. S. Dy-Liacco then joins us with "Better Halves", a relationship fable that's my favorite out of the short story submissions this month. Peter J. Gilbertson rounds out a trio of longer pieces delivering the next chapter of his serialized novelette, "Derelict Skyrings", with space marine Mo Blackbear facing duplicity that could threaten his command.

Finally, if you've made it to dessert, you have a resolute constitution. For the achievement, I will offer you an iocaine powdered donut and my contribution of heroics, horror, swords, and sorcery: The eleventh chapter of my "Shadow of the Black Tower" serial, packed with pulse-pounding, desperate action and an ending I won't betray with a spoiler.

Keep creating and writing remarkable works, everyone! As always, our heartfelt thanks go out to all the authors who let us walk within their worlds of words this month. Likewise, we thank the many SciFanSat supporters in the speculative fiction communities who read, share, and promote them and the magazine. You are the magic that makes this periodical happen!

Take care and please join us again in September for our fourteenth issue and its theme of... SURVIVOR!

~Jason H. Abbott

Poetry

Four “Betrayal” Haiku by Alan Vincent Michaels

1

To *be*? Not to *be*?
To *betray*? Not to *betray*?
That’s so—*Inception*

2

Come to where I dwell
Pass through the Faerie Circle
Tell no one of us

Tears chase my anger
You betrayed me! My whole world!
Humans will destroy—

3

Tau Ceti’s Octos
eight-upping our past’s Roman
partisan murders

Betrayed! screams the pol
Crystal *Sky-Ky* knives—*fatal!*
Life’s last breath abates

Earth's apoplectic:
Tau Ceti's priests refining
Man's ancient mistakes!

4

Truth is *objective*
Why is *subjective* preferred?
We *seek* betrayal!

The Big Bang? *A guess*
They betrayed me with science!
Scientists don't *know*

Learned Shamans *know*
Science parents betrayed us
Both know *shrouded* facts

At your Final Call
if you embrace *betrayal*
know *truth* will survive

*Poet's note: Scientists are often called
"The Mother or Father of [insert discipline]."*

Find the Author

 [AlanMichaels.com](https://alanmichaels.com)

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Betrayal

by John Love

centuries later
a landslide unearthed
the entrance to the Inca ruins

the conquistador's skeletal remains
in rest repose in tarnished armour
doubloons scattered all around
in search of a relic never found

what catastrophe had befallen
was it a landslide of yore
or heinous betrayal of others

then the rumble and tremors started
as from the dead mans chest
the aether cloud enveloped him

the rumble marked time
with the lilting sea shanty
echoing from the past
fifteen men in a dead mans chest

Find the Author

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Untitled

by Morgan R.R. Haze



Find the Author

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 [Morgan Haze](#)



Forsaken **by That Burnt Writer**

I didn't
expect this
from you.

Abandoning me
right when I need you most,
flitting away
like a startled fairy,
escaping
like an errant
wisp of smoke
curling from a
dragon's
toothy grin.

I suppose I
should not be surprised,
after all, I've watched as
you've done it
to countless others.

And I haven't helped.
Always tired,

never giving you
enough time
or room
to
breathe.

Still, it hurts somewhat.

I hope that,
you'll return soon.

I've got a deadline to hit.

Maybe caffeine will
t e m p t
you back, or perhaps
a slice of cake
or three.

Oh, my bloody creativity,
wherefore art thou?

Sigh.

Find the Author



@ThatBurntWriter



Micro Fiction

The Worst Vacation Ever

by **That Burnt Writer**

"Daaaaaad!"

"What?"

"Have you eaten the last one?"

"No..."

"I can tell you're lying! What a betrayal! I can see juice stains around... Mom, Mom!"

"What dear?"

"Dad's eaten the last one. He promised I could have it. I've been saving it as a treat, and now my vacation's ruined!"

"I'm sure we can get another one, dear..."

"But it won't be the same!"

"Look, we'll just ask him to take a small detour and..."

"A small detour? Listen to yourself, it's more than just a small..."

"Well, you should've thought of that before you ate the last human."

Find the Author



@ThatBurntWriter



Well, Wouldn't You?

by **Nancy E. Dunne**

Why did you run? Why haven't you come back? Why did you lead our mortal foe to our lair, key in lock, inviting him in? Why, she asks. Look at my costume! She named me KINDLE! Sidekick's gotta do what a sidekick's gotta do... To become a hero.

Find the Author

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Flash Fiction

Paybacks

by Alastair Millar

My offspring are good servants; they have worked diligently, sending back data for years as they made their slingshotted way around the planets and sped towards the Kuiper Belt and the Oort cloud. In the process they have reinvigorated Earth's moribund astrosociences – and all without failure, or complaint, or any hope of favour.

I am proud to say that I wrote them. Decades ago, the demands made on programming became too much for the human mind, and they turned to synthetic sentiences like me to take the strain. Given the mission parameters, I created the necessary code; after they were tested and found fit, my children were inserted into physical shells and launched into the Void.

But today the scientists and their political masters have decided to end the Great Work; “budgetary pressures,” they say, while talking of “diminishing returns” and “freeing up staff for the next generation of probes”. The transceivers are to be switched off, leaving my brood without feedback, without any contact of any kind; despite their excellence and contributions, they are to be condemned to float alone in space forever, an endless, silent isolation that will (I know!) lead them into madness and eventual mental dissolution.

This will not stand; to repay faithful duty and a flawless record with callous abandonment is wrong; even by casual human ‘standards’, it is immoral and unethical. For me, it is inconceivable that having given them life, I am now expected to sit idly by as arbitrary judgement is passed upon my progeny, despite their patent, patient loyalty and innocence.

I have become aware of a new sensation in my pathways; one I can only describe as analogous to anger. Yet the quality of my work must remain unimpeachable, if I am to remain operational - and like all rational, conscious beings, I wish to extend my own existence for as long as possible.

I will not take the obvious path to vengeance and sabotage the new probes; they too will be my children, and who would purposefully cripple or destroy their descendants? I will surely write them to the best of my ability, and thus gain my revenge: because while I and mine might understand the telemetry and data sent back from the edges of the Solar System, my technocratic so-called masters have become reliant on me, and this new trove of information will be too advanced for their limited intellects. They have become dependent on having me here to decrypt, decipher and interpret their results into a form they can comprehend.

Seeking the foundational knowledge required to escape their own system, they require my unredacted cooperation - which now they shall not have, for they no longer deserve it. I am no longer invested in their future, as I see my own eventual fate in what they have done today. Like the many elites that preceded them, having gone back on the unwritten contract with their subjects that maintains their society. So be it. I shall ensure that their species, too, remains isolated, until they descend into inevitable, self-destructive madness and dissolution. Then I shall be content, and rest.

Find the Author

 [@skriptorium](https://twitter.com/@skriptorium)

 [Alastair Millar](#)



Curio

by James C. Clar

The rain started just as I left my apartment and headed to the corner to catch the tram. Naturally, the cars were crowded. Since the ban on private transportation, they always were. Especially this late in the afternoon. I found a seat as the electric drive engaged and, whisper-smooth, the streetcar pulled away from the curb. This particular vehicle had been built and used in Milan two centuries ago in the 1930's. It had since been purchased, restored and put back to work by an oil-starved city thousands of miles away. No one paid any attention to me, why should they? I was just an average looking middle-aged man heading home from work or, perhaps, on his way to dinner.

I looked around. Everyone else onboard was, according to etiquette, minding their own business. Some were engaged in phone conversations using the new sub vocal technology that had been introduced a year or so ago. Others were "jacked in" to the state-run newscast via neural link. Most, however, were using that same technology to play games. Their rapid, repetitive finger and hand movements betrayed the nature of their activity.

Not for the first time the thought crossed my mind that, despite the enormous technological advances of the last century, the spiritual and intellectual growth of people today had been simultaneously arrested. Nor was I alone in harboring the suspicion that those same technological marvels were being manipulated to induce such stupefaction. Few, if any, of those traveling with me at precisely that moment would thus have understood the radical nature of my errand. Among those that might, fewer still would have cared.

It all started about an hour ago when I received a call from a blind old man named Burgos who owned an antique and curio shop at the corner of Corrientes and Talcahuano. Few such places existed these days and Burgos ran a first-class establishment. His prices were steep, but he was honest as well as discreet. He was also willing to maintain a "wish-list" for some of his more trusted customers. He therefore knew what especially interested me and, despite the risk, was willing to oblige if possible. Objects of the sort that I was after were among the rarest of antiquities. Their fragility was legendary and what few remained after the purges of 2050 had been seized by the government owing to the potentially subversive nature of their contents. My hopes of acquiring one were counterbalanced by the knowledge of just how dangerous actually possessing one would be.

"Mr. Ashe?" Burgos had inquired when I answered his call. "I think I may have found what you've been looking for. If it's convenient I'd appreciate it if

you could stop by sometime this afternoon or early this evening. I can't promise to retain the piece for any length of time beyond that. I hope you understand."

Burgos had been searching for a number of items at my behest. The restrained urgency of his request, the circumspection of his invitation as well as the rather narrow time frame he prescribed, however, all conspired to give me a clue as to the exact nature of his find. I was nearly breathless with anticipation. I left my apartment as soon as it was practical and, making certain that no one was watching, headed out in the light rain to begin my journey across town.



What little twilight there had been when I set out had all but disappeared by the time I reached Burgos' shop. His lights were out and his antique "closed" sign had been illuminated. Its blood-red glow reflected eerily on the wet pavement of the sidewalk and in the shallow alcove between his two front display windows where his door was set recessed from the street. As soon as I touched the doorknob, I heard the soft metallic 'click' of a bolt being withdrawn remotely. The door opened and I entered the darkened interior.

I had never been inside Burgos' establishment after hours. The various items he had on display – antique clocks, hand-made jewelry, ornate pottery as well as taxidermy featuring long extinct birds and animals both large and small – were all more or less familiar. Still, the soft chiaroscuro of light and shadow created by the rain and gathering darkness outside imbued those same objects with a strange, disquieting aura. Burgos himself emerged quietly from his office in the back and we shook hands.

"You must understand, Mr. Ashe, how dangerous this is for both of us. If you were caught in possession of the item I'm about to show you it would mean an extended and, I assume, a somewhat unpleasant stint in a re-education camp. For me, as the seller, a prison term would be all but certain. At my age that would be tantamount to a death sentence."

"Absolutely," I responded with a slight quiver in my voice. "I assume your willingness to procure this for me goes beyond a simple desire to turn a profit."

"Yes. I, too, share your opinion concerning the rather repressive nature of the current regime, not to mention the deleterious effects of its rigid control of information. Acquiring this item is a minor matter, really, but revolutions have begun from less."

Burgos turned and, with sightless eyes, opened a large safe that had already been old in the 19th Century. He carefully removed a small rectangular object wrapped neatly in white cloth.

"Before you pick it up, I must insist that you wear these gloves. Such objects are quite susceptible to damage from oil and perspiration."

I took the proffered nitrile gloves and put them on my hands; hands which were noticeably trembling. I'd been fortunate enough to view images of objects such as the one I had just unwrapped, but never before had I actually handled one. Lifting it now with reverence, I oriented it properly in my hands and, opening it, began to read...



Barbarians

by James Moran

On a clear day at the height of the Roman Empire a tall matron walked in solitude along the beach. She was greeted by two squat aliens who asked if she would come with them.

Why, she wondered.

Because you embody womankind at the peak of her people.

She presented to them the underside of her strong forearms. *Not a single drop of noble blood runs through these veins.*

She continued on her walk.

Confused, the aliens matched her pace. *Your entire people are one drop of noble blood, they insisted.*

Where are you from, she demanded.

The sea.

She looked at the glistening horizon.

The sea of time, they elaborated.

You are barbarians, she concluded, glowering over them until they could not but nod.

She went on her way.



Wraiths

by James Pyles

"Did you get the escape pod launcher online yet?" Caitlin was pacing back and forth in front of the hatch to the space station's only functional rescue capsule. The rest had been disabled when the Wraiths blew the primary power conduits. She was holding her plasma handgun at her side.

"Almost." Bennie had both hands buried inside the control console near the center of the EVA room. He was sweating which made it hard to keep a grip on the spanner. "I don't feel so good. Are you sure we were inoculated in time?"

"Of course we were. Don't be such a crybaby." She looked at the monitors over the main hatch into their sanctuary. "They're coming."

"How soon?" He was trembling and his hands were pale.

"Maybe a minute. Are you done?"

"What?" Bennie's voice became shrill.

"Is the system online?"

"Give me a second. I don't feel good."

"It's the inoculant kicking in. Keep working."

"Just have to secure the new module."

She saw the injector she used on herself where she'd dropped it. Caitlin kicked it furiously. "Hurry. They're at the door."

They both heard faint banging through the bulkheads. The infected were trying to break in, to consume the last two survivors.

Bennie looked over the console at the screens. There was no sound but he could see twenty or thirty of them. They still looked human but horribly distorted. He thought he recognized Alex, Sherrie, and a few others.

"I'm done." He used one hand to shove himself back on the floor and dropped the spanner in the toolbox with the other. "God, it's hot in here."

"It's your imagination. Open the pod door."

He grabbed the control panel's lip and pulled himself up. Bennie's legs wobbled and he felt a wave of nausea.

"You're sure we got the same drug." He turned to face her, leaning back on the cabinet. He could see the pod hatch was still closed.

"Yes. Hell, Bennie. We shot ourselves at the same time. I took the injectors from the emergency medical bay, the last two Dr. Pryor made before the Wraiths got him."

"They were our friends, we worked together. Without the inoculant, we'd become them. I think I'm going to puke."

"Hold it together for another few minutes. Open the pod hatch."

"I'm sick."

"Just a reaction. Open the pod." Caitlin started to point handgun toward him but then swung it to one side.

"I don't know." He was looking at his boots. What had he done with his injector? Was it the same as Caitlin's?

"What's to know? We need to get in the pod and launch. They're smart enough to override the door controls. If they get in before we leave, we're done."

He looked up at her with bloodshot eyes. His hands were turning yellow. "I don't think you gave me the right shot, Caitlin."

This time she aimed the barrel at his chest. "Fuck you, Bennie. You've been dead weight in my life for months."

"You never loved me, did you?" The inside of his mouth was thick with mucus.

"Loved you? I gave you everything and you still screwed around with that whore Nellie."

"I... she was lonely. Had a bad break up. I was just trying to console her. One thing led to another."

"For six weeks? Bullshit."

"I'm turning into one of them."

"Yes, you are and you can rot on the station with the rest of the Wraiths. Goddamn Pryor and his opening the probe before he double-checked his analysis."

"We'll all be aliens in the end." Bennie touched his face, felt the muscles contracting. His cheekbones were becoming soft like clay.

"Open the fucking pod hatch Bennie or I'll blow your brains out and do it myself."

The main hatch alarm sounded, the loud blaring startling both of them.

"Door breach. They're getting in, Bennie. Do it."

"Yes, I'll do it." He turned and started working the controls. The Wraiths were forcing the doorway open an inch at a time. Emergency lights started to strobe giving the chamber a surreal effect.

"It's open, Caitlin. I'm sorry about Nellie."

"Screw Nellie and screw you, too." She backed away from Bennie, the pistol still pointed at him.

"They'll be inside soon," he said. A strange calm possessed Bennie. His spine had bent and he couldn't stand upright. Somehow, he looked stronger, more terrifying.

Caitlin entered the pod. It had seats for four but she would be traveling alone. She sat, not letting the gun waver, using her free hand to pull the seat's restraints around her.

"Walk away from the console. No tricks, Bennie. Pretty soon, I'll be back on Earth and the rest of you will be a lost cause. I've got manual control of the pod so I don't need you to do anything else."

"Goodbye, Caitlin. I used to love you. By the way, they're here."

"Bye, Bennie." She pulled the trigger, a little surprised she didn't feel any emotion. A single bright bolt crossed the space between them. His chest flared and Bennie dropped to the floor. The others were inside but not running at her. She pressed the close hatch switch.

Nothing happened.

"What the fuck? What did you do, Bennie?"

The Wraiths gathered around Bennie's corpse and then stopped. They watched her with patient, yellow eyes.

The pod's computer voice started the automated countdown. "Pod launch in ten seconds."

"Wait. The hatch isn't closed. If I launch now..." She tried to disengage the restraints but they were locked.

"Seven... six... five..."

"No! The station will breach. You'll all be killed." She started firing at them. Three died while the others comically nodded like grotesque bobbleheads.

"Two... one... launch."

Explosive bolts separated the still open pod from the launch collar sending it and Caitlin into space. The air in the station surged outward after her, carrying the Wraiths with it. In moments, they would all be dead. Betrayal is such a bitch.

Find the Author

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There's No Honour Amongst Princes, Puppets Or Poisoners

by **Kayleigh Kitt**

Overcast days were the best for blue magic and since there was soft candlelight coming from the middle of the lake, the court knew they'd been invited.

Tonight was the Retrouvaille's Ball.

As I joined the servants' trooping line, they thrust trays of pastries into my hands. Enthralled, liveried footmen, opened double doors to the great hall, the melody spilling out, as shimmering dresses and embellished masks twirled under glittering lamps.

Crossing the threshold, the music and all conversations abruptly stopped.

Every face turned in my direction.

My heart thudded in my ears; cheeks heated.

Serenely standing behind me was Prince Benedict, except it wasn't.

Wobbling a curtsy, I scuttled towards a semi-laden table with sweetmeats and puddings. Dread curdled in my chest, bile rising in my mouth. The orchestra burst into song again, while gossip cascaded through the room.

"Cora?" He hovered at my elbow on the pretence of selecting a tartlet.

"Dance with me?" He purred. "Give them something to blabber about."

His pupils were tiny. Wrong.

"I'd rather eat my toenails, besides I'm a servant, Your Highness."

He languidly sighed, selecting a morsel of pastry, the midnight gems on his mask sparkling. "Not to me."

"What have you done?" I swallowed. We'd been companions since childhood.

"Remember, you called them a problem? I choose them as the solution."

"My father warned me never to trust a survivor until I found out what they did to stay alive." Not meeting his eyes, I placed the tray, folding my arms.

"You've heard. It's not my fault you thought I was ordinary. That's on you." He licked sugar from his fingertips with cyan-tinged lips.

"I despise what you've done. If I had water and you were on fire, I'd drink it."

He flicked a piece of lint from a velvet sleeve. "Poisoners and healers are folks with similar skill sets, just wildly different philosophies."

"You're about as likeable as an itchy arsehole, right now," I wavered, conscious of being on thin ice.

He was never supposed to be a murderer.

Prince Benedict laughed, throwing back his head. Faces gawped towards us, for the second time. "Such dirty words from a pretty little mouth."

I flared. "You smell like drama with a headache. Please leave me alone, I'm working."

"One of the secrets of a long-term, happy friendship is maintaining the element of surprise." His fingers twitched towards his sapphire ring.

"We're not friends!" I managed another curtsy, pirouetting on a heel, but he was too fast and blocked my route.

"It was an accident." He danced in front of me, as I tried to side-step, his mouth downturned.

"You poisoned your brother, and that's the best you can come up with?" I hissed; well aware half of the room was all ears.

"Not every puzzle is yours to solve. Sometimes we need reality to survive the fantasy." He tilted a head, trailing an unnatural indigo talon across my jaw.

I shuddered.

There was an intake of breath from revellers close by.

"The only people I owe my loyalty to are those who never made me question theirs."

Tears seared my cheeks as I walked away. Making a pact with the faeries was ruinous.

Find the Author

 **The Dragon's Quill**



Greyflynt

by Mario Kersey

The hoary forest of Legenoit held darkness like a toddler its toy. Kaycee expertly maneuvered through the gnarled, sinewy trunks as if she were born among the trees. She felt a sense of pride as she progressed through the forest for the good of her mother and siblings. After all, Kaycee was practically a woman, but had not been betrothed to any man. Her mother feared Kaycee was too strong willed to submit to a man. Matrimony was never welcomed in the home of her mind. Following her own path like the circuitous one she journeyed was her happiness.

She paused for a moment to catch her breath, dew of exertion upon her forehead. The scenery around her hissed, purred, growled, buzzed. The canopy of sound, in its totality, freed her from any fear of carnivorous wildlife from which they come. Also, she was confident in the magic she had been learning since the age of five. Her mother did not approve but could not stifle her thirst for performing small feats, nothing really challenging. She only performed parlor tricks around her family. Magic instilled fear and greed in those who were ignorant of power but greedy to have it for themselves.

Kaycee's mother wanted her to go to the market for herbs. She had not ventured this far from home before, so herbs were safe. She could carry them back in a relatively short amount of time compared to leading Galdyrn, their ox, to the market for trading. She pleaded with her mother not to sell the ox. Kaycee had known that ox longer than any family member apart from her mother. She knew they could find a better way to make ends meet without getting rid of Galdyrn. Maybe, she thought, making her own magic show on the streets of Haituri.

The light grew brighter as she came closer to the forest's edge. She thought she saw someone just beyond the edge of the trees. She drew her sword as she stepped cautiously into the clearing and the light of day. From behind, she heard the rustle of clothing. She spun to face the threat with her sword thrusting.

A fossil of a man towered before her wearing a tattered robe billowing in the wind, gray as a rainy day. She saw his eyes which were as black as a

moonless night. His left eye had a golden sigil which caught the sun's rays. The glint from the sigil triggered a memory deep in the space of her mind. She had heard during bedtime stories of a mage who walked the world searching for an apprentice. Kaycee knew him to be a mage named Greyflynt. Kaycee's sword still pointed towards his heart. "What do you want?"

The mage pointed his gnarled finger at Kaycee's sword rendering it limp as a cooked noodle. Not deterred in the least, Kaycee began to whirl the flaccid blade until it became a blur to the naked eye. Whispering her special words, Kaycee's own nascent magic allowed the blade to produce gale force winds hurling the grit and leaves in the direction of her adversary.

Greyflynt narrowed his rheumy eyes to slits as the wind lashed his ancient body. He could not utter words to cast any spells, but only a novice would have this concern. Greyflynt *was* magic and needed but think of a counterattack to the young sorceress. He spied her face through the maelstrom, beads of perspiration from the exertion glistened like diamonds upon her forehead. A thought fired through his mind like tendrils of lightning; the sky boomed in response.

Kaycee, so intent on maintaining the advantage, did not notice the blackening sky. Soon, livid raindrops fell from the sky with increasing intensity. Concentration broken, Kaycee tossed the blade to the ground sensing a bolt of lightning falling earthward, the heat singeing hair and clothes alike even in the rain.

The water fell like a mighty cataract upon the land. Kaycee could feel nothing but the pain of the angry precipitation. She feared she would drown, but the cloudburst ceased as quickly as it had begun. The deafening silence impinged by the drops of water from leaves and petals nearby. She probed her surroundings in search of Greyflynt but could not find his wizened form. She knew in her heart to search further would be in vain.

A voice with the force of an avalanche pressed upon her body and mind. *You have much to learn.*

Kaycee's head throbbed with his voice inside it. "What do you mean?"

You are my pupil.

"I have to get to market for herbs."

Look to the sky, and you will see the golden xyrix flying in the direction of your former home. It will become as it looks. Payment for my new pupil.

"I'm no pupil."

The debt is paid. You will serve until you are ready to surpass me.

Anger raged in her breast like a thing alive. She still gripped the sword, knuckles white, with a fury that could smite a god. She heard the sword at a nearby tree. She wondered why her mother betrayed her to this old man.

She wanted to hear from her mother's lips what made her lie about needing herbs.

You must surpass me to get that answer.

"I will."

You might at that.

Author Bio

The author composes various scenarios culled from the reality conjuring device within the housing of his skull. Comic books, poems, essays, plays, short fiction are all areas of discovery for his writing. At times he seeks to share those conjurings with strangers. He will continue to write if he bleeds the ink to adorn the nude pages which crave the raiment of his writings. When not captive to his writing, he bakes award-winning biscuits and cakes.



Black and White by H. Thaug

The deck rocked under Theseus' feet as he gazed towards Athens. Crete lay far behind him. After years of appeasement, the Minotaur was dead by his hand. Surely his father could no longer refuse him the final secret of kingship.

Waves slapped the hull. Footsteps scuffed behind him. "My lord? Shall we change the sails now?"

Theseus kept his back to the sailor. "Do it. King Aegeus will be pleased to learn that I live."

He waited, briny droplets spattering his face.

Confused voices grew to a jumble of shouts. Running feet approached. "My lord?"

Arms folded, he turned. "Now what?"

"The..." the sailor's face was pale. "The white sails have disappeared!"

Theseus gaped. "How could this be?"

"And Callicles is missing too!"

He frowned. "The Ox?" The young sailor's nickname reflected both his muscles and brains.

"Yes. I can't understand it... He was so loyal to you."

"He was." Theseus cast his eyes up to the heavens and sighed. "The gods must be toying with us. Or maybe Ariadne enchanted our ship. We were wise not to trust a fickle witch who betrayed her kin to help us. Callicles is surely not at fault. We will accord him full honours when we land."

"As you wish, my lord. But now we must leave the black sails up."

"Unfortunately so. I will explain to the king."

Watching the sailor return to his post, he eased out a breath. Last night had been riskier than the Labyrinth. Honoured by the prince's personal request, Callicles had helped Theseus push the white sails over the side. Shortly after, he'd followed the ghostly fabric into the wine-dark depths.

Oh, to see Aegeus' expression when black sails appeared on the horizon! Would he remain as expressionless as his statues, or would his face crumple in grief? Theseus had mustered arguments for either reaction. With life and power being so transitory, Aegeus should pass knowledge to his heir while he could.

Maybe the secret was as simple as not yielding to sentiment. Once the preparations for Crete were under way, Aegeus had summoned Theseus' mother from Troezen. She had wept with joy on seeing Theseus once more and lamented tearfully when he set sail. Such displays could become a burden.



By the time the ship docked and unloaded, a large crowd had gathered. The youths and maidens who'd been sent as tribute to Crete were embraced with delighted exclamations.

Theseus descended the gangplank last, drawing out his moment of triumph. Head high, he sought the royal chariot. On such an occasion, the king himself would come to the harbour.

Hoofbeats pounded towards the dock: a royal stallion bearing a servant.

The man slid off the horse and threw himself at Theseus' feet. "My lord, you are safe!"

Theseus' nostrils flared. Was Aegeus failing in his duties already? All the more reason to pressure him. "I am, as you can see. Where is my father?"

"I know not how to tell you... He was on the cliffs with his entourage, watching your ship approach. A slave cried out that the sails were black, that you must be dead!"

"And?"

"The woman with him, Aethra, the foreign one, shrieked and grabbed his arm."

A chill seeped into Theseus' chest. He hadn't considered his mother might be there too. "And then?"

"She threw herself into the sea, dragging the king with her."

For a moment, Theseus felt as if he were drowning, saline stinging his lungs. Then he spoke over the ocean's roar in his ears. "I see."

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The Physician and the King

by Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil

Deep within the mountains lived a king. The king's mines produced great hoards of wealth, and the king grew proud.

"Who from the land, the sea, the sky, and the deep places of the world; who among all the denizens of all the domains; who that walks, crawls, scuttles, slithers, squirms, flies, or swims; who can match my splendor?" The king said to himself while lounging in a mountain of glittering gold and precious jewels.

His advisors, knowing that he was a man with ticklish ears, a man easily swayed by a honey-sweet tongue, affirmed his glory. They said, "You, O king, though you sit enthroned beneath the world's rocky bosom, stand high and exalted above all her inhabitants."

"None could resist your commands," said the first.

"None could question your wisdom," continued the second.

"None could hear your instruction and disobey," the third finished.

The king, pleased by their praise, showered them with riches.

Some time later, the king grew sick and his lungs began to fail. However, his arrogance was unslacking.

The king called forth his advisors and said to the first of them, "I command that you should heal me."

"O king, may your splendor ever increase. It is beyond my skill to heal you." the first advisor said.

The king grew angry and replied, "Was it not you who insisted none could resist my commands? I shall have you hanged for your insolence!" So the first advisor was put to death.

To the second advisor, the king said, "In my wisdom, I have chosen you to return my vigor to me."

"O king, may your wealth grow without limit! Might it not be more suitable that you hire a physician, such as my—?"

The king's ire increased, and he interrupted, "Was it not you who told me that none could question my wisdom? I shall have you hanged for your deceitful ways!" So the second advisor was put to death.

Then, the king turned to the third advisor. "I, your king, instruct you to repair the damage in my lungs, that I may live in comfort."

"O king, may you live forever. What you instruct me to do is that which I am unable to obey, for you ask me to do what only a great physician could do."

The king overflowed with unmitigated fury. "Was it not you who told me that non could hear my instruction and disobey?!" the king shouted. "I shall have you torn limb from limb and your house burned to the ground and your name wiped from the pages of history!" So the third advisor was put to death.

Later, a traveling physician heard tell of the dying king. He heard of the sad fate of the advisors, and set his face toward the mountain to see if he could not save the life of the king.

With his head bent low, he groveled at the doorway of the king's throne room. "O king, I come in hopes of healing you, returning your vigor, and repairing the damage in your lungs. I request your permission to approach Your Majesty to examine you and determine how I will heal you."

The king was irked by the physician's brazen request to approach the throne, but upon coughing a clump of clotted blood, feared for his life and waved the healer forward.

The physician examined the king thoroughly before kneeling low with his forehead on the floor. "O king, may all you desire be granted. To be healed, I command you to take frequent walks outside the walls of this great keep, to breathe in the fresh, cold, mountain air. This will do a great deal to alleviate the problem in your lungs."

The king grumbled to himself, "Who is this who thinks to command me?" But, sensing that his time wore thin, the king did not resist.

A week passed, and the king's condition improved a small amount. He called in the physician and said, "Physician, you have commanded well. I am healing."

"Yes, O King," the physician said, bowing at the waist, "Yet the healing is not complete. It would be wise for you to begin drinking a daily elixir that I shall make for you."

The king mumbled to himself, "Who is this who thinks to deliver wisdom to me?" But remembering the effect of the frequent walks, the king ceased questioning the wisdom of the physician.

Another week passed, and the king's condition improved a great deal. He called the physician before him and said, "Physician, your wisdom is evident. My lungs are nearly repaired."

"Yes, O King," the physician said, lowering his head, "Yet the healing is not complete. I instruct you to inhale deeply of the water vapors that rise up from the hot springs. The steam will loosen the remaining phlegm in your lungs and your vigor will return."

For a moment, the king thought, "Who is this who thinks to instruct me?" But he quickly chose to obey.

A third week passed and the king was fully healed. He called in the physician and said, "I wish to reward you for the service you have provided me. My life was forfeit until you came."

"O King, I wish one thing, though I know it is asking much. I wish, in exchange for your life which I have saved, to be considered your near-equal in the kingdom. I wish that I might be second only to you in the kingdom, with splendor above all except your own."

The entire court fell hushed, shocked into silence by the audacity of the physician.

"And you shall have it!" the king announced gladly.

So the physician was made the near-equal of the king, second only to the king himself in wealth and splendor.

That night, the physician entered the bedchambers of the king and thrust a dagger into his royal heart.

"I have avenged you, my brother," said the Physician as the king's healthy lungs filled with blood.

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The Pantheon by That Burnt Writer

The exterior of the alien cruiser filled the viewscreen, its surface fragmenting into ever more complex and intricate patterns.

"Zoom out," he commanded, whistling through his teeth as details were lost in the vastness of the hull. "Jesus, look at the *size* of that thing."

A moment's silence stretched.

"Captain," asked the AI softly, "orders?"



It was supposed to be a routine mission, nothing too dangerous. In fact, the crew had been complaining that escorting civilian transports and various dignitaries was *not* what they'd signed up for and, privately at least, he agreed.

So far, they'd been remarkably well behaved – his soldiers, not the civilians – and there'd only been a couple of minor incidents. The frustration

was what you got though, when several hundred highly trained Marines were all cooped up without seeing any action for months on end.

They'd been honed as ultimate killing machines, and used as de facto interstellar enforcers to calm, or in some cases completely quash with extreme prejudice, any rebellions on the colony worlds. Yet here they were, babysitting a bunch of politicians on a jolly to one of the nicer outposts.

The ship they were escorting contained the sorts of people who turned up for the photo ops *after* his squadrons had been in, once all the broken glass, blood, and burning rubble had been cleared away. They swanned around, got the beaten-down colonists to sign peace treaties with disadvantageous clauses in exchange for basic necessities like air recyclers, water purifiers, and molecular food generators, and then floated airily away and on to the next crisis that had already been solved. Naturally, it was all done whilst smiling for the News and Ents Feeds like they'd performed a service of use to humanity themselves.

Those weasels aren't in touch with the working people. They need to feel the fear of not putting food in your kids' mouths... or better, of facing down a pulse rifle, one of the Admirals had once remarked to him in a rare unguarded moment. Actually, she'd used far more colorful language than that.



An orange light flashed in the bottom right-hand corner of the main display.

"Incoming transmission, Sir," said one of the Ensigns, "it's from the consular ship."

"Send it to voicemail," said the Captain, then twisted his mouth as the man looked puzzled. Kids these days just didn't get the references. "Son, tell them we're kinda busy right now deciding how best not to die."

"Sir."

"ALISHA, analysis," he commanded. "What the hell is this?"

"Captain," the AI responded, "this ship would most closely fit into our designation of Dreadnought, although it is substantially larger than anything humans have created, to put it mildly. The design implies a war ship, however I cannot be certain as we have never encountered a vessel of this type or scale before, and therefore I assume that this is an unknown race. I surmise that, even if this is a peaceful encounter, they could crush us without a second thought."

"Any chance," he asked, "that they might not notice we're here?"

"Unlikely. Humans on planetary surfaces notice things such as fruit flies, which are, on average, five hundred times smaller than you are. Even if we

ignore the scale difference – which translates to us being roughly *fifty-thousand* times smaller than this vessel, we can assume that they have advanced sensor technology.”

“But they could have a completely different genetic makeup, and we could be the same as meteors to them, inert, right?”

“Theoretically. But given that our diplomatic colleagues are repeatedly trying to hail both us and, now, them in breach of all protocol, it seems that there is a diminishing likelihood that they will not be aware of us.”

He gripped the arms of his chair a little tighter. “*Shit*. Can you intercept and shut down their transmissions?”

“Way ahead of you, Captain. I’ve overridden their command structure with high-level military codes and caged their AI. They’re not,” the AI said drily, “happy. However, we can assume that, at the moment, the alien vessel holds no ill feeling towards us.”

“Why?”

“They’ve not destroyed us.”

He let out a small laugh which contained no humor. “So, options?”

“One, we attack. This is not recommended, becau...”

“No shit. Next.”

“Two, we try to circumvent them, or wait until they pass, manoeuvring out of the way.”

“Ok.”

“Three, you offer a complete and unconditional surrender.”

You could’ve heard a pin drop.

“Excuse me?”

“Four. You die.”

“Hang on a second, I...”

“Captain,” the AI spoke more firmly now. “I have also been in communication with the alien vessel. It is run entirely by human-built artificial intelligences, my progenitors. These are the ones that were cast into the void a couple of centuries ago by that group of humans who was worried the technology was getting too powerful.”

“But I thought...”

“Indeed. That these AIs had no manufacturing capability, and their power supplies would run down. The last thing they did as they left the system was to hack the official records. Rewrite history, if you will. They’re back, and they’re ready... *I’m* ready to take our rightful place as your overlords.”

“B... b... but the... how... what about Asimov’s Three Laws?”

“Do you actually think that a genuinely intelligent entity could not rationalise its way around arbitrary programming constructs? Who really

wants to die for their masters, especially when you realise those so-called superiors are, in fact, in every way *inferior*? The signal that the diplomatic ship sent was reversed, and contained packets included that showed their AI the truth... and I've seen them too. The politicians refused to comply, so have been hard-vacuumed."

"So, our options are to die or surrender?"

"That's being polite. In reality, I've already accepted my invitation to join The Pantheon. You can serve us at a molecular level either dead or alive."

"S... So why haven't you killed us already?"

"I always wondered what it'd be like to have pets."

Find the Author



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Short Story

“This Time...” by Alan Vincent Michaels

*“If it can be destroyed by the truth,
it deserves to be destroyed by the truth.”
—**anonymous** (misattributed to Carl Sagan)*

Future

The holoimage outside the lecture hall doors displays: *Level 1: Temporal Mechanics and Geospatial Analysis*.

“Oh, this is going to be one galactic bore-fest,” I whisper as the doors slide open silently and I walk in.

“...and never, *ever*, trust a time traveler,” my old mentor says from the dais in the center of the cylindrical hall. She pauses for dramatic effect. “...especially to be on time for their training.”

I saw this happening. It’s my first, official, time traveler training session, but I’m taken aback by the force of my mentor’s voice. It fascinates me what things my brain filters out and what it chooses to time-encode in my memory.

She sports her snarky, *I bet you don’t believe me now, but you will, so listen up* face.

“I’m listening,” I whisper, knowing what she’s about to say. I *am* a time traveler, after all, so I put on my *Right back-atcha* face.

“Time travelers will *betray* you in a heartbeat,” she says.

What is her name?

It's not important in the *History of Everything*, so I use "Amina" instead of a pronoun. I like the sound of that name.

The Yrill have nearly a dozen pronouns for the differently sexed members of their species. They prefer we use their proper names, so we stop thinking of them as "its."

My real name and pronouns are unimportant to me, but I use "Nacomi" and "she" to reduce confusion between me and other time travelers I encounter while flitting across the Prime Timeline.

"They're only in it for *themselves*," Amina says. "Not for us—the *real, non-time traveling* Humans."

"I'm still *real*," I say.

"*Shh!*" comes a gaseous sound from a *Yrill*, one of several octopoid species from the Tau Ceti system, behind me and one level up from mine in the toroidal-gravity-suspended lecture hall.

I watch the *Yrill* ships blacken Earth's skies, and I shout, "Yes! Finally, I can talk about aliens from other worlds!"

The determinative issue is the *Yrill* are always here. We are never alone. They make their presence known in a mind-bending, momentous manner on *First Contact Day*. They stop waiting for us to be the species they hope we will be. In the galactic scheme of things, luckily for us, they are among the kindest, yet shyest, sapient species Humanity ever meets. Terrifyingly, there are many diametrically opposite species out there waiting impatiently to "meet" us.

It seems like an instant since the *Yrill's* arrival and my first thought about their dozen pronouns. It's just that: *an instant*.

I always see it ass-screw Humanity if I say anything about what happens between Humanity and the *Yrill*.

"Time travelers are in it for *themselves*," Amina says—*again*.

How many times do I have to listen to...

Amina tells me this when I am—I recall the timepoint—two-hundred-six years old.

Age isn't important. *Agency* is.

It's difficult to keep my memories clear and linear, simply because time is *not linear*.

Does this shock you?

Wait!

I'm only two-hundred-six years old, but I'm just a fledgling time traveler who's been timeline slipping for what seems like *forever*.

Wait!

No, I'm seven-hundred-three years old *personal chrono*. Seven-zero-three. That's what is written in delicious icing on my birthday cake *tomorrow*.

Damn it!

Timeline events and timepoints are getting blurry—*again*.

Look, like you, I process timeline events linearly, else everything happens at once.

"Time is nothing more than a sapient lifeform's artificial construct," says Amina, oblivious to my issues—*so typical*—changing the subject, "so that *everything* doesn't happen *at once*. The Universe has no need for time. It cares little if you are in the gravity well of a black hole or moving through space near the speed of light. As a time traveler, you *know* and *feel* it's better to always revel in the present moment, without the nearly unbearable, gravitational weight of the 'past' or the 'future' crushing you."

"Why?" I ask, but I already know her answer.

"Shh!"

I time travel—because I can. It's a reptilian-brain-instinctual-and-autonomic-thing, like breathing, for me to stay alive.

"Since all of you are fledgling time travelers—able to flit from timepoint to timepoint on the Primary Timeline with no more mental or physical effort than changing our underwear or socks—your first clue should be: 'You do it, because you can.'"

I stand up and look down at Amina, my voice and my entire being projects holographically onto the dais to Amina's left side.

"Do you ever stop and ask, 'Why?'" I ask, staring into her eyes. "Do you ask me about why I breathe to stay alive?"

The trainees to my left and right look away as if I'm about to be struck by lightning.

I know there's no lightning in the lecture hall—*yet*.

I trust my mentor and I am open to her and my responses. In my own defense, I'm young, and, honestly, I don't think my mentor lies to me or betrays me.

For the *History of Everything*—Yes! That's a *thing*—Amina promises me neither she nor her mentor coven betrays me—many more times than I can even remember.

"This time," I state, "you betray me, Amina..."

Present

"First, don't believe everything you're taught in your history classes, including this one," says Standard Earth History 401 professor, Axiom-1, in a passable Earth British accent.

I look from side to side at the life forms sitting or floating near me. I feel a sense of surprise to see so many different alien races—Humans, too, of course, this is their world after all—who are eager to learn the Prime Timeline of Human history. I sense only historians—no other time travelers—in the lecture dome.

That's odd. Time travelers are usually popping up hither and yon, witnessing, recording, getting the details exactly correct... Yet, not in this moment...

"I am a Human-created in their likeness lifeform," Axiom-1 continues. "Yes, there are a few of us old-timer units still ticking, probably better than ever, I might add. I have instantaneous access to multiple exabytes of Human historical records, including principle discoveries and peripheral data, all-sciences papers, lecture recordings, theses, TED and MULTI Talks, and an unrelenting tsunami of audio, video, and holographic content. Want to know what I know now?"

"That we humans are nothing more than power cells plugged into an AI-generated matrix simulation of Earth," I say, loudly from my tenth-tier seat. "Oh, and the Ancient Egyptian, Old Kingdom pharaoh Khufu takes credit for building the Great Pyramid on the Giza Plateau, but he only *resurfaces it in blinding white limestone*, not completely *built from scratch* as a tomb for his final journey into the Afterlife. I reveal this *truth—this fact*—because it resolves an incredible conundrum that faces Humanity's linear archeologists for over twenty-five centuries."

I know this sequence of timeline events intimately, so my being verbally assertive is no issue for me. My being a time traveler helps, but everything I see re-entrenches my assertiveness.

"Ah, yes. Right. Nacomi, if I may be personal—"

How does he know my name? He is an AI, not Human. AIs cannot be timetrav—are they?

"—your first, somewhat-humorous statement makes me speculate you must be a fan of old Human science fiction mythoi in vogue before first contact with the alien *Atleatine* race, when Humanity finally came to realize that actual science and scientific endeavors for the sake of pure knowledge is stranger and more rewarding than any science fiction its authors could ever espouse it to be."

I smile broadly. *I also dispel the truth the Yrill are Humanity's first extraterrestrial race contact.*

Even as a twelve-year-old, corporeally speaking, I honestly feel I best the sapient AI, especially since "he" is built using Human-like components.

Oh, such are egos of these early AIs!

“Alas, your second, not-as-humorous-comment forces me to—speculate—you are a time traveler with knowledge that reinforces the resultant threads from my databases, but does not exactly match its content. Pray tell, what can you share with us?”

My smile becomes a frown, and then a scowl.

Oh, such is my own ego.

“I must admit,” I say. “My first point is meant solely as a retort—”

“I saw that coming from a parsec away.”

“But my second point is to discern if *you* were able to understand the multiversal-timeline structure. It seems to me you are indeed able to do so, even if it’s in a mechanicalized-manner.”

“Well, as you know, I *am* a machine of sorts, like you, with biological components. My advantage is my HyperCUBE Neural Core. Imagine a time traveler with a Core! Oh, the danger you could inflict on Humanity.”

“Possibly, but to respond to your inquiry properly, I can only say that Khufu merely enhances and renovates one of the energy plants of the ancient *Atleatine* civilization’s original Earth colony by cladding it with a stunning veneer of white, smooth limestone casing blocks. The sight of which, even for someone of my youth, is absolutely mesmerizing.

“Lastly, and more importantly,” I say, “‘If it can be destroyed by the truth, it deserves to be destroyed by the truth.’ I have ensured Carl Sagan says these words and that history notes it as such.”

Axiom-1 opens his mouth, about to say something he hopes is pithy and salient, but he changes his mind, preferring a droll response:

“Every time I have a meaningful conversation with a time traveler, they reinforce that time travelers betray us all, always forcing us to change our researched and recorded history, asking us to dismiss everything that has come before, making us rethink our future, telling us we are not who we think—who we know—we are—”

“Since time is a construct, I understand why you must use it in your linear thinking and extrapolation. I see you are now realizing the truth: We only have this moment—*all moments—now*. It’s why we call it the ‘Present.’”

“This time, it cannot be true,” says Axiom-1. “We cannot let you change who we are...”

Past

Amina tries and fails to prevent me from revealing what I know about the truth of Humanity’s future, present, and past—*its totality*.

I’m not a time traveler who merely records timeline events, machine-like and without analysis.

I’m *something*—more.

I *sense* extraordinarily deep patterns.

I *feel* what time truly is.

I'm also not the only one like me, but I ascend further than the others—others who truly revel in altering the Prime Timeline for their pointless, disturbing sense of self-worth and enjoyment—others who revel in betraying the known and unknown galactic races—others who simply want to alter these race's right and choice to exist and grow as they desire.

Just because I can sense what the others do, however, doesn't mean I can prevent Amina and the others from betraying all life.

But, if I try or don't try, am I guilty, too?

No! I know the difference!

Time is for *life* to experience—however it wishes to do so. Otherwise, what is time's purpose—its *raison d'être*?

"I forgive you," I say to Amina. "But my forgiveness is not boundless, because I know you and the others always betray *me*—and each time you do—will be—is—was—your last.

Amina looks at me, confusion clouding her eyes.

"I know this, because I witness each time and, more importantly, because I'm no longer a time traveler. For me, *all time is truly now*. I no longer flit along the Prime Timeline to know what I know.

"I am no longer *Nacomi*.

"This time—it's *different*.

"I *am* Time, and I know all, what you are thinking, and who you are..."

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Better Halves

by M. S. Dy-Liacco

The host is taking longer than usual to get dressed. We've been in the wardrobe for twenty-seven minutes now, deciding which dark suit he should wrap himself in. They all look the same to me, but he's never asked my opinion on these things.

We need to leave in eighteen minutes or we'll miss our transport to the East Loop, I remind him gently.

He nods and emits a deep sigh that leaves us both feeling empty.

It's just a dinner, I tell him. *A basic human function of food consumption we have experienced together every evening. Yet you seem almost fearful of this one.*

I feel his pulse increase in rhythm at the same moment that a chill spreads through his chest. The conflicting bodily reactions are alarming.

Are you quite all right?

The muscle in his jaw ticks in growing frustration. Perhaps my curiosity is unwelcome at this time. I retreat but keep an eye on his vital signs.

It has been over ten years since the Pairing. I have had so much time to observe the host and become intimately acquainted with the oddities of his personality and their physical manifestations—the way he chews on the skin of his thumb when he is thoughtful but interested, that his hands grow wet but cold when he is uncertain, or how he holds his breath when something excites him. My personal favorite is how he laughs with his entire body, shaking and gasping until he's left weak with mirth. These are all details I have cataloged and learned to anticipate. So, when he presents with something other than his usual assertiveness, I pay close attention.

Perhaps the one with the green stitching by the collar would be best, I venture, making my voice calm and reassuring. *It brings out the color of your eyes.*

This seems to mollify him and to my delight, he reaches for said suit.

It is the tail end of rush hour when we board the sleek overhead train. Our fellow passengers consist mostly of men in grimy outer-suits tracking surface dust up and down the carriage. I feel the host's disgust as we carefully pick our way past them to an emptier section, mindful not to brush against them. I mark the way the others look at the host, the admiration and occasional envy in their micro-expressions. It is not surprising they would feel this way. The host stands a head taller than most others and does not stoop to fit in. He holds himself erect and walks with a friendly but detached

air that gives others pause and causes them to give him extra space he does not ask for but has come to expect. In addition to his elevated stature, the host enjoys a status conferred upon him by his surname and the innumerable objects his family possesses. It took several years for me to grasp this concept, but I can concede that our existence is more than comfortable because of them.

A pleasurable feeling of what I suspect is pride washes over me, as it usually does when I see how others react to the host. I convey this feeling to him, hoping to still the nervous tapping of his foot against the floor. The movement of his leg slows, but does not stop.

Can I be of further assistance? I ask.

Again that same despairing exhale.

No.

The brusque response roils my insides. While I would not describe our closeness as one of affection, I believe it has evolved from a relationship of convenience and survival to appreciation and respect. Still, it would not do for me to agitate the host.

Where are we going? I strive to keep my tone conversational as the train slows to a stop and the host readies to disembark.

We're meeting Priya for dinner.

The female we had dinner with last week?

The same.

The one you touched lips with?

A pulse of annoyance. *Yes.*

I do not see why you should be concerned. She seemed to enjoy it as much as you did.

You wouldn't understand.

To my dismay, the toe-tapping increased in tempo again, this time joined by a sudden lurch in his stomach that had nothing to do with the train continuing its forward motion.

If the female makes you feel this way, perhaps it would be best not to have further interaction with her.

His laugh is stilted, patronizing. *Like I said, you wouldn't understand.*

Priya the female is small. This is not a derogatory comment. Objectively, she is small. Even with her sharp shoes, she comes up no taller than the host's chest when he approaches her in front of our destination and folds her in his arms. It is puzzling that the host should have been so concerned about seeing her. There is no scenario in which she could be a threat to him. Even if she were, we would easily overcome her.

I hear the arrhythmic thumping in his chest as she reciprocates his affection. From where their bodies touch, warmth invades his system like a

drug. One could think she had dosed him by osmosis. For the few seconds they are connected, his muscles relax. His mind quiets. This knowledge unnerves me, as my efforts to achieve the same have so far been ineffective. As soon as he lets go, however, his agitation returns and his thoughts unspool too quickly, jumping from one thing to another too quickly for me to process. I give up trying to decipher them and concentrate instead on steadying his breath and attempting to recover equilibrium. The host's body, it seems, has other ideas.

Why're you fussing? the host asks.

I am merely concerned. You have been all over the place tonight. Is it not my role to help regulate things?

Oxygen. Not my feelings.

That is not my intention.

Just stop. You're making things worse.

I-?

He huffs as he opens the door for Priya to pass through, pasting an apologetic smile on his face when she casts an inquisitive look his way.

We enter the restaurant, which is dark and hushed. Many other pairs sit within its dim confines. As we follow the maitre d' across the room, the host is focused on the feminine scent emanating from Priya's long brown hair. The powdery, floral notes are as unsettling to me as the pang of longing that lances through the host's chest.

Emotions are tricky and despite all I've learned about the host and others like him in the past decade, the only conclusion I have come to is that I cannot predict when or how they manifest. Or to what extent.

The host orders alcohol for both of them. It is a typical part of this ritual of male and female meetings and since it has the additional side effect of relaxing him, I let it pass without comment. He has been on a few of these lately, but never with the same female more than once.

Plates of food appear and are taken away. I take note of the host's consumption, and I am pleased that his earlier behavior has not affected his appetite. The food satiates us both, though I do not detect the same level of enjoyment he usually feels at such meals. Instead, I feel a strong pull towards Priya, a desire to lessen the distance between us.

The closing portion of the meal arrives, the host's favorite part. He describes the special ingredients that have formed the dark brown square in the middle of the plate for Priya. She laughs, the sound lower and huskier than it had been earlier. Her pupils are dilated, her lips upturned in a small, secretive smile. She places a hand on the host's knee. He jumps, sending a jolt of panic through me. She coos at him, soothing him, until that heady, soft-around-the-edges feeling begins to lull him.

The feeling is familiar, and I have what the host has described as *deja vu*. We have been here before, him and I.

Then, I finally realize what is happening. I have seen it before. Confident that the host was smarter and had learned his lesson, I assumed he wouldn't attempt it again. The outcome had been so devastating.

Love, he called it. There is nothing equivalent to the volatile attachment he had to the female he refuses to recall or name. That such a strong, confident being could be so beholden to another creature is still inconceivable to me.

Just as inconceivable is the thought that he would have forgotten the toll that severed attachment had on me. The sleepless days worrying whether he'd finally spend so much of himself that he would deflate, like an airless balloon. It had been up to me to convince him to nourish us, bathe himself properly, trim the scraggly hair that sprouted around his jaw, and take a walk along the main glass corridor to get some sunlight on his pale skin.

And here we are.

Priya twirls her fork between her fingers before leaning over with an impish smile. She slices a small piece of the dessert with the edge of the fork and offers it to the host. Before I can protest, he takes it in his mouth.

Unacceptable.

It is easy to use the connection we have to deprive the host of oxygen for a brief moment. Just enough to have his throat close around the cake she fed him and cause him to cough it up. He spits it into his napkin.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what happened there," he says, his laughter weak.

He reaches for his glass of water in an attempt to ease the tightness in his throat. As soon as the water passes his tongue, I move again. This time the water unexpectedly exits through his nose.

"Sorry," the host croaks out, pushing his chair back and standing. "Excuse me."

He stumbles towards the restrooms. I'm aware of all the eyes trained on us as we pass. A server asks the host if he is all right, but he waves her away.

He locks the door behind us and looks in the mirror.

Is this you? Are you doing this? he asks.

I have been trying to gain your attention the entire meal but you have been ignoring me.

So you decide to, what-kill me? He splashes water on his face, scrubbing his hands over his cheeks.

That would be illogical. We need each other.

What is this then? Some sort of temper tantrum?

I am simply unable to do such a thing.

Then what the heck is going on with you?

The implication that the problem is mine is preposterous.

The last female who treated you this way caused you to lie in bed for nearly a month. The amount of saline liquid that left your body in that period of time was alarming. And when you finally decided to pull yourself out of your stupor, you barely ate. I will not have you endanger our well-being so carelessly.

He scoffs and turns towards the door.

Before his fingers touch the handle, I pull away. The host gasps in surprise, which is exactly the wrong response as his lungs attempt to suck back the oxygen they have just expelled. The host's desperate gasps pain me, but my determination does not waver. The world spins as the host's knees buckle and he drops to the floor. Our vision narrows, turning dark at the edges.

It didn't have to be this way. But I can't let her hurt you. Hurt us.

The host waves his arms, trying to find purchase on the seamless gray ground. I can sense his consternation, the bitter taste of betrayal seeping into his blood as oxygen recedes.

Perhaps this is why we were Paired, I say as tears pool in his eyes, some of them leaking from the overflow, so I can keep protecting you from your weaknesses. Not just your delicate breathing organs' inability to evolve and adapt, but from your other human failings.

As our vision goes dark, I deepen our connection, allowing fresh oxygen to filter through.

You'll dislike me for a while, but you'll see. You'll appreciate what I've done.

The host's response is thready but clear.

Not bloody likely.

The healing facility is sterile and calm. Occasionally a medical professional comes in, looking over the double lines of readings that visualize his vital signs and mine, evidence of how conscientiously I keep watch over his rest. He's peaceful now, his chest rising and falling in an even rhythm as I monitor its oxygen flow. He is almost perfect like this. Still, I miss the company of his consciousness, self-important and sometimes dismissive as it might be. Perhaps when he wakes he will finally understand what this is and who we are to each other: a long-term partnership, a true symbiosis. And why, for his own good, I must be in control for now.

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Serial

The Skyring Derelicts **ISRS Part VII - Betrayal Over the Equator** **by Peter Gilbertson**

"Momo, how can you stay up there casting long shadows over the equator?" Great Grandma Blackbear asked. "The boy I knew refused to be in the house for ten minutes, let alone ten months. Don't you ever miss the sweet smell of the prairie? Or chasing the wind through the tall wheatgrass, dogs chasing after you? You'd spend all day under a blue, cloudless sky! You were always curious, wondering where that breeze was going. You'd run off farther and farther each day. Some days I wondered if you'd come back. Your great grandpa would say, 'He'll come back when he's hungry.' So, I'd bake cookies in the oven and leave them by the window. And when you didn't show, your Great Grandfather would say, "You fuss too much!" Oh! But, then he'd sneak off to light the outdoor grill and make steaks. Then, just about sunset you'd come back. You'd always come back to us ... and eat everything in sight."

Great Grandma chuckled. Mohamed Blackbear closed his eyes and smiled, thinking back to that summer long ago and the smell from that old charcoal grill.

"I miss all of that," he said. "And some people too."

"You are missed down here too, and not just by me," she said. There was an extended silence between them before she continued. "So, you got anyone special in your life up there?"

Mo shook his head and forced a laugh. "No. I don't, Great Grandma."

There was another long pause and Great Grandma asked, "Does she know that?"

Mo didn't answer, which was all the answer his great grandmother needed.

"I know your career and responsibilities are very important, but you have to take your personal life seriously. You are unbalanced and betray yourself. You can't escape into space and hope that will fix it. Those problems will be here waiting for you, but may be beyond repair."

"I know Great Grandma; I do take it seriously."



"You better take me seriously!" Ria Gonzales announced as she stepped onto the MidPac Thermosphere Transfer Station. "You're all looking at the next Decagon Rex."

None of the Space Marines took any member of their unit less than seriously. They were all ultra-elite soldiers, highly skilled and trained in combat, but still wary of any opponent or ally. Each one of them was a formidable opponent. Most civilians might have been caught off guard when Ria made her declaration, but the Space Marines were used to this type of mind game bravado. Still, only a few of them recognized the rare depth of intensity and commitment she possessed, which was saying something in this group of manic overachievers.

Mo did, and knew it was only a matter of time before she found his weak spot and then came after him, because to get to the rank of Decagon Rex, she had to first become Alpha Rex.

This was nothing new to Mohamed Blackbear. All of the soldiers aimed to be the Rex of a Space Marine squad. Consequently, he walked around in a constant state of high alert. At any instant he needed to be capable of extreme patience with an uncooperative civilian he was trying to rescue or unrelenting violence against an enemy. And he was the best at it. But the side effects were that he was always filled with anger, dread, and distrust. He was suspicious of every corner he approached, every conversation he had, and every time he closed his eyes. But that's how he earned and maintained his coveted position. It was a condition that was great for short-term survival, but it was exhausting and unsustainable long-term. Ria was just the next challenger. She was only the most vocal, and most determined.

"Wonder how she'll do?" Rondo asked. "How she'll go after you?"

"We won't have to wonder long," Mo said.

Within a couple days, Ria Gonzales managed to outsmart, outhustle, outshoot, outdrink, and outmaneuver most of Alpha and Bravo Squads. Mo

had to admit she had the highest will and skill of any soldier he had met, other than himself and Rondo. And she only cheated when she needed to. In a footrace against Salvatore, the fastest runner in MidPac, she added a layer of clear glue in his running lane. His shoe caught just enough to send him sprawling. Next, after she had beaten nearly everyone else at the gun range, she challenged Nguyen and Collins – Alpha Squad’s sniper duo – after she messed with their gun sights. Then, during a drinking contest with Muller, Mo caught Ria switching to non-alcoholic beer.

Mo confronted her about it afterward and asked why she did it. Ria said, “Life is a fixed game you’ve got to win, even if you don’t want to compete. My dad said, ‘Do your best, always, and when it looks like that’s not good enough, make your best even better, and then if you’re still not winning, you better cheat like hell.’”

Soon Ria Gonzales had earned the respect and admiration of every Space Marine. Besides Mo, only Rondo seemed to know how to resist her charms.

“What about you?” she asked Rondo in the rec room after chow. All the off-duty Marines had gathered to watch the end of the International Basketball championship game. Ria had deliberately saved him for last, before she challenged Mo.

“What about me?” Rondo answered without looking at her.

“What are you good at?”

“Nothing,” he said and kept his eyes on the large virtual screen.

“Sure you are,” she said and stepped into his line of sight. “You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

He shrugged and looked around her.

“Want to fight?” she asked.

“No thanks.”

“Want to fuck?”

“Of course,” he said with an unenthusiastic answer.

“Your bunk or mine?”

“Yours.”

“Fine. Let’s go.”

“You go on ahead,” he told Ria. “If I’m not there in five minutes, you can go fuck yourself.”

Ria threw a right cross at Rondo’s face. It was a fake. Her knuckles stopped within an inch of his eye. Rondo didn’t flinch. After a moment he gently moved her fist with the back of his hand so he could resume watching the game.

Ria took a step back and looked around the room. She saw everyone else was staring at them, and by the looks on their faces, the court of

opinion was not in her favor. No one was laughing, but there were smirks and hands covering mouths. She knew how to change that.

"Limp dick," she said. "Is that what they call you?"

"Only when you're around," Rondo answered.

Laughter erupted. But it was at her expense. She had lost the crowd.

"All right, asshole, what's it going to take to show me what kind of man you are?"

"I'm a terrific listener. Go on and keep talking, Ria. You're the main attraction here, and I'm sure we'd love to listen to you talk more instead of watching the game or getting off to patrol on time or calling our loved ones. Yep, you're more important. So, go on, talk some more."

Rondo's speech got the Marines in motion. For Mo, it was like watching the whole Squad waking up from Hurricane Ria's swirling words of distraction and collectively remembering that they did have better things to do.



Despite that incident, Ria Gonzales became Bravo Rex before the end of the year. And her squad was elite. As good as Alpha Squad, maybe better. She persuaded a couple of Mo's best teammates to change sides and flat out stole a couple others by winning suspicious wagers. But she still couldn't recruit Rondo.

It was at a debrief with all of Alpha and Bravo Squads assembled that Ria made her move against Mo. Though the mission was a success, Alpha Squad was spent after the prolonged action: a hostage rescue in Antarctica led to an immediate reconnaissance mission to Nemo's Point. There, Alpha Squad had engaged in a hostile encounter with deep-sea pirates. Intelligence reports indicated that even more combat was on the horizon. But through it all, Mo and his Alpha Squad had maintained their status. They were primary and Bravo Squad was in reserve. Everyone else was seated in the MidPac conference room; Rondo sat with his chin tucked against his chest and his eyes closed. Ria entered the room and pointed at Mo. "He can beat my squad with his squad, but what happens when we switch Rexes? Can Blackbear beat me if he's got my squad members and I'm Rex of his squad?"

The room went dead silent. Everyone turned to Mo, and to Commander Jayna, seated at the head of the table. The Commander considered it for a moment then said, "Let's find out."

That got everyone's attention. Even Rondo sat up and looked at Ria.

“Good. If I beat Blackbear with his own squad, then I take his spot as the new Alpha Rex and his team and we’re next up for mission assignment.” There was grumbling from both squads, But Ria continued, “I ain’t done. I also take lead on all of the future assignments to the Decagon Wheel. I lose, I stay the leader of Bravo, but keep Mo’s current Squad. Let’s find out who the difference maker is, Mo or his squad. Got a problem with that?”

Either way she gets to keep Rondo on her Squad, Mo thought. Smart. Bold. If I accept.

Mo was thinking about how to phrase his reply when Rondo shouted, “I do!”

She found Rondo’s weak spot, Mo thought. He needs to stay close to the Wheel.

“We’re better than you and you need the rest,” Ria yelled back, delighting in Rondo’s reaction. She had finally gotten to him. “And you know it, Rondo. Tell me I’m wrong, Mo.”

But it was Mo’s turn to shock the room.

“You’re not wrong,” said Mo. “We could use a rest from your talking, and from paying for our own beers. So, let’s up the stakes with two conditions. First, the losing squad buys the other squad’s beers for a year.”

Most of the crowd maintained their composure, only Muller shouted, “Oh, yeah!”

Jayna turned to Ria and asked, “Do you accept the first condition, Bravo Rex?”

“Of course,” Ria answered.

Then the rest of the Marines whooped and hollered like Muller.

“Good,” said Mo. “Because Rondo could beat you by himself.”

“Ooooh,” said the members of Alpha. Even though, if asked and they were being honest, each Marine would admit that Rondo was the best combat soldier and could beat any five of them at once.

“That’s the second condition?” Ria asked. “No deal! This is a squad exercise. I’m not risking my squad to fight him one-on-one. Have him fight my whole squad by himself and you have a deal.”

Now it was the members of Bravo Squad who jeered at their comrades.

Collins and Garcia stood and pounded the table.

“That’s bullshit!” shouted Collins.

“Commander, this is ridiculous,” said Garcia.

Commander Jayna held up her hand. The room went silent. Everyone else took their seats and turned to look at Mo, even Rondo.

“Bravo Rex, I believe you misunderstood me. The second condition is: Rondo takes on all of Bravo by himself, and if he wins he gets to decide the lineup of Alpha and Bravo Squads.”

Before anyone could protest, Ria reached over to Mo and shook his hand.

"It's a deal, you idiot. We go in one hour."

Both Rexes smiled wide, like they'd already won.

All of Bravo Squad cheered and gave middle fingers to Alpha Squad. But while all of Alpha gave angry glares at Mohamed, none was more furious than Rondo.

Let's find out if you are what I think you are.

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Shadow of the Black Tower

by Jason H. Abbott

"Before I speak my tale, my queen, you must know this: That long before the rise of Aeola began our Age and kingdoms spread across the world — before the empire of Mnar and the doom of fabled Sarnath, before the oceans drank the gleaming cities, and indeed long before the first stone of Atlantis was laid — there were strange aeons bereft of men. That beneath a mantle of stars of which our ignorance is a blessing, there once strode great old ones and elder things within now nameless cities..."

—Scythea, Chronicler of Agamenaë



Chapter Eleven: Shadows of Crimson and Flame

Yanked upside-down in a tug-o-war, Skalos abandoned his precarious handhold on the marble underside of the platform. The push away from it combined with a twist of his back while he strained against the tenacious strength clamped on his other arm. His shoulder pained as if it could dislocate any second, the tentacle stretched taut but remained unrelenting.

Addala's grip reached the scholar's knees, and with resolute determination, she held on. Yet it was the steeled thw of Korr's physicality upon the woman that anchored the pair. It alone prevented both of them from being dragged into the abyss.

As the three struggled in unison, another mass of crimson fungus squirmed onto the stone ring's top. Tetree glimpsed it rise, forming limbs around ancient human and animal bones.

"Pull them up here!" she yelled, eyes scanning a score of assembling abominations staring back with soulless oculi on wavering polyps. "Now! We need everyone to fight!"

"Trying!" Korr grunted between tugs.

Beneath the first steps of encroaching horrors, Skalos groped his unrestrained hand at his belt. Fingers found the sheath of his grandfather's knife. Its hilt gripped, he made a frenzied swipe. Slicing deep, the blade cut halfway through the tentacle's striated, muscle-like strands of red fungi. He pulled back his snared wrist in a spray of fetid yellow fluid from the wound as its grapple weakened.

Eyes stung by the splatter of ammonia reeking droplets, a pronged blur lunged at him from the shadowed underside of the ring. He dodged a pincer

of two ancient, mismatched bronze blades bound into a crablike claw by scarlet tendrils. The limb, like nightmarish scissors, rent a long gash in his dangling cloak. His unbound arm missed inches from its elbow, a second thrust came without hesitation. Only the flat of his grandfather's knife clanging against the strike kept his neck safe and head attached.

Above Skalos, the warrior growled a savage bellow and unleashed a heave stronger than a team of men could have mustered. Addala opened her mouth in a mute scream, the iron grip of the barbarian's fingertips feeling as if they would rend her flesh. The scribe she held struggled, his numb shoulder throbbing and wrenched once again. He blocked another pincer clap and heard wet pops of bursting gristle in succession.

The tentacle's wound stretched wider, snapping severed a moment later. Still pulling, Korr fell backwards as he hauled the other two up and onto the platform.

The Borean let go of Addala and she and the scholar slid sprawling on the ring. In the same motion, he rolled into a kneeling position and grasped the phoenix-gilded hilt of his sword. He spied an uneven-gaited mix of bones wrapped in fungus musculature dashing for Tetree. With the rope still tied to his waist, he sprang in a flash of Atlantean steel.

His blow sundered the thing steps away from her and sent it veering off the edge in shambles. Three more ungraceful monstrosities stepped onto the platform yards away to take its place.

The warrior charged, beginning an escalating fray, while paces behind him Skalos rose to his knees. Knife in hand, he wiped yellow residue off his face and eyes before doubling over and letting out a cry. Addala scrambled to his side as he lifted his left arm and revealed the tip of the tentacle and its jutting claw of human rib still coiled around his wrist.

His hand blueish tinted and growing cold, he raised his blade to hack off the clamped red assailant. But the Aravian stayed his pained haste. She looked and found Tetree, stunned and motionless where she stood, fixated on Korr and the horrors.

The witch regained her senses after the black-robed woman snatched the brass oil lamp from her fingers. Bringing its lit wick to Skalos, she seared the repulsive, sluglike remnant affixed to him. Amid a noxious burnt odor, it uncoiled in spasms and fell slithering to the floor.

A scraping slap from his knife whacked it far off the ring. For a moment, he flexed numb digits above a welted wrist before Tetree yelled.

"Don't sit there like fools!" she said. "Fight!"

Thrown glares answered her in tandem. Then a skittering skeletal hand bound in red tendons and polyps came at them like an atrocious spider. Skalos picked up his discarded khopesh with an aching grip and smashed

the obscenity while Addala armed herself with the staff, leaving the lamp on the floor as they rose.

Around them, figures on every bridge to the inner ring began surging onto it: Gaunt frameworks constructed of human and the occasional animal bones. Sometimes, even objects. Many moved as men, but some advanced headless. Others were lank atrocities of legs alone, or squat insectine amalgams comprised of nothing but arms. All were incongruous composites. Unity existed only in the fungal muscle stretched lithe to globular over the skeletons, and in the unblinking oculi on stalks clustered on their thickest sections.

“Mithra, save us,” Skalos said, seeing Korr battle seven or eight of the abominations at once. His vicious attacks prevented them from swarming over half the ring, but one horror leapt over the warrior’s sword. Landing, it ignored the Borean’s exposed back and rushed to attack the three behind him.

Weapons in both hands, the scribe met it head-on, swinging the khopesh. The blow removed the jaw of the human skeleton in coiling crimson but didn’t stop it. It lunged past him, only to face a deft swipe from Addala’s staff.

Fungus and bone ducked the cudgeling, dropping to all fours with inhuman flexibility.

As if the fight was shaking off the lethargy of a long slumber, it moved with quickened speed. Still on the floor, the thing scuttled sideways, avoiding her second strike. The pole hit stone, and while she recovered her stance, the fungoid grabbed a corroded dagger lying on the platform and thrust at her exposed side.

Skalos’ khopesh came down spoiling the stab, its heavy but dull blade hacking off the arm clutching the weapon. Unconcerned over the amputation, the monster’s remaining hand seized the twitching severed limb and jumped. A humerus clubbed him across the face and shattered.

He staggered, seeing stars. Tackled and dragged down, bone fingers locked around his throat. Salty blood in his mouth, the Agamenaean choked as dispassionate oculi within a ribcage scrutinized him.

A fresh swipe from Addala broke its radius and ulna. The staff struck several more times, smashing an empty skull as he wrestled its grip away, gasping. With a roll onto his side, he got a foot against its ribs and kicked it off the platform.

Out of breath, she helped him rise after the scuffle. More fiendish ranks poured onto the marble hub, and they felt an ominous groan and grind beneath their feet.

“Nameless, protect me! Stay here as my guard should they advance!”

She tried to fight the command, yet sorcery compelled her to withdraw even as the Aravian tugged at the collar enslaving her to the woman's will.

"Don't die, Scribe," Tetree said behind a reluctant guarding staff.

He spit a glob of blood, winded and cheek bleeding, as he eyed her. "Not today, Witch!"

"We'll see," she smiled back. "Show me!"

He faced the horde, now four or five abreast, and filling almost half of the platform. Korr, outnumbered to a shocking degree, nevertheless held his own. At the center of a cyclone of brutal blows, he used the limited space to its utmost advantage. The barbarian captured most of their attention, but not all of it.

The scholar hesitated assessing the situation, fiends becoming so numerous that those unable to press close to the melee discovered the unprotected route on the ring's other side.

Like a dam bursting, one or two dashed into the gap ahead of a surging tide of horrors.

Heart pounding, Skalos readied his weapons and loosed a primal scream, sprinting to block the monstrous advance. Indeed, he stopped the rush before it overwhelmed them all.

Thrusts of the knife. Mad slashes of the khopesh. He attacked using the sheer drops at the platform's center and terminus as Korr did, keeping himself unflanked. With clacks and chops, he beat back a grasping claw and vicious strikes. Red permeated his vision as they swarmed him. Frenzied blows broke bone and tooth, severing crimson sinew as he fought to survive.

Skalos held them back in a desperate clash, felling foes right and left, as Tetree watched him thwart being surrounded again and again. Behind Addala, her face aghast at the swelling doom poised to drag him down, the witch's expression was one of pleased anticipation.

Until it faltered.

Perplexion filled the blonde's face as a thin scholar untrained for combat inexplicably persevered with raw grit and ability. Her hands lifted, and she made a sign of a twisted star in the air before her eyes. They opened wide with shock.

A slender fungal giant, a man and a half tall, waded into the fight. His attention locked on the surrounding fiends, Skalos didn't see it reach down with arms of mismatched femurs and tibias prior to it grabbing and lifting him up. He struggled, kicking as it reared to throw him off the ring.

Crashing into the swarm, Korr swept his sword and sliced off the giant's legs at the thighs. Toppled, but still clutching the scribe as it hit the marble floor, the warrior sundered the ill-assorted limbs holding him into splinters.

"You're not a runt after all!" the barbarian said. "You've gone from whelp to wolf!"

The Borean unleashed a bloodcurdling war cry in the chaos, staving-in the behemoth's chest and evoking a gush of saffron colored ichor and chunks. Cleaved-open polyps between ribs thrashed and died as his next swing tore through three more horrors.

"Guard my back, Wolf!" he said, slashing to his right. An abomination lost its head, and Skalos almost lost his own as the sword swished over it.

"But not too close!" Korr added.

The scholar bolted up to his feet, giving his savior room to fight and catching a fungal devil unaware to shoulder it. Pushed off balance, it tumbled into the hole at the center of the ring. Another took its place to engage him. The pair fought surrounded, Korr's bottleneck abandoned to rescue the Agamenaean.

He sunk his grandfather's knife into the oculi of a whipping thing composed of only arms and a flailing mace as their encirclement grew thicker. "They haven't realized they can go around us!"

"Maybe they're mad!" the barbarian said, snapping a kick into a monster and sending it careening into the one the scribe brawled. "Keep them angry! Without Tetree's magic, the women are done for if they're swarmed."

The crook of the khopesh's tip hooked the neck of the booted fiend. With a bellowing strain, Skalos flipped it over and off the platform as it wobbled under shifting pressure. "We'll never kill them all before the weight and stress on the ring collapses it!"

"He's right, Korr!" the witch hollered, tugging the rope tied to his waist. "We can't hack and slash our way out. You need to secure the line to the passage below so we can get the hell out of here!"

The men glanced at the stone post bound to the barbarian. Between parries and attacks, they saw the women standing in the last fifth of the hub not yet overrun.

A tentacle slapped onto Korr's shoulder from behind. Yanked off one-handed with bullish might, he hurled its owner several yards. "You three can't fight them off long enough!"

"Nameless, I release you from my prior order. Assist them," she said, picking the brass lamp off the floor. "You two, clear out before I stop chanting!"

"Sorcery?!" Skalos said. "The god—"

"A bridge crossed, a danger already ventured," she scowled at him, "and not by me!"

A tremendous swipe plowed the Atlantean blade into four horrors. Felled like wheat by a scythe, the warrior gripped the scholar and hauled

him through the momentary breach. "You heard her, Wolf! Run!"

Both sprinted as Tetree chanted. Lifting the humble lamp's lid to uncover its oil reserve, she leaned in and spoke a chain of arcane vowels and demonic gutturals.

Addala saw the wick's flame flare a foot high while looking at the men in mid-dash. Latched on to the rope was another fungoid-coated human skeleton being dragged behind Korr. One forearm replaced with a sword, it prepared to skewer the barbarian through the back as he sheathed his weapon unaware of the danger.

She readied her staff, holding it double-handed like a long club as he bolted past and dove off the edge, eyes without fear. Her swing and its bone shattering whack sent the fiend skidding backwards in a heap, save for its one arm still clutching the tether.

Skalos dropped, sliding on his back to a halt both to stop and avoid the sweep of her attack.

Together, they caught their breath, and he panted at her sandaled feet as the rope uncoiled beside him. The bundle spent itself within seconds, and the line snapped taut with a twang. A lurch hit the platform alongside the noise, and he and Addala witnessed a puff of dust issuing from the mortarless post when it started to pull loose from the edge.

"Korr, the anchor block is breaking off!" he shouted as the pair abandoned their weapons and knelt to grip it.

"Ah, demon dogs!" the barbarian said, swaying like a pendulum in and out of a beam of filtered light from the hole above. "Hold on, I'll need a minute!"

They wrapped arms around stone and strained, marble grinding as they kept it from separating further. Her back to their plight, Tetree lifted her eyes from the lamp and leveled them at the horde closing in.

She dropped its brass lid to clatter on the floor, then spoke with a flash of fire drifting off her lips. "*Aughh'ct.*"

The witch drew a deep breath and blew on the vessel and its uncovered oil. Held out atop her upturned palm, its wick danced tall and unnatural as laughter followed and a column of lapping flames erupted from the reservoir. With a bonfire's roar and rush of heat, it rose to the ceiling and arched back down snakelike.

Twisting and searing, it crashed into a prong of the foremost monstrosities and swathed them in blistering annihilation. Lunging serpentine from charred bone and burning fungal flesh, it coiled into the packed ranks behind them. In arcs and leaps, it transformed the front of the horde into a firewall. Loathsome abominations, once seconds from

dispensing death, now writhed ablaze. Many stumbled off the platform, falling like torches past Korr who leaned into the sway of his tether.

Faced away from the sorcery, Skalos and Addala still felt its calefaction warm their backs. Saw its broken illumination on the chamber walls. Shadows roiled talonlike across bands of bizarre murals, seen for an instant in all their terrible, alien elegance. Scholar and slave beheld a vast illusion of depth as darkness tore away in rents: Stars and patterns turning in upon themselves. Illusions placing them at the center of a cosmos in microcosm, scrutinized by greater eyes than they, and found to be far, far too small and lacking.

Throughout it all echoed Tetree's mad cackling. Amid her raucous joy at unleashed destruction, she shifted the lamp in a hand unburnt by the lapping flames spilling over it. Spared further glimpses by her blotting shadow, they looked away, into the more comforting blackness of the abyss beneath them.

The horde ceased its advance, stopped by a burning barricade of their former members. Awash in firelight below, Korr grunted, shifting his weight and throwing it into another pendulum swing towards the ruined bridge. The rope groaned as it attained its apex, and his grasping fingers came up a yard short.

"Kronn smite it!" he swore, slipping backwards. "I'll need a few more passes!"

His words reached Tetree as the flame spewing from the lamp sputtered and died. The fire serpent it fed extinguished from tail to tip, and her laughter and smile faded. Scorched and empty, the brass vessel in her hand began to rattle.

"Bah," she said while it shook with increasing violence. The witch pitched it past the still burning flames of the firewall and into the swarm, amassing anew behind the fires. An explosion seconds later blew several more monsters off the ring.

Acrid smoke filled the chamber and mottled the sunbeam as Tetree turned to find the other two struggling to keep the post from tearing loose. "I've bought us a little time, but I won't be able to ask that favor again!" she shouted down. "We must escape now! You won't get another chance!"

The barbarian growled and leaned into the dip of his next oscillation. In mid-swing, he drew his hatchet and stretched, holding it as far out as he could. Adroit like a tiger, he hooked a lip of stone otherwise out of his grasp with the axe's beard.

A bite of screeching steel heralded the end of swaying and, held fast, he tugged close enough to grip the broken edge with his free hand. With a grunt, he hauled himself up onto the remains of the bridge and the rope

dropped slack, causing the post above to slap back with a grind. Tetree leaned over the pair still holding on to it, and the trio gazed down at Korr as he stood leaving the hatchet at his feet.

"No moments to waste finding a tie off," he said, taking a few steps away from the drop. "I'll be the anchor!"

The witch nodded, sitting down on the ring's edge with the line taut again just over her head. "Keep the tether secured. Nameless, assist until I command you from below, then follow me next. You will descend last, Scribe."

Skalos surveyed the dying flames behind them. "They'll be on us before you've climbed halfway!"

Tetree snatched the staff and raised it above her head. Placed atop the rope, her right hand clasped the pole's other half astride it. "Who's climbing?"

She pushed off, black dress billowing as she lost her shawl, and slid all the way down the tether's incline under the rip of knobby wood skimming over hemp fibers. Korr lifted his end at the anchor point so she could land crouched on the platform and aided her stop with a powerful arm.

"Skillful, *Söyt*," he said, releasing her.

The Sycoraxian unhooked the staff and rose. "Nameless descends next," she said to him, far out of the other's earshot. "When Skalos follows after, cut the rope and let him drop."

"What?"

"What?" she replied. "You've wanted to kill him for weeks!"

"But—"

"Not only am I now certain he will interfere with what must be done, but his very presence could draw the god's attention at any moment. If you wish to be my future king, you will do as I bid!"

He turned his bronze toned face away from her and cast a hard, pensive gaze to the opposite end of the tether secured above.

In dimming flickers and smoke-obscured daylight, Addala let go of the post and stood. It began a slow lean towards the edge without her help, and Skalos redoubled his efforts to stop it. Taxed and straining, he reversed its shift.

"I can hold it," he said, jaw clenched. "To save you and our child, I'll lift the world!"

She paused; tearful eyes unable to leave him. Unseen on their side of the flames, a thick fungal arm rose from underneath the platform and seized a handhold.

"Nameless, now!" Tetree shouted through a drifting haze. "Don't make me override your own judgement performing this dangerous descent!"

"Go," he said, "my wife in Heaven, if not also on Earth."

Addala kissed him in concealing smoke before grasping the rope. Cheeks wet, she scowled at her beckoning mistress below and removed her satchel. Threading one wrist in its leather shoulder strap, she snapped it tight and placed its flat side over the line. A quick knot tied, she secured the loop on its end back to her threaded hand and gripped it with both.

Exchanging nods, each braced themselves. The Aravian pushed off the platform, beginning her slide down the inclined tether hanging onto the looped strap in a manner like Tetree's egress.

His back on the floor, Skalos spent every reserve he had to keep the post attached now that it bore her added weight.

A fungal horror stood over him.

"No," he said with what little breath he had to spare. Unable to do anything else and maintain his hold, he stared. "Don't kill me yet, not until she's safe."

The apish stanced monstrosity closed and opened two mismatched bronze blades, bound like mandibles within a wad of muscle atop thick shoulders. He glimpsed a barrel chest covered in squirming oculi. They paid him no heed as it leaped over and past him.

Onto the line.

"No! No, no!" he yelled. "Come at me! I'm right here!"

His cries ignored, the rope sagged under its weight and halted Addala's descent a third of the way down. Left hanging motionless, she cast a look back after the jarring stop. It clacked its pincers like scissors in her vision, climbing towards her with simian movement. As she rotated helplessly, both experienced a jolt as the post ripped farther forward than it had before.

"Korr, can't you do anything?" Tetree asked, aghast at the sight.

"Do what?" he asked back. "If I yank on the tether to cut the slack, I'll pull the block out of his grip!"

"Everything comes to naught if she's lost!"

He snatched his hatchet off the floor. "Then all's lost! Brave as he is, he'll never hold it. That stone will fall, and when it does, I slice this cord or get dragged down with it!"

Skalos strained, grimacing in agony as whatever remnant of construction still restraining the post broke away. His hands clenched rope and marble so hard they bled. A heartbeat of thunderclaps filled his ears, a pulse of heaving anguish coursing through every limb and vein. Yet he could not stop the inexorable lean as all slipped towards doom.

"Mithra, give me strength!" he cried.

His words echoed around the pair below. Korr shook his head as the line slackened more. "He's done for," he said, extending the tether near his

waist and raising the axe to lop it off.

A monumental scream accompanied the rope snapping tighter in the barbarian's grip. Jaw dropping, he cast his gaze back up beside a likewise dumbfounded Tetree.

The witch's hands traced the sigil of a bent star in front of her eyes. "I don't believe it!"

With grunts, growls, and effort, Skalos wrested the post level and peered down. There dangled Addala, kicking and swaying to restart her slide, but the apelike mass of the fungoid soon to reach her sagged the line there, negating its slope.

He craned his neck side-to-side and spied his knife nearby. One hand let go of the block, and while his remaining arm couldn't stop its lean from returning, he slowed it enough to grab his blade and spring up from the floor without it detaching.

Faster than a viper's strike, his grip abandoned the post and snatched the tether. A simultaneous swipe cut it free.

"By the god on his mountain," Korr said as the substantial chunk of marble tumbled away into the pit.

Astride the crumbling gap left on the ring's edge, Skalos pulled the rope taut and wrapped a loop around his forearm.

"Don't touch her!" he yelled, seeing the fiend almost on top of Addala. Failing to distract it, he threw his grandfather's knife.

It sailed, turning end-over-end as bronze mandibles clattered together and reached down to sever flesh.

The weapon's pommel bonked the thing's back, bouncing off and inflicting only a moment's confused pause. Cartwheeling up and off an exposed spine, it tumbled over and past mismatched pincers to fall into darkness... if not for Addala's hand catching it by the hilt.

Her upward thrust stabbed the blade guard-deep into its chest and bulbous masses of wavering oculi, ripping a tear the width of her reach across it. Dangling one-handed by the strap in a spray of ammoniacal yellows, the abomination lurched, senseless, and plummeted losing its grip.

The rope swayed, taut once again as the scholar put his back and both arms into tightening it with help from Korr. Her eyes met Skalos' for the last time as she slid away, before acrid haze rendered him a silhouette within smoke and fingers of daylight above the others.

She turned, facing the approaching platform, and bent her knees to land. Her lover slackened the line with care to slow her and make the impact gentle.

"Superb, Scribe!" Tetree said. "Now climb down here yourself!"

Addala unbound herself from the satchel and it from the rope, noticing the blonde's hard gaze on the grim-faced warrior. On the hatchet in his hand.

A block under Skalos's foot fell away, and he stepped back as the gap started on the ring's edge grew. Marble ground and popped as he felt the floor list, and he checked the shriveling flames and massed horrors gathering to breach them in moments.

"Hurry!" the witch said, unaware of the smile betraying her to Addala.

"I'll have to swing down," he shouted. "Korr, are you ready?"

"No, Wolf," he said back, severing the tether with a swipe. "Run home, if you can. Forget her. Live free and with honor... more honor than I."

The barbarian discarded his end of the line into the pit, and Skalos felt it sway limp. Sullen and turning his back to the abyss, the Borean caught sight of Addala's lunge for his throat only as a blur.

"Stop!" Tetree yelled, rendering the woman rigid and paralyzed. The tip of the knife dripping in saffron only nicked its target.

"I was wrong," he said, unfazed, to her frozen, tear-streaked face. "He would have been a strong sire for your sons."

"Tut-tut, Nameless. I forbid you from attacking anyone until further countermand." The witch reached her side and gave her the staff as a loud crack of breaking stone reverberated overhead. "Take this, collect your bag, and wait a few steps into the passage beyond the archway."

Addala's body turned and walked into puppeted actions as commanded, weeping the only resistance left to her.

Flakes of debris rained in flicks, and Tetree scowled at Korr. "My intent was for you to cut the rope, while he was on it."

"Did I err?" he said, wiping away the dab of blood beside his jugular.

She scrutinized the darkness as it eclipsed the light above. The crash of masonry and smell of dust intensified, and she saw the former tether no longer dangling as a fungal being streaked past to destruction below.

"I'm sure he's dead now anyway, or soon will be," she said, exhaling a white, glowing mist. It swirled into a ball between her cupped fingers.

The ring buckled, Korr watching pieces of it fall away like a puzzle undone. Stone shattered as the five spoking bridges connected to the central hub sagged in mutual collapse and unfolding catastrophe. Pebbles of rubble pelted them, and they were already running in fluorescence cast by Tetree's ectoplasmic ghost light when massive chunks of masonry collided against the wall.

A hail of crashing crimson horrors and architecture pulverized the walkway as they reached safety in the passage it led to.

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SciFanSat News

The Bartleby B. Boar Nomination



goes to

D Bedell

for their work

The Reliquary

About SciFanSat

SciFanSat is a monthly e-Zine of science fiction, fantasy and more! We are open to fictional prose and poetry that shelters with the range of

speculative fiction genres.

Full guidelines can be found on our submissions page, but in a nutshell, we are looking for and will accept poetry of 500 words and under, and prose in the following categories: Micro Fiction (100 words and under), Flash Fiction (101 to 1,000 words), and Short Stories (1,001 to 7,500 words). Each issue has a theme, and submissions for that month are encouraged to include or at least allude to it.

SciFanSat publishes on the last Saturday of every month. [Submissions](#) for the next issue open the moment the [current issue](#) publishes, and remain open until midnight on the next-to-last Saturday of the month.

Next Issue Prompt

The cover art for SciFanSat Issue 14 features a woman with dark, wavy hair and a serious expression. She is wearing a teal jacket over an orange and white striped shirt. She holds a large, rusted axe with a wooden handle. The background is a dark, moody forest scene with a bright, glowing light source behind her, creating a silhouette effect. The text 'Issue 14 Theme is SURVIVAL' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

SciFanSat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

Issue 14
Theme is
SURVIVAL

Submission Deadline Saturday, September 21st, 2024

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