

September 28th, 2024

Issue 14 | Survival

SciFanSat

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

Micro Fiction

Marcelo Medone

A. A. Rubin

Voima Oy

Flash Fiction

Brent Streeter

Kayleigh Kitt

That Burnt Writer

Short Stories & Serials

Wendy Maxon – “Terror Sleeps Over”

Jack Croxall – “X”

Nancy E. Dunne – “Survival of the Fittest”

Peter J. Gilbertson – “Derelict Skyrings” (Serial)

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



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Cover Illustration "Survivor" by
Jason H. Abbott

Layout & Typesetting
Kimberly Abbott

For more information, address:
Blue Boar Press
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Editorial

Welcome to our September issue of SciFanSat, a literary home for science fiction, fantasy, and more! This month's theme is SURVIVAL, and we have offerings from a wide spate of authors stayin' alive and keeping us entertained with their speculative fiction. At least, I hope they're all still living. At any rate, none of them are *confirmed* as zombies...

If you open this issue in dire straits, A. A. Rubin, Voima Oy, Alastair Millar, M. H. Thaug, and Marcelo Medone all contributed to a quick-grab emergency kit of microfiction to get you through initial trials. If you make it to the escape hatches in time with those, break the glass and snatch up some flash fiction by Kayleigh Kitt, D Bedell, Brent Streeter, and That Burnt Writer before jumping. Be aware that their stories can also function as a floatation device (pull cord to inflate, hold away from face).

Now, chances are likely you'll end up somewhere soaked to the bone and shivering in the dark. Hopefully, you've remembered your Adams Guide and not forgotten your towel. But if that's not the case, DON'T PANIC! Instead, have some peanuts and wrap yourself in the insulating thermal blanket of entertainment that is our short story collection this month!

For a flesh-crawling scare, check out Wendy Maxon's "Terror Sleeps Over". It's definitely one of my favorites found in this month's selection and a great, creepy read made even better by the air of Halloween approaching. If you'd rather warm yourself up, bask a little in Alan Vincent Michaels' "Under One Sun" and try to go native. Brent Streeter's "The Awakening" pairs with his earlier flash fiction "The Talentless" to offer us viewpoints from opposing folds of a world divided between magical haves, and have-nots.

Next, Jack Croxall lends us a journal of uncertain beginnings and melancholic ends written with the ink of a survivor's pain, in his short story, "X". Meanwhile, in "Survival of the Fittest", Nancy E. Dunne introduces us to Scarlet MacDonald who ain't afraid of no ghosts! Another character that knows how to survive is space marine Mo Blackbear in

Peter J. Gilbertson's serialized novelette "Derelict Skyrings", which continues this month with Mo showing us how to keep it clean and still come out on top.

Last is my contribution of heroics, horror, swords, and sorcery: The twelfth chapter of my "Shadow of the Black Tower" serial that concludes its second act of three. Will Skalos survive the impending doom upon him at the end of our last issue? Read on and find out! This installment also marks the start of a hiatus for the serial, but for good reasons and it will return early next year to the magazine's pages to begin the story's conclusion. See the end of the chapter for details of what's happening in an author's note.

Now that I've gone over our contributors and content, there are three important announcements and a reminder this month, all going into effect immediately with the release of this issue.

There is a **New Submissions Deadline: We are changing the deadline for submissions to nine days before SciFanSat's publication on the last Saturday of any month** instead of seven. This means **all submissions will be due on the next-to-last Thursday of the month before 11:59 pm EST**. We are making this change to grant us more time to edit and assemble the magazine, as the previous seven-day schedule has become inadequate and unsustainable since adding a full-time job to the workload of the publication's coder and typesetter — my wife, Kim — in the spring. The additional two days will reduce stress and time constraints on her, and without her efforts, there would be no SciFanSat.

Next, **all submissions now need to be attached as documents regardless of word count**. We have removed the ability to write or paste short submissions (such as poetry, microfiction, or flash) as text in the forms. We are making this change for two reasons: Number one is because over 90% of all short piece submitters are doing this anyway, even though it isn't required, meaning that this change will inconvenience few. Number two is that text submitted this way in our form system requires us to copy-paste it into a document ourselves, add header information to it, and fix (or guess at) its stripped formatting. That's a lot of added, unnecessary work for us on an often tight schedule that is better left for the author to do, anyway.

The text submission feature was a holdover from SciFanSat Magazine's inception, from an assumption that submissions would remain focused on short poetry and microfiction like its Twitter event predecessor. Our intent was to offer authors a convenient method to copy-paste from Twitter into the form without extra steps. However, within the first few issues, it was clear most authors wanted to submit more substantial pieces of flash fiction and short stories to the magazine, making the feature almost vestigial out of the gate. Even submitters of poetry and microfiction — which we always welcome — overwhelmingly preferred the formatting advantages that a word processing document afforded them once we offered the option. Thus, the occasional text submission became a pain-in-the-butt for us and even a point of confusion on the

forms for some. Now let's wish the option a fond farewell as it rides into the sunset. *Adios!*

As we wrap up updates on submissions, I will also remind those that haven't already done so to read the [SciFanSat Submission Guidelines](#). Formatting your documents properly helps us immensely, thank you!

Our final update concerns the **Bartleby B. Boar Nomination certificates** we gift to the winners of the Peer Review Poll held for each issue. Until this point, we printed and physically mailed these certificates to the recipients. **From now on, we will email print-ready, quality PDFs of the nomination certificates to the winners.** *We love you guys, gals, and whatever other being of matter and/or energy that you are...* but the cost of printing these and sending them through the post over the past year is the magazine's biggest operating expense. Even bigger than the annual cost of maintaining the SciFanSat website and all its other online needs combined! As a volunteer, not-for-profit project with limited reserves, we can't afford to continue that. Instead, by sending the certificates electronically, we feel we can say thank you and show our appreciation without jeopardizing the publication's future growth and stability.

This **changes nothing** about the upcoming, first-annual Bartleby B. Boar **Award**, which will give recognition to one of the 2024 nominees as author of our "story of the year"! This year's eleven nominees will have their nominated pieces republished in our December 2024 issue and, in the end-of-the-year Peer Review Poll accompanying it, votes will determine a grand winner. *That winner will receive the physical, custom engraved 2024 Bartleby B. Boar Award trophy along with a printed certificate shipped to them!*

Keep creating and writing, everyone! As always, our thanks go out to all the authors who contributed this month and let us walk in their worlds, and to our supporters in the speculative fiction communities who read, share, and promote the magazine. You're all amazing!

Take care and please join us again in October for our fifteenth issue and its theme of... NIGHT!

Jason H. Abbott
Editor, SciFanSat Magazine

Micro Fiction

Sole Survivor

by A.A. Rubin

Our attack had obliterated the planet. It was clear that nothing had survived.

A woman staggered forth from the smoke and ruin. We beamed her up, and I stammered, "How?"

She brushed the ash from her hair and began, "At first I was afraid.. I was petrified..."

Find the Author



[Best Climate Change Stories: An Anthology of Original Short Fiction](#)



[A. A. Rubin](#)



Just Friends

by Voima Oy

She couldn't look at me when they knocked on the door. You come with us, they said. I'm sorry, she said.

They took me to a room, asked me what I knew. I said nothing. We'll be back later, they said.

The door opened. Come with me, she said. She handed me some papers. You'll need these, she said.

I didn't ask why she was doing this. Follow the underground, she said. You'll be safe outside the city. Remember, you don't know me.

Would I have done the same for her? Maybe that's what you do to survive.

Find the Author

 [@voimaoy](#)



Vigil

by M. H. Thaung

As snarls transitioned into meaty squelches, I turned from the cage towards Lady Moon. My silver blade reflected her fading glow.

When I'd returned to a home visited by death, the pulped remains were unrecognisable. I couldn't explain the single, so far unidentified, victim's survival. After they returned to human form, I'd know whether to help, or flee, or finish our visitor's work. A softhearted approach? Maybe. Unlike certain of my neighbours, I wasn't a mindless butcher.

A yowl came from the cage. I blinked at the battle-scarred cat inside. Of course, I realised, now he has four lives.

Find the Author

 MHThaung.com

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



Compromised Situation

by Marcelo Medone

Outside, the landscape has become toxic from radioactive bombs. Acid rain falls constantly and causes burning sores on the skin.

The sky is covered with invading alien ships that shoot their laser beams at anything that moves, turning it into charred debris.

Hideous beasts sprout from the underworld, ready to take me prisoner and devour me while I am still conscious.

My group has been cruelly annihilated.

I have a broken leg; I am completely naked and locked in a dungeon with two ferocious and merciless zombies.

I have a gun with only one bullet.

Please call the writer now!



Runaway

by Alastair Millar

You'll rage when you realise I've gone, but I'm not on this Earth-bound shuttle because I'm running away from you.

Really.

I'm not running away from your constant swearing and nightly drunkenness. I'm not running away from your gaslighting, from your put-downs or the hundred other daily microaggressions you use to keep me in my place. I've survived those. In truth, I'm running away from me, from an urge to 'do something' that's becoming a compulsion, threatening to burst out of my body, alien-like.

Be glad I'm running away; Mars isn't big enough, and I'll kill you if I stay.

Find the Author

* [Alastair Millar](#)



Flash Fiction

This Place Called Home

by Kayleigh Kitt

We'd walked to the edge of the forest yesterday, Jaku and I, and not because of a whim, or adventure. It was our duty and our allocated task to check the perimeters this month. Seventeen years sat on our shoulders like the weight of a century but we lightly shrugged it off with the ease of our youth.

The elk were suddenly baying, not the appeal for unity but to move as a herd; it was sharp, yipping, the call of danger, the cry to flee. Once running, they'd cover the ground quickly.

There were wolves out here.

The trees whispered to each other, and our houses would tremble in response but they were safe, high in the canopy, anchored to the trees. Walkways were fastened between dwellings; mere nesting boxes burrowed into the foliage, reinforced against the elements. Once, our village would have been the lupine prey below.

I'd hoped the elk would stay for solstice but it seemed not to be the case this year.

The orange rusted barbed wire was broken down in places since our last visit. A scrap of bright blue fabric fluttered forlornly from a lonely metal spike, its origin unknown, for none of us wore the regal shade.

Last night, above the howling winds, we had slept in the nets we carried, high up in the tree branches and we heard the wolves below, gleefully ripping and tearing, the screams of its prey almost unbearable. Jaku wrapped his arms around me. My twin brother, my yin, my strength. He knew how I abhorred the noise, despite everything needing to live; although the monsters hunted for sport, not survival, leaving the ground sodden with the scarlet life they robbed, and that coppery, sticky tang.

We should have left, and resettled, but it was the only life we knew, my parent's and theirs and theirs before them. So, we checked the lines for intruders and damage beginning at the abandoned Klish outpost. Some had left and over generations, our numbers had dwindled. Checking the barriers, we moved each day to another station, Himple, Lakin then Felch. All was well with the ghosts of our ancestors lingering in the air. We repaired the fences, patching with what we found after we'd exhausted the meagre supplies, we'd carried.

Nearing home and looking up we studied the snowflakes lazily drifting down. The air was pinched with the chill, but I couldn't help thinking that they looked like ashes. I rubbed a flake between my fingers, leaving a grimy residue. And then we climbed the last ridge.

The trees were ablaze, red, swollen with flames, the wood and leaves crackling hungrily, eating our homes, smoke being blown away from us.

And blocking our way was a large white wolf, his lip predatorily curled, crimson dripping from a yellowing fang. Its fur rippled, and behind it forms on the ground were highlighted in the glow of the fire.

Solstice was often full of surprises.

And this year was no different.

Find the Author

 [The Dragon's Quill](#)



Rue

by D Bedell

One

The moonlight was harsh on the corpse, an intangible, glowering death mask of stark anonymity in a night too still for the uneasy. Death in the aftermath of Boundary was expected in the marginal population of outcasts from the city on the hill. Domestic disputes, gangs, and drugs were the usual scenarios with the occasional adventure seeker paying the full price of unwise curiosity. The full moon always brought out the best.

Constable John Rue was wary as he switched on his flashlight as much to dispel his mood as to look at the victim. One glance and he knew it didn't fit the usual profile. Rue liked things that fit, puzzles that were as predictable as the picture on the box. He told himself he would survive as long as he saw the patterns. Rue swept his light around the perimeter and shadows scurried farther into the dark. All but one. A figure stepped into Rue's light and began walking toward him.

Damn! The Prophet.

The Prophet was a street preacher who roamed the Boundary forever speaking in riddles and appearing all too often where there was trouble.

"Hello, Constable."

"What do you know, Prophet?"

"I will give you twenty-five to one."

Twenty-five plus one. Twenty-six.

"One what?"

The Prophet turned away and faded into the dark. Rue watched him go with relief. He tightened his lips and turned to the lifeless face. The eyes were open and the stare without essence prickled Rue. He wondered why the scavengers had not robbed the body including the meat down to its bones. Something made the body taboo even in Boundary.

He radioed the morgue for retrieval.

Two

The morgue always smelled like the charnel house it was. Rue smeared menthol petroleum jelly into his nostrils to keep from gagging. The coroner looked at him and smiled; she had long grown used to the smell. It clung to her.

There were no wounds on the body, no sign of violence. Toxin screens all proved negative. It was a natural death to all appearances except one: Desanguination.

Something tugged at his memory and slipped away unknown. In the main, Rue said he did not believe anything he heard and only half of what he saw. It was not true. Myths outlived memory in Boundary and Rue believed just as many as he did not, cautious in his judgments. He recognized legends had origins and considering them in context was useful in the constabulary. More than a few had proved true in the foreboding twilight of forlorn conscience.

Rue collected myths with painstaking accounts scribed in his private notebooks. The stories fascinated him, and he probed them until his prodding revealed the secrets of their survival in the Boundary. He applied them as a methodology to see where they would lead and often found a reality he had not seen that was explained only within itself. It was a vindication of his unfulfilled potential. Constable Rue relished the adventure despite the frequent dismay of consequences and pursued the ephemera with the same diligence as his duties. He often did not know the difference but would warrant that patterns were the equivalent of destiny in the Boundary.

The coroner tagged the cadaver with a small flourish and a smile.

Three

Rue went home and turned to his notebooks to find another quotidian madness that pervaded the Boundary, convinced a myth was manifest in its execution. He sat at his desk and opened his cigarette case and saw the pattern, three on each side. He took one out and lit it.

Six. Two threes-thirty-three. Six divided by two threes-two. Twenty-three. Two plus three-five. Thirty-five. Eight. Two more than six. Twenty-six. Prophet.

The answer was always in the pattern and Rue applied himself to its decipherment. An old tale had been revived, or perhaps survived its dormancy, and he suspected its resolution would take more time than another victim would have. He stubbed out the butt in his hubcap ashtray and began to look for the picture on the box.

Four

Three days later, the second body caught the constabulary's attention with an identical autopsy report from the coroner. Rue was rattled by its discovery; he had not expected it to happen so soon. A sense of urgency compelled him as he searched for the correct key to the enigma while the Boundary held its huddled breath. Rue had not seen this kind of reaction to death, and it discomfited him. The Boundary was the end of the line with every breath borrowed callously with no thought of recompense. It was a pattern without meaning in any of its certainty. He searched and found the first piece.

Taboo. The taboo is true. What taboos survive in the Boundary?

The Boundary was no place for innocents. Nothing lived there without consuming something and, in turn, being consumed. It was pre-dawn predation for any and all finding themselves in its confines. Rue wondered if a taboo could become a ritual to be performed by a street Prophet.

Twenty-six. Two plus six. Eight. Ate.

Five

"The Chosen shall not be touched!" the Prophet barked. The scavengers backed away from the corpse, leaving it unmolested in the Prophet's glaring eyes.

Keep the taboo and live, fools.

He smiled and looked down into Rue's face left serene in the Prophet's pattern. They would survive together in the Boundary.



The Ghosts of Eurydice

by That Burnt Writer

"The ghosts," she stammers, "the goddamn *ghosts*. Just run, run as far and as fast as you can."



The distress beacon had done what it was supposed to; dropped us out of hyperspace, provided the location, attributes, and callsign of the ship. It continued broadcasting on the agreed varying intermittent time-lapse frequencies which meant that it'd be interpreted as some remnant of the universe's background radiation for anyone who didn't know what they were looking for.

You couldn't trust anyone these days.

Ever since our first interstellar war had kicked off, things had gotten a lot more complicated. We needed resources to expand but, apparently, we're not the only ones. Where there's competition, there's war.

Politicians spout off on the holo-channels, trying to placate colonists who are, quite understandably, terrified that their new home is going to be the next front line. The alien warships are vast, terrifying, and can crack a planet in half without breaking a sweat. No one wants their local sunrise to be blotted out by one of those damn things, because it'll be the last they'll ever see.

So, humanity's gone off the standard routes with small exploration craft, crewed by fifteen to twenty people. The search for asteroids, planets, anything that we can strip-mine, to fuel the never-ending arms race.

That sort of vessel was what had come up on the displays, a ship called *Eurydice*, out in the wilds looking for its fortune, or perhaps just enough to buy the next set of air recyclers, fuel cells, and food pellets to keep the crew alive.

We'd hailed as we approached, set the sensor arrays running and come up with pretty much nothing. It was probably a small hull breach, all the air out had been sucked out, and the crew had asphyxiated. Quickly, if they were lucky.

As we drew neared, it lit us up with its own scanners, including a scrambled series of dots and dashes, that our AI had determined was a repeating Morse Code pattern. An outdated way of sending messages, sure, but still used in some of the... shadier areas of the galaxy in an attempt to try to keep communications away from the main hypernet.

"APPROACH WITH CARE," it'd translated for us, "USE SECONDARY DOCKING HATCH. LAST SURVIVNG CREW WILL EVACUATE FROM SECURE LOCATION."

"There aren't any life signs though?" the Captain had asked.

“NEGATIVE. HOWEVER, A SECONDARY SCAN INDICATES A SHIELDED AREA WITH ITS OWN LIFE SUPPORT, RUNNING AT MINIMUM CAPACITY WITH DIRECT ACCESS TO THE DOCKING HATCH MENTIONED. ALMOST LIKE A HISTORICAL PANIC ROOM BACK ON EARTH.”

“Interesting. Ok, take us in, usual decontamination procedures.”

A few moments later, we’d watched as the mechanism that led directly to our quarantine area locked on and started a match sequence.



She looks like she’s been stranded for weeks, although it’s likely only been a couple of days according to the beacon metadata that shows when it activated. Frightened eyes from a pale face peer around the corner, her hair lank and dirty. Slowly, as she realises there is no-one in the docking corridor, she ventures through.

“Hello?” she calls, her voice trembling.

“Hello,” a quiet, calming woman’s voice answers over the intercom. “Take the first door on your left, and sit down. We need to sterilise the corridor, just to make sure you’ve brought no alien pathogens in with you. There’s food, water, and a bed. Make yourself at home. What’s your name?”

“Sarah.” Her voice is hushed, timid, but she goes through the door and sits, her eyes darting around the room, before wolfishly cramming food into her mouth. We leave her a few moments before activating the vid-screen on the wall. The ship’s doctor smiles gently.

“Hi Sarah, I’m Julie. We’ve got people about to board the *Eurydice* to try to get to the data logs, but it looks like the rest of your crew have... passed away. Can you tell me what happened?”

The girl stops eating, food halfway to her mouth.

“You can’t go in through the main dock. They’ll kill you all.”

“Who will?”



A metallic clang sounds as we check our pulse rifles one last time.

“MAIN SEQUENCE COMPLETE,” the AI says. “PREPARE FOR BOARDING.”

There’s a brief rush of air as pressures equalize, then we get our first view into the abandoned ship. It’s everything you’d expect it to be, dark, foreboding, and an emergency light flickering just around a corner in the distance.

We’ve all seen the Horror channel on the HoloVids, and know it’s just make-believe. Still, the adrenaline is there as we get into formation and Jayce takes point. After sixty seconds, we’re halfway through the ship and we’ve found nothing. It’s like a genuine ghostship.

Something flits behind us across the corridor. I turn, having caught it in the corner of my eye, but the others laugh at me, tell me I'm too jumpy.



"You don't understand," she yells. "The crew... they aren't dead, but they aren't alive either. I'm not sure they're even human anymore. We had an asteroid we were taking samples from, one of the lab techs got sloppy..."



We're sealed off from our ship, and there's... something here.



"It's airborne, radiation resistant, and you can't stop it. We had it vacuum-sealed, but I think it evaded the biocontainment at a quantum level. The only thing it couldn't penetrate was the lead shielding of the science deck."

She's clearly terrified.

"They're something else, something... inhuman. That's why I call them ghosts, why they won't show up on your scanners. They'll kill you all if you go through the main hatch. They'll..."

She tails off as she sees the doctor's right eye start to twitch.

"It's too late," she screams, "it's here. Get me back into my saferoom!"

She grabs the food and drink and bolts for the door, but it's too late. Quarantine was locked down as soon as she entered.

"You idiots, you've killed us all," she cries, sinking to her knees.

Find the Author



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



The Talentless

by Brent Streeter

The cobbled-street stretched out before me, devoid of people. The buildings that lined it watched in sombre silence, their windows dark and foreboding. I stepped from streetlamp to streetlamp, grateful for their small pools of light that kept the night at bay.

I popped up the collar of my trench-coat, before stuffing my icy hands back into the warm embrace of the coat's pockets to keep a sudden chilling breeze from piercing my bones. The wind swept down the street as if it were my escort.

I glanced about fervently, hoping that my careful watch would deter anyone from thinking I was an easy mark. People often disappeared in the early hours of the morning; only to be found dead, their throats cut and their possessions pilfered. Such was the method of the gangs that prowled the streets when the city slept.

As much as I detested the thought of killing another person, I could not fault those who committed the act. Work was scarce, and the city overcrowded. Life was punishing for those not born into the *Fold*—the city's elite—and the old ways of peddling magic to the outer-cities had died with the last of the magicians. The Fold had since deemed the use of magic heresy, unless you were born of their stock. To be caught wielding magic now was a death sentence.

Once a *talentless* used magic, the Fold always found them and tore them from this life screaming.

The figure of a man detached itself from the shadows a couple of yards ahead of me. The blood froze in my veins. I dared a glance over my shoulder and saw two more figures lurking in the shadows behind me. I silently cursed my luck.

The man shrouded in shadows ahead did not move, content to wait for me to reach him, knowing that I had no choice. Thoughts raced through my mind.

Perhaps I could convince them to let me go once I gave them what they demanded. Or perhaps I could convince them I was not worth the effort.

Each stride brought me closer to the man in shadow, each slow and purposeful step sealing my fate like a funeral process making its way to the burial site.

"Tha's far enough, boy'o," the man said, and I halted within the shimmering pool of a streetlamp.

I took a shaky breath, trying to steady my nerves. The glint of steel that flashed in the man's hands caused me to swallow hard. *I don't want to die*, I thought, *not like this, not here*. I scanned the surrounding buildings, hoping, silently pleading for any signs of help. Anything to deter those that now surrounded me, but I was alone, left to the whims of my assailants.

Words tumbled from my mouth. "I'll give you whatever you want, just please don't kill me!" The last words were a mere squeak.

The man spat.

"Now why would we do a thing like tha'? Let ye run off to flap yer gob abou' our lil' meetin'."

He shook his head as if insulted by the idea.

"No, better to kill ye and take wha's yers. Much easier tha' way."

The man took a step forward into the pool of light as I attempted to take several paces back, bumping up against firm hands that grabbed and held me in place. The gruff voice that belonged to the hands barked.

"Yer not goin' anywhere, you snivelling worm."

I fervently tried to pry loose from the brute's iron grip that held me as the man with the wicked-looking dagger closed the distance. His eyes were hard and cold, his oily smile revealing a scant number of yellowed, rotting teeth. His rancid breath washed over me and I fought against the urge to retch.

Panic replaced fear as the dagger's edge came to rest against the soft flesh of my throat. The men that surrounded me laughed amongst themselves, revelling in my fragile and helpless state, content to drag out my sentence at a leisurely pace. They knew I would not cry out; it would only hasten my death.

I DON'T WANT TO DIE!

The words roared through the swirling chaos of my mind, and all fell silent. The world seemed to slow around me. I could feel the beads of sweat that sluggishly rolled down my face. The increasing pressure of the blade at my throat as it drew the smallest trickle of blood. The tightness in my gut as my bowels threatened to give out, and the stench of fear, so thick in the surrounding air I could almost taste it. My head felt ready to burst at the seams and I could do nothing to relieve the pressure that was building up, engulfing me.

My body vibrated with a silent scream, and the world echoed that vibration. Windows of buildings shattered, sending showers of broken shards pattering against the cobblestone street. The paving cracked and splintered, as if struck by a great unseen weight. The street lamps bent at odd angles.

I felt the hands grasping me go lax and drop away. The man before me wore an expression of confused agony as blood gushed from every orifice. He crumpled to the ground. The dagger clattered to the street beside him. I did not have to check to know that neither he nor his companions would ever rise again.

I trembled with adrenaline. What had I just done!? The talentless could not channel magic! It was an affront to everything the Fold stood for!

I hastily scanned the street for signs of pursuit. The Fold always knew when somebody used magic. Time was against me now. Already, lights were flickering into existence in the buildings around me as people woke from the disturbance.

My life was over. I was now an apostate and there was only one choice left for me to make: run or die at the hands of the Fold.
I ran.

Find the Author

 CreativeScrolls.com

 [@creative_scrolls](https://www.instagram.com/creative_scrolls)



Short Story

Terror Sleeps Over

by Wendy Maxon

The LED mini candles on the white tile counter flickered, casting unsteady shadows over the four teenagers laying out their sleeping bags. Penny claimed the spot next to the fireplace. The host got to make the rules, right? Danica had already downed half a bottle of strawberry Boone's Farm and was flipping through reruns on TV but not really paying attention. She was mostly watching Luuwine. So was Maisy.

Instead of setting out her sleeping bag, Luuwine was helicoptering around the living room, touching all the furniture and lamps as if she'd never seen a house before. She brushed her hands over the couch like *oooooh* and marveled at the glittering blue panels hanging above the fireplace. Luuwine's hair was dark and knotty, and she smelled like a bottle of floral perfume left stewing in an attic for centuries. Her cheeks were sunken, and her green eyes—greener than Penny's, and slightly bulged—sat way too far apart. How had Maisy convinced her to invite this beady-eyed bitch? Must have been a moment of weakness. Penny had suffered a lot of those lately.

Luuwine pressed her rail-thin body against the carved stone of the fireplace mantle. Her shoulder thwacked the pearl-framed picture on the ledge. "Don't touch that," Maisy said, her eyes sliding to Penny. "She'll freak."

"Who is this?"

"Shhh!"

Penny grimaced. Did they think she couldn't handle a simple conversation? "It's my sister. She died three years ago."

"Of the blossoming of the twelve," Luuwine said, her voice breathy. Penny glared at her. They had been in a rush the day the picture was taken, and she'd had to yank her sister's brown hair into a high ponytail while Anna incessantly sang songs Penny loathed. There was no way Anna looked twelve in that photo. Not even with that string of pink pearls around her neck—the ones Anna claimed made her look princessy.

Penny crossed her arms and surveyed the scene. This wasn't how tonight was supposed to go. She'd finally convinced her mom, who normally sequestered upstairs during sleepovers, to join her girlfriends for ladies night and leave them unchaperoned. It had been three *years* since dad split, Penny pleaded. She left out the part where he'd fled a week after Anna's funeral, head tucked low, shirts balled under his arm. Instead, Penny reminded her mom she wasn't getting any younger. *Yes*, Penny knew where the fire extinguisher was. *Yes*, she understood that if she screwed up one more time, she'd never be trusted again. When her mom finally gave an exasperated nod, Penny beamed. She'd killed two birds with one stone. Her mom desperately needed to socialize, and

Penny was ready to have the best night ever. Anything to get her life back to normal again.

How wrong she'd been.

Penny hated how Luuwine was draped over the fireplace. If the girl looked any more boneless, she'd melt onto the hearth. If only she would flow all the way out the front door, but even then, it would be hard to get rid of her. The scent of her zit cream had already baked into the leather couches by now.

Maisy, on the other hand, looked thrilled. She'd rallied for Luuwine, and now her smile could barely fit around her chubby cheeks. Maisy twirled a frayed green friendship bracelet around her wrist even though nobody their age wore them anymore. She'd scrounged it out of Penny's junk drawer, and now the bracelet was as bent as Maisy was. The girl took any scraps you gave her. Still, despite her goofiness, Maisy was a good right-hand woman. She played lookout whenever needed, she made a solid bean burrito, and when Penny shambled onto her doorstep bawling about her sister's accident, Maisy hugged her for hours. If only she weren't so interested in Luuwine.

Penny bitterly regretted having brought those two together. Luuwine had transferred to their school last year, showing up to Bio wearing bright blue braces and milkmaid braids. She never seemed to notice their giggling; instead, she checked her updo in the mirror, twisting each strand so hard Danica swore she yanked out a whole clump. All semester, Luuwine brought weird hippie shit to class—beaded bracelets, old coins—and rubbed them like a genie was about to pop out and grant wishes. Penny finally urged Maisy to strike up a conversation after hearing Luuwine's family owned a huge weed farm upstate; a connection like that could boost their social sway for *years*. But when asked, Luuwine babbled about moon cycles and refused to confirm or deny anything. Eventually they quit hounding her. Too late. After one conversation, Maisy was hooked, and Penny was stuck.

Luuwine retrieved her cornflower yellow sleeping bag from the entryway. She carried it to the fireplace and unrolled it diagonally across Penny's. She didn't even reposition Penny's bag—just carefully lay it over hers like a rug, meticulously smoothing out the nylon. Luuwine checked her watch. Looked at the bag. Checked her watch again. Readjusted half an inch.

Penny's eyes widened. Before she could protest, Danica spat out, "You can't do that."

Luuwine ignored the tipsy girl. She tugged at the corner of her bag, accidentally planting a long footprint across Penny's cushion, expensive North Face Subzero.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Penny elbowed her way through and rubbed away the tread from Luuwine's shoe. She grabbed Luuwine's cornflower bag and flung it in the middle of the living room.

"No, no. It can't go that way," Luuwine said, her voice warbling. Beneath her knitted brows, her eyes glinted acid green. "I need to put it back."

"Hell no you don't."

"It can't stay where it is."

Maisy tiptoed over and whispered in Luuwine's ear. Penny bristled. Maisy got infatuated with anyone who paid her attention, but she'd never betrayed Penny before. Why was she siding with this headcase?

"You don't understand." Luuwine picked up her bag from where it landed in the center of the room. "He won't allow it." The bag dragged behind her as she measured exactly nine steps to the fireplace. When she counted aloud, the tremble in her voice matched the flickers of the fake candles.

"What's she doing?" Penny hissed to Danica.

Danica blanched, her tawny skin taking on the color of a parsnip. "I don't know!"

Maisy helped Luuwine rearrange the bag. "Don't treat it like that," Luuwine said, grabbing Maisy's hand. "Like this, see?" She sunk to her knees and kneaded the fabric with her knuckles. "It won't break open if you don't do it right." As Luuwine rubbed the quilting in the middle, a beatific look spread across her face.

Danica side-eyed Penny, but Penny placed her hand on Danica's shoulder. She pantomimed for Danica to get the steak knife from the kitchen.

A wormlike shape wriggled in the center of Luuwine's golden bag. They stared at it, transfixed. "What is that?" Penny mouthed.

"It's here!" Luuwine lovingly patted the cornflower bag. "It's here, it's here!"

A misshapen blob the size of a rose bubbled up from a rip at the top. Red and soft, like two puffy petals. Luuwine plucked them, attaching them to her face at a slightly askew angle. A set of lips. A half-formed mouth. Two white baby teeth poked through both plump lips, each tooth rotted and sticking out in its own direction. Luuwine smiled wide, and her second lips smiled wider. In the flickering light, her two fused jack-o-lantern grins glowed.

"Now we begin!" Luuwine beamed at the sleepover guests.

Danica, who had returned clutching a steak knife, took one look at Luuwine and gagged. "What the—?"

"That's okay," Luuwine said. She stood and descended onto Danica, massaging her knuckles up and down Danica's arms while the girl stood frozen in terror. "You'll be okay now."

Adrenaline coursed through Penny's body. She stood by the grid of sleeping bags, watching to see what Luuwine did next. The long-haired troll with the fleshy, red butterfly of a mouth had quickly gone from your standard pity invite to a total wild card. Penny had to find a way to get her out of the house, now, before her mom got back. If her mom discovered she'd let a maniac roam around their home, she'd be grounded for years. Worse.

Penny mustered her most authoritative voice. "You need to go. This is getting weird, and you're making a mess. Grab your stuff. Sorry, Mais."

"I'm afraid I can't." Luuwine moved slowly toward Penny. "I have a surprise for you all. You're ready."

"Nope. Time to go." The air in the room had gone cold, and the chemical smell of the opened packets of skincare masks on the coffee table stung Penny's nose. She stormed to the sleeping bags to chuck Luuwine's on the lawn. But she heard Luuwine moving quickly and looked up.

"Come," Luuwine said to Penny, all smiles as she advanced. A thin yellow strand sparkled in each of Luuwine's eyes, like Edison lightbulbs firing up. Her gums were reddened and inflamed, bursting out between her teeth and over the wires of her braces. Were they filled with blood or flowering velvet petals? Ugh – Penny's brain felt foggy. If only Luuwine would stop leering like that.

"Have you heard of the liminal threshold?" Luuwine asked. "It's where we exist in time. The transitional passage between our two stages of being: the simple, and the *real*. We can stay here forever, if we're scared. But we don't have to. Not if we know the secret."

Penny set her jaw. "Get out of my house."

"I'm tired of hanging in the imbalance. It's boring! We have an opportunity—not on this plane of existence, but the one just next to it. We need to twist our world to get there." Luuwine dreamily looked at the ceiling. "Offer a gift to the one who knows how, and he'll tell us the secret to life."

"Does he want our blood?" Maisy asked. Penny shot her a look.

"A different gift. Special."

Penny blinked rapidly. This was getting scary. What if they were in serious danger? If someone ended up hurt, Penny's mom was going to hear about it on the news anyway. Her cellphone was on the other side of the room. If she could get past Luuwine, she could punch in 911 and send the freak to prison where she belonged.

Luuwine glanced at the wall clock. "Almost midnight," she whispered, the glee practically bursting out of her pointy cheekbones. "That's when his real lessons can begin. But..." Her smile dropped. "If we don't put up a Redbird as collateral before he comes, he'll skip our house."

"What's a red bird?" Maisy asked.

"Shut the fuck up, Maisy!" Penny yelled.

Luuwine pouted. "We can't live without it!"

Maisy looked dumbstruck at Penny. For the first time in what felt like years, Penny exhaled in relief. *Finally* someone needed her guidance. She broke into a wide grin and opened her mouth, ready to let Luuwine really have it. Then the counting began.

"Six, four, the heart of the three." The mixed-up numbers spilled from Luuwine's lips like gibberish. "Five, five, seven hearts, five, three, five." Luuwine turned to the array of electronic tealights on the counter. "I know," she told them as they flickered. "But it's what he wants."

One by one, a small orange flame—a real one—burst up from each LED. As Luuwine counted, the candle flames rose and fell by inches, shifting from spark to torch at her

command. The other girls reeled backward, staring at the fire. Penny's stomach tightened. Luuwine had gone completely off the rails and gained total control all at once.

Luuwine's last count rang out as clear as bells. "Twelve." The flames roared high, then extinguished completely.

Maisy's face contorted. It sucked inward several inches, as if a giant unseen finger had poked her in the center of her nose, and her eye sockets and cheeks sunk in around the dent. After a fraction of a second, her features resettled, and she smoothed back into her old self. Icy prickles shot down Penny's spine.

"Don't worry," Maisy said. "We can get you a red bird."

"No!" Penny yelled.

"You can't hurt me," Luuwine said to Penny, her eyes bulging to gumdrop size. "But he might destroy you, if we don't find one."

Penny shuddered, speechless. Was this really the girl who couldn't dissect a frog two days ago? She had to stop her. If Penny lost one more person she cared about, her brain and heart wouldn't be able to hang on.

Over by the kitchen, Danica looked like she might throw up. Normally it was fun to see Danica struggle to hold her liquor, but this was urgent. That knife was Penny's ticket to getting across the room. A wave of drunkenness must have hit Danica because she quickly bent and dropped the knife to the ground. It plonked against the wooden floor and bounced several feet. Penny inched toward it.

Luuwine pointed to Danica. "She can be our Redbird! But we only have ten minutes to get her ready." Luuwine crept to her sleeping bag, crouched, and raked her spindly fingers across it.

Screw the knife plan. This was Penny's chance. She tried to bolt to her phone across the room but plowed into Maisy, who had set herself up as guard to keep her out of the ritual space. "Move!" Penny yelled, but Maisy shook her head and grabbed Penny's arm. Penny writhed, but Maisy held fast, forcing her to look down.

From the center of the rip in the golden sleeping bag, Luuwine plucked two sticks, like barren branches, each a foot in length. She aimed them at Danica's hunched body. Behind them sounded a loud thunk. Penny and Maisy whipped their heads around to look at Danica. She had fallen to the ground in a fetal position.

A straw-like shape poked out the middle of Danica's back and climbed upward, ripping through her pink pajama-clad flesh as it grew. Penny gasped. She broke free and ran to Danica, nearly retching when she looked down. A neat red slash blazed across Danica's exposed back, from which sprouted new, branchlike offshoots. They multiplied like wildfire, elongating until they resembled the thin twigs scattered beneath the mulberry tree in Penny's backyard. Danica writhed and groaned. Another stick sprouted, then another, then brown, jagged nuggets of tree bark. Five, seven, ten pieces across her back, then too many to count.

Penny desperately cried out to her, but Danica's face distorted in pain, and she stopped making any noises other than whimpers. Was this actually happening, or was

PTSD making Penny's mind slip? Her vision kept fading and tilting, making it hard to tell whether the thicket on Danica's back was real, or whether something even worse might erupt from beneath it. The scattered brown mess of sticks and roots was growing into something vibrant and earthy, a big, pulsing pile of mulch. A relentless garden Penny couldn't tear her eyes away from.

"Go faster!" Luuwine called to the rising clump of brush. "Three more minutes to midnight! He can't see the Redbird in this stage!"

Luuwine braced her hand on Maisy's shoulder. Her blue braces had twisted up, giving her a Cheshire cat grin, sharp white teeth and all. Maisy stood in a trance, eyes glazed.

Luuwine inhaled joyfully. "He won't accept any treasures without our scent. He needs to smell our essence." Her eyes shone pale green; their yellow filaments sizzled and burned. "It's in our oils, our sweat. But he needs *more*. To access our primal selves, he needs our *tension*. I've been channeling your physical essence and emotional energy all year. Can't you feel that joy? The excitement? The tang of accidental urine, from an anxious bladder held just too long while we wait, we wait, we wait..." She strode to Danica and stroked her hair before speaking again. "The sour stench is what makes it the purest. He must know the ocean of the room into which he descends."

Danica's voice, once rich and confident, was now a frantic whinny. "I'm scared."

"Yes, that's it. Perfect. *Primal*." Luuwine shyly hugged herself. "Now he can answer our question. It's our miracle!"

Luuwine dug in the pocket of her dress and pulled out her offering: a small silver coin, the kind she'd played with during class. She held it up for them to see, then dropped it onto the back of Danica's bowed head. It hit her crown, slid, and got lost in the curls of her hair.

Penny tried to focus. She couldn't afford to do nothing. Something terrible was about to happen in three minutes, and she had no intention of seeing what it was. The knife was only a few yards away from her. She could snatch it, hold off Luuwine, and run for the door.

Penny sprang for the knife, but her arm fell short. Her body thudded on the ground. Pain radiated through her shoulder. She bit down, trying to shake off the throbbing and dizziness, and willed herself to concentrate only on the knife in her sightline. Grunting, she wriggled closer to the weapon.

A pair of silver shoes blocked Penny's hand. Luuwine bent down, her cheek mere inches from Penny's, and touched her face. The slimy feeling of those long, otherworldly fingers made Penny gag, but then her vision went hazy. Her brain felt both vast and shrinking all at once. She blacked out for a moment, and when she came to again, she was standing upright again.

Disoriented, Penny tore her sight away from the beastly mess that was Danica and stumbled to the kitchen. She needed to regroup in a place where she could breathe again, to erase what she had seen with the familiar whiteness of the cabinets and

cupboards. This was where she and her friends always hung out, back when her friends were normal and not tiptoeing around her sister's death. Penny staggered through the space, touching all the recognizable surfaces: the smoothness of the white marble counter, the arc of the chrome fridge handle. Her real friends used to sit on the sleek, tall stools, gorging themselves on bowls brimming with popcorn, and when the special mahogany cabinet was left unlocked, they smuggled out Belvedere. The kitchen was normally a bright yellow, a paint color her mom had insisted on to combat the leaden cloud of depression that loomed over them after Anna's death. But now the dim ceiling lights bathed the room in a sickly glow, more corpse-like than comforting.

Penny stopped and sniffed the air. It smelled pungent, and there were little *splat* sounds too, like something was dripping. She examined the room. It wasn't the farmhouse sink—nothing was plinking against the steel. No, it was more distant, and now fast enough to be a trickle. It was coming from the living room.

Voices rose from the living room—hushed at first, then more insistent. Some kind of chanting, but Penny couldn't grasp the words in her clouded state. She stepped closer to the doorway and concentrated. "The puddle is forming," she thought she heard. "Invert the redbird. Count the droplets." Whatever they were reciting involved some kind of... pattern? She couldn't clear her head enough for anything to stick.

The kitchen walls were leaning in, and the stretch of paint above the dishwasher was puckered, like the fur on a tennis ball. A smattering of pink pearly diamonds poked through the yellow wall, like studs on a leather jacket. Penny's first instinct was to count them – *count the droplets*, they had said. Her mind felt way too loose. Anna had been wearing her pearls around her neck three years ago, on that horrible night she ran into a lightning storm and was struck. According to the coroner, when the bolt hit the puddle of water beside Anna, the blast had shot up her left leg all the way to her heart, and back down her right leg.

Penny raised her hand and raked her fingers lightly along the wall. The first pearl felt cool to the touch, smooth, and gritty, just like the ones she'd secured around Anna's neck. Penny scraped her fingers against two more pearls, three. They were rigid, but the wall was supple and wavy, and when she dragged her hand further across it, her middle and ring fingers melted through and fell into nothingness.

Penny jumped and yanked her hand back. The pearls on the wall glowed crimson red, and her ring and index fingers dripped long, thick streams of blood. She could smell metal, though she knew she hadn't cut herself. In fact, she couldn't feel a thing. Her fingertips had been stripped of their nerve endings.

"Turn her, she has turned, she has turned," the voices in the living room droned, which startled Penny from her reverie. She ran to the kitchen entryway to see what had become of Danica.

When she got there, she had to squint to figure out what was going on. The huddled mass on the wooden floor was Danica, but backwards and...restructured? The forest along Danica's spine had been peeled away and placed beneath her, with Danica, still

fetal, nestled facedown inside. Her barren back was now a pulsing, meaty atrocity sprinkled with shoelace-long strips of pink cotton and bloodied skin.

Invert the Redbird.

Penny forehead was on fire. The aching was so acute she thought her eyes might burst from their sockets. She tried to rub her temples, no longer caring about the blood on her fingertips, but she gasped when she felt two hard, stick-shaped protrusions where her eyebrows should be. She moved her fingers along her head, feeling each new growth — now four, five, six.

Terror gripped her.

Snippets from the worst evening of her life flooded her consciousness. All those memories she'd refused to touch over the past three years, panicked that they would bury her, flashed through her mind. The rain pounding against the concrete while thunder cracked in their ears. Her mother's shrieks at the realization that Anna's fate was inescapable. The way she screeched, "You're so irresponsible...how could you be so irresponsible?" at Penny before dissolving into a heap on the front porch. Penny's own tears streaking her face, mixed with feelings of such guilt and self-loathing she wanted to shatter into a billion pieces, becoming pulverized into dust.

Desperation stirred deep in her soul. She hated touching those nubs on her forehead but couldn't stop running her fingers from one to the next. Penny wanted to call out for her mother, to feel her arms wrapped around her broad shoulders one last time, calming her in a reassuring embrace. To hear her melodic voice promising that even if the world was falling in, and everything was twisting and inverting like those slippery water wiggler tubes she and Anna played with as kids, that at least they still had each other. But she couldn't force her mom to come home now. The woman had suffered enough. The thought of her walking through that bile-yellow kitchen only to witness another young girl crouched and cowering in distress; whimpering as this second girl faded out, her bloodshot eyes at last glazing over...Penny couldn't put her mother through that. She'd have to shoulder it alone. Penny couldn't be a pathetic Danica-thing, a pathetic little baby bird in a nest. She *wouldn't*.

The grandfather clock in the hallway erupted in a loud, ominous *bong*, one after another. After twelve loud chimes, the house stilled. Anticipation crackled in the air.

A plume of smoke rose from the mustard sleeping bag, tunneling over each sleepover guest one by one, devouring them. The smoke tornado went for Maisy first, but quickly dissipated and headed for Luuwine, who beamed and closed her eyes, gleeful to be swallowed up. The smoke left Luuwine and went for Danica, violent in its search. It knocked the Redbird out of her nest and rolled her across the wooden floor, leaving twisted smears of blood in her wake.

"He's here!" Luuwine screamed with delight.

The funnel of smoke was morphing now, flattening out into a round, dense cloud swirling above the nest. The thick puff of gray moved steadily, its outer edges swelling up and out like hundreds of flickering candles, or whitecaps on a beach. Its movements

were slow, languid, as if gratified by the attention and the offering. Penny stared at it, mesmerized. She knew she needed to run. To get to the front door or through that bendable kitchen wall and flee from Luuwine and this gray beast as fast as she could. And yet she couldn't. There was something too compelling about the shape. Its *contents*. It looked gray, but white and purple too, with dashes of black spiraling across it. Was that a burst of yellow, a spindle of pink? It broke through her consciousness. The last time she had seen something so bright but undefinable was the night Anna wriggled free from Penny's grasp and burst into the storm.

The cloud licked up the nest as it rose up and down, expanding until it permeated the ceiling and surrounding walls. It washed over Penny as well. The sensation ignited her, electrifying and restoring her. The wisps curling around her made her throw her shoulders back. She could tame this thing. The bolt of lightning she'd been missing from her life ever since she'd failed to save Anna finally shot through her. Anna couldn't withstand the storm, but Penny could. She could protect them all.

At last, the nest was sopped up entirely, funneled into the cloud's murky center until the only thing left on the ground was the husk of Danica and the remnants of her blood. The remainder of the smoke tunneled towards Penny, and she could feel the other girls gawking at her. But Penny smiled. The plume of smoke couldn't touch her face. Instead, it hung in the air, circling the crown of branches sticking out from her forehead.

"You're the earth mother," a voice from the cloud rasped into her ear. "You're the way through."

Penny rose and floated toward the fireplace, with a layer of dense gray mist cradling her feet. Triumphant, she soared past Maisy, Luuwine, and the broken egg that was Danica, until she reached the framed photograph of the person who mattered most. The fog softly deposited Penny onto the golden bag. Her home. The twigs burst from Penny's skull and shot to the ground like darts. Rivulets of blood dribbled from the wounds.

As if beckoned by a subterranean force, the cloud was sucked back down through the rip in the golden sleeping bag. Once again, silence settled over the room.

"It was you all along," Luuwine said in awe. "That's his lesson." She bowed her head low.

"Hand me my cellphone," was Penny's response.

Maisy blinked and trotted to the opposite side of the room to fetch Penny's phone. She, too, bowed when she handed it over.

She could finally call the police, Penny realized. Call up 911 and send Danica to the hospital and Maisy to juvey and Luuwine to whatever asylum best suited her. Get her life in control and return to normal, burrowing into the predictable daily grind.

But she had more important things to do.

Everything will be okay, she texted her mother. *You can trust me*. Her searing pain was finally gone.

Penny stepped down from her golden throne and strode to Danica, who lay starfished on her stomach. "This is how you bow," Penny said. She bent to the ground and nestled her phone in the fleshy cavity that was once Danica's back.

"For you," they chanted. "For your protection, we will count the droplets."

Penny grinned, loving it all.

"By midnight tomorrow, leave your pearls and colored glass in the nest," Penny commanded Luuwine.

The frame surrounding the photo of Penny and Anna gleamed.



Survival of the Fittest

by Nancy E. Dunne

It was always this way - no sooner had I shut the car door my phone would ring. I start the car and hit answer on the phone.

"Miss... um... MacDonald?"

"Speaking." I knew what the call was about before the caller stumbled over my name. The panic hidden in the words, the uncertainty in the hitching voice, all of it adding up to someone in need of help. Someone who couldn't believe what was happening to them any more than they could believe they were saying any of these words out loud. "You still there?"

"Yes ma'am." There is a pause and a gulp so loud that I hear it through the phone. "I... I need your help because, I need to—"

"What sort of ghost is giving you trouble, Love?" I ask, finishing the thought for her.

"I'm in the basement of the theatre on campus and there is... something is—" The line goes dead with a loud click. I swear and put the car in gear to head for the theatre. Loud laughter fills the car suddenly, fueling my annoyance.

"Knock it off," I call out to the empty passenger seat. "Either come help me or leave me to it, Mamó." The laughter fades as a warm feeling spreads through my chest. "I will help her, I promise. Love you, and Ma too."

Minutes later, I'm parked in front of the theatre and walking toward the large glass doors. A girl is waiting there, eyes wide, and she pushes open the door for me to enter. "Miss MacDonald?"

"I didn't catch your name on the phone," I answer. Something was wrong here. "You said there was something in the basement?" The girl nods. I follow her into the building and down the never-ending stairs.

I am Scarlet, spelled with one T like the oak tree for which I was named. I am of the mountains that surround the sleepy college. I leave tributes for the old gods and stay out of the way of the new ones. Protect the ancestors from the world and the humans. Well, from the lot of them. I keep the shrines, as did my mother, and her mother, and so on through the women in my family.

Tonight, I'm focused on the job at hand in the dismal dressing room under the theatre. I move at a dead creep, eyes wide in the darkness. The girl, who never did give me her name, has long since fled in terror. Typical.

"I know you're here." Nothing. "These are college kids. Come with me and leave them alone."

The voice feels like a purr up my spine. "I will not. They asked for me. Shoo!"

"They didn't grasp what they were doing, you know that. You need to come with me." I see her finally, levitating a few feet about the floor and glaring at me.

"Well, I'm here now. They called me. Don't you ask me to leave this spot or tell me to leave those students alone." Massive arms, all six of them, fold across her chest in a strange braided-looking knot of skin and bone.

I scowl. This is going on way too long, and I have other things to do. Other shrines to visit, other fires to put out, both literal and figurative. "Is there anything I can ask you?"

"Sure. Just not those things. What do you want?"

"Stop showing up naked." Parts of her that I never wanted to know about, let alone see with my very own eyes, shake as she laughs.

The purr returns, and I brush it off my shoulder as though it was a solid touch. She unfolds her arms and stands, giving a shake that I'm sure was for my benefit, and then tries to rise to her full height. Her braided green locks brush the ceiling of the dressing room and remove a bit of the popcorn coating thankfully installed to make the room soundproof. I did not need a nosey art student coming in to see what was going on in the theatre space.

"Now then, I have a gift for you if you will come along with me." I retrieve a small package of flavoured tobacco from my coat pocket and she grins as soon as the paper that contains the leaves unfurls and releases the scent of cinnamon and cloves.

"Oh, that is nice," she says, holding out about four of her hands and giggling like a child.

"Nope. You have to come with me first and promise me not to return to these children, no matter how much their call intrigues you." I look pointedly at her, watching her face transform from its natural state back into that of a young woman in her twenties, with caramel colored skin and long dark hair that hung in rope-like locks halfway down her back. "Clothes too, please?"

She huffs loudly as a bright orange sweater and a worn pair of blue jeans appear, wrapping her lithe form in the decency required to walk out the front door. "Better?"

I nod and she falls in beside me as I tuck the tobacco back into my pocket.

Just before I open the door, I look down and notice that her feet are bare. I point at her well-manicured toes which are soon covered in a pair of tennis shoes.

"Thank you." I hold the door for her and she pauses in the stairwell, hands outstretched. "Nope, you have to leave the building first, you know the rules." Snarling softly, she bounds up the stairs ahead of me and makes a break for the door. I lift my hand as my foot touches the top step, and the door slams shut just in time for her to bounce off the invisible barrier. "I meant first before I gave you the tobacco, not first as in before me. No telling where you'd go."

We step out into the moonlight and I extend my hand. She glares at me. Her appearance may be of a young woman, but her eyes are that of the ancient wraith: amber with a faint glow. The younger the creature the bluer the eyes, so this one is very old indeed. Very old, but not very clever.

“Back to where you came from, never to tread here again.” As I speak the words of the charm that my mother and grandmother taught me, I press the tobacco pouch into her hand and with my finger draw a spiral on the back. She grimaces and fades from view, as they always do.

The laugh I hear in the air has lost its purr.

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X

by Jack Croxall

I spend all of my daylight hours **scared and alone** in this musty old **cellar**.

It's woeful and I bet it smelled this bad even before everything turned to shit. Great. My second sentence and I've already resorted to swearing. When I decided I'd start this diary (five minutes ago when I got a tiny sliver of signal) I thought it would be my poetic and deeply moving goodbye to the world. Maybe I'd write about love and loss, or maybe the splendour of nature. Then, when all is done and dusted, I'd have left something to be remembered by. **As well as my corpse**, of course.

This was a bad idea.



Okay, I'm an idiot. There's nothing else I can do down here. I've rooted through every cardboard box a hundred times, organised and reorganised my supplies, I've even built a fort. So, I'm back. Hello. Again. God, this diary is going badly.

But there's just enough light coming through the boards I nailed over the cellar's tiny window to type by. So I may as well type. Stops me staring up at the window just waiting for a shadow to pass by.

Maybe I'll just write and not hit *Submit*. Right, where to start? Well, my name is – actually, I think I'm going to refer to myself as 'X'. That sounds mysterious. If you're reading this and want to know my real name, I still carry my purse. My railcard is in there and, if you really want to know who I am, go find me and fish it out. I won't bite...

So, my name is X. I live in a little English village in the middle of nowhere. Before all *this* happened, I had a mum, a dad, a sister and there was a boy I liked, his name was Jonah.



I couldn't think of anything else to write so I waited until I came back from my rounds. That's the stupid name I have for when I go outside at night scrounging for stuff. Drinks are the hardest. I only trust bottles or cans, or did, and I was running out of places to search for them. But I guess that doesn't matter now.

My leg is doing alright actually; didn't hold me up at all. I saw Jonah too. He's looked better, I have to say. It's strange because this is only the second time I've seen him since we came here. Maybe his ears were burning.

Anyway, I found some tinned pineapple in a creepy old caravan I hadn't searched yet. Had to bust the door open with Old Trusty – which I thought might attract some

unwanted attention – but it was fine. I'm actually eating the pineapple right now, tastes good. I also found a radio in there. I already have three down here, but none of them work. Not that the caravan radio works either, all you get is static. It's just nice to collect something. You know, to have a hobby.



I can tell the sun is rising. I managed to sleep for a couple of hours, but I woke up after a bad dream. I know some people can remember their dreams, but I never do. I wake up and grasp at them, but I never manage to hold on before they fade away. It's like trying to pinch the corner of a wisp of smoke; the harder you try, the quicker it fades to nothing. I'm just left with a sensation, a kind of imprint which sums up the most intense part of the dream.

And a cold sweat. **That's new.**



I've been through the box of photo albums I found at the back of the cellar again. I've looked through them a few times now, but I always notice something new.

There's a photo of this little girl playing with a pretend guitar. I can tell it's pretend because it doesn't have strings, only brightly-coloured plastic dials. Kind of like *My First Guitar Hero* or something. The girl has dark hair and she looks a tiny bit like my sister did a million years ago. I don't have a picture of my sister. I suppose I could go and get one from my old house, but it's right in the middle of the village. I'm lucky I wasn't torn to shreds the last time I went back. So, what I've done is put this girl's photo in my back pocket as a substitute.

I guess I should probably write something about my real sister now. But I don't think that's a good idea just yet.



Daylight is starting to fade and I'm getting ready to go out on my rounds. I always take my satchel with me, packed with useful objects. I have Old Trusty (a crowbar) which sticks out of the top for easy access, a small toolbox, a pair of heavy-duty gloves (there's a good story about how I got those, I might write that one down later) and a hammer. I carry a penknife I found down here in my pocket, my purse and phone, and a torch in my hand.

I don't like to use the torch because its battery is running out and there's always the chance it might attract *them*. I probably shouldn't have used it last night when I got back. Maybe I'm starting to enjoy this writing malarkey? I need to be careful with luxuries.



Okay, that **could have gone better.**

Picture the scene: I'm using Old Trusty to try and lever a kitchen window open, when one of them just walks right through the garden hedge. Seriously, straight through it. It's not the mightiest of hedges but, still, it just appeared like it was walking through one of those Japanese paper walls. My satchel was on the ground, but I legged it anyway. I'm not stupid. I know I can go back for it tomorrow. I felt strangely naked without it on the way back here though.

Like I said before, I need to be careful with the torch so I think I'll try and get some sleep now.



I slept pretty well last night; no nightmares or cold sweats. Maybe a midnight chase was just what I needed to blow away the cobwebs.

I actually woke up wondering about you. If you're reading this, who are you? If you're like me, living through this village nightmare, how have you managed to go this long without being killed or whatever? Maybe you're Army or some such. Maybe you're just some kid who's played so many videogames that surviving all of this was already second nature to you. Or maybe you're like me; living on borrowed time and searching for a good place to die. Maybe Future Me was brave enough to tap *Submit* on my diary and you're currently reading this on your phone or computer.

Here's an idea. Maybe you can carry on this diary from wherever I left it at. God, I really hope this isn't my last entry, although I suppose any entry might be. If you do carry the diary forwards, and I'm a corpse, maybe it will become cursed. **Spooky.**



I've been preparing for my next excursion.

If I know I'm going somewhere I'll likely run into an ugly, I like to take extra precautions. And I want my satchel back. It was a present from my dad, and I know it cost him a lot of money.

So, I'm taking a pair of shears from the shelf of old tools down here. That way, if I lose Old Trusty, I'll have a backup weapon.

If you are local, I wonder how you like to kill them? Pretty morbid question I know, but everyone around here seems to have their preferred method. The last villager I saw alive carried a pair of mini cricket bats and seemed to have bludgeoning down to an art form. He never saw me though, I was watching from a grove of trees as he killed his way along the main road near the village.

That was before I decided to stay inside during the daylight hours. We can at least see a little bit at night; ambient light and everything. They can't though. I've seen them, they bump into things. It's pretty funny to be honest. If they hear a noise, they walk in the direction of the sound, never trying to avoid any object in their path. They either bash said object out of the way, or, like that hedge, blunder right through it. Obviously

bigger things stop them dead (ha!) though. If that happens, they sort of shuffle backwards and then try again a few times. Eventually – and I've seen this too – they just give up and stand there, waiting for something else to attract their attention.

That's **not how it works in the daytime** though.



I think it's about an hour before the sun sets so it's nearly time to head out. I'm going to change my bandage. One minute.

Okay, it didn't look that bad really. The original scratch wasn't too deep and now the wound seems to be doing that scabbing thing I remember from normal injuries. It just doesn't smell very good. A bit like when you walk past a bin that needs emptying.

Anyway, I've applied more antiseptic and redressed it. Time to go.



That was fun. I'm glad I had those shears with me.

I got my satchel back you'll be happy to know. And I got inside that house I'd been trying to break into as well. More through necessity than choice in the end, but I'm pleased I did. I found more batteries! That means I can justify writing at night a bit more. In fact, the people who used to live there (I think the husband owned the local garage) were pretty well kitted out. There were a lot of tins in their cupboards, and they'd even left a shotgun. It wasn't loaded though.

Not that I need a shotgun. I didn't tell you this before, but I have my grandpa's old service revolver. He always told me and my sister that it was decommissioned, but my dad apparently knew otherwise. I keep it tucked into the back of my jeans at all times. It had three bullets, one of them is gone, so only two left.

I'll only be needing the one of course.



Morning. I'm feeling pretty low today. I think concentrating on getting my satchel back took my mind off things, but now I feel pretty deflated.

Surely that's understandable? The village I knew and loved has been replaced with this sodding hell. I miss my family, my friends, TV and hot dinners and Instagram. Before all of this I was a pretty positive person. Sure, I had a bit of trouble getting up in the morning, but, once I was up, that was it. I'd meet the day's challenges head on, try to enjoy myself as much as I could. Not today though.

Maybe if I write about Jonah I'll cheer up. Not Jonah as he is now of course, Jonah when he was all smooth-skinned, curly-haired and bright-eyed. Now he's like the anti-Jonah or something. His face looks like it lost a fight with an angry lobster. No, wait, I'm supposed to be writing about Jonah version one here.

He's one of those people that I can't remember meeting. My family has always lived around here and so there are lots of people who have just always *been*, if you get me. I always thought we would drunkenly get it together at a party – that's what I'd usually do if there was a boy I liked. Classy.



I've perked up a bit. Out of sheer frustration I went upstairs (naughty, I know) and looked out of a window. Sure, I saw an ugly, wandering aimlessly as they always do, but I saw that the trees are starting to turn too. That means it's nearly autumn, and I love autumn!

My sister and I always used to go out and kick leaves at each other in the autumn. I don't know if it was because of her low centre of gravity, but my sister was amazing at it. She could somehow whip up a blazing whirlwind of golden-yellow and fire-red, surrounding us both in a leaf storm that I couldn't help but flail my arms madly at. Then we'd both fall backwards into the leaves laughing, me wondering how on earth what had happened was possible. She was that good.

God, **I let her down in the end.**



I think I'll stay away from the house with the shotgun tonight. It usually takes a day or two for a group of uglies to disperse once they're all riled up. I could use the rest of that tinned food I suppose, but I've got plenty to be getting on with for now.

Instead, I think I'll swing by another farmhouse I was scoping out before I decided to turn nocturnal. I never met the people who used to live there, but I remember Mum telling me they liked their privacy. I'm sure they wouldn't mind me visiting now though.

Also, there's a woodland between here and there and I might be able to find some leaves to kick about a bit. I think that would make me feel close to my sister again.

I'll check back in later.



I'm **still alive**, but only just.

I made it through the woods just fine (only the odd leaf on the forest floor at the moment though, sadly), the trouble started at the farmhouse. I couldn't get in – the doors and windows were barricaded – so I tried one of the outbuildings. Locked. It had a cat flap though.

My first instinct was to leave it, but then I wondered if there might be something useful inside. Lord knows what thinking about it now. I lifted the cat flap with one hand and shone the torch beam through with my other. That's when an ugly dived at my pinkies. Luckily, it misjudged its leap and got a mouthful of plastic cat flap instead. As for me, I fell backwards onto my bum.

Next, the damn thing started bashing on the door from the inside. I don't think it could ever have got out, but the noise attracted more uglies from out of nowhere. I only just managed to outmanoeuvre them and hightail it back into the woods.

That's not the worst of it though. On the way back my leg started to hurt. A lot.



I woke up this morning and I'm walking with a limp. It's funny, Dad had a limp when he and Mum died. He was nailing planks of wood across our windows and doors because there was no signal (as per bloody usual) and we thought that what was happening here was probably happening everywhere. It's only recently that I realised this was an isolated, local outbreak. Anyway, Dad dropped the hammer onto his toe, he always was useless at DIY. I think it was only a couple of hours after that when he and Mum were taken.

It was like a wave of death. No, not like, that's exactly what it was. A hoard of uglies swept through the village, probably originating from the secret research facility in the woods we're not supposed to know about. My sister and I wouldn't have had a prayer if Mum and Dad hadn't charged down the first few that got into our house. They gave us just enough time to escape, to run away and leave them to die. My sister was screaming all the way and I had to drag her like she was four again.

She wouldn't speak to me for a few days after that. I didn't blame her, I hated myself too. But I would have hated myself even more if I hadn't done what I did next. On my own, I snuck back into our house with the crowbar I found here. Then I dispatched my parents. I can't bring myself to type it any other way. It wasn't like in the movies, I didn't pound their skulls into mush whilst sobbing, 'Why?' over and over again. I just found them, or what was left of them, forced the crowbar through each of their eye sockets, and came straight back here.

Then came the crying.



I haven't told you about the heavy-duty gloves yet, have I?

After I got back from our old house, my sister started speaking to me again. A shared, day-long cry will do that for sisters. Once we felt up to it, we decided to explore the parts of the farmhouse we hadn't searched yet. All the bedrooms were empty, only a few belongings flung about the place (I suspect the previous tenants left in a hurry). The problem came when we investigated the attic. Once we'd opened the ceiling panel in the upstairs hallway, once we'd pulled the compact staircase down, I went up. My sister stood at the top of the hatchway shining the torch beam over my shoulder. And that's when it touched me. Terrified, I fell to my left, screaming as the thing came crashing down on top of me. I was yelling things like, 'Shoot it!' and, 'Run!' but my sister was just

laughing her head off. I soon realised that my attacker was in fact a shop-window mannequin.

I think the people who previously lived here must have been arty (or into some seriously freaky stuff) because the mannequin was dressed in scarves, bandannas, ties, watches – loads of things. The rest of the attic was pretty empty but at least we got the mannequin's gloves.



I'm not feeling good at the moment. I've got a sore throat and I've coughed up blood a couple of times. My leg pain is getting worse too.

I don't think I'll go out tonight. I have enough tins left and one of them is a *Full English In A Can*. Sounds pretty disgusting, but intriguing at the same time. I've been saving it for near the end. A sort of consolation prize.



There are two mattresses down here. Obviously one is mine, and the other one was my sister's. After she died, I couldn't bring myself to get rid of it. I don't have a photo of her, only Guitar Girl's. Her bed is the only thing of hers I have left. And she didn't even sleep in it that many times.



The tinned *Full English* was vile! You've got to laugh though, what else can you do?



I'm **crying as I write this**. Tears of sorrow, shame and regret.

It happened as we were searching a cottage just off of the main road. We'd used Old Trusty to get inside, and I'd rushed straight into the kitchen to find the food. We'd run out more than a day before and I was famished. My sister followed me into the kitchen, a wide grin on her pretty little face because I was sitting there with an open can of beans. Then one of them came at her from behind. I must have walked right past it on my stupid way to the cupboards. It bit into her neck and blood gushed over the tiles in a torrent. As she yelled out in agony, I leapt up and implanted the crowbar right into the thing's skull. It crumpled to the floor, but the damage was done.

'*Don't let me lose myself.*' That was the last thing my sister whispered to me before she passed out. Her wound was much more severe than mine is, and much closer to the brain. That seems to make it quicker. I took grandpa's revolver from behind my back and blew her brains out.

I **buried her** in the back garden.



After my sister died I went kind of crazy. I took Old Trusty out across the fields and pulverised every ugly I could find. I don't even remember it that well, it was just, find, kill, find, kill...

We'd only been going out in daylight before then but, in my anger, I carried on through the nights. That's how I learned about their inability to evade in darkness. Eventually, though, one got me. I found three munching on a dead cow and ran straight at them. Took out the first two easily enough, but the third managed to scratch my leg with a bloody fingernail just before I clobbered it into oblivion. Once I realised its nail had broken the skin, it was like a switch had been flicked inside me. *That's it, I'm dead too.* I lost my bloodlust and came back here.



If none of this had happened, I think my sister would have eventually gone into medicine. I was doing okay at College but she was top of her class at school. And she had a really kind nature too. She'd never squish any bugs that got trapped in our house; she'd get a glass, scoop the little critter up and seal it inside with a book. Then she'd take it outside and release it, even if it was a wasp.



I've decided that here's not the place. I'll hit *Submit* and then I'm going to do it in those woods I wrote about; consider this diary as my Note. I'll be able to find a nice spot to sit and look at the trees, some place that's calm and peaceful. I'm going to leave the picture of Guitar Girl in this cellar, she belongs in this house. The tree leaves will remind me of my sister more than any photo ever could anyway.

I guess all that's left to say is thank you for listening.

I know it's possible that no one will ever read this, but that's not really the point is it?

Love,

X

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The Awakening

by Brent Streeter

The day that would determine my future had finally arrived.

Our mentors ushered us into a small narthex and commanded us to await our summons, before departing. Their dedication to training us over the years had ended, leading to this single defining moment. The cramped room bristled with anticipation of what was to transpire. For us *Unawakened*, it was the next chapter of our lives.

The grand, monolithic sandstone doors that blocked our path forward shuddered, releasing a hiss and swung inward, revealing the chamber of oaths, an immense space hewn from the same stone, and adorned with intricately detailed reliefs of our people's redemption through the *Light. Awakened*, who came to watch the ceremony filled the chamber in stoic silence. We entered, walking down the central aisle. Eyes trailed after us, expectant.

At its centre, a dais rose. A large metallic gong inscribed with the Light's dogma dominated its circumference, while beside it stood one of the *talentless*, dressed in the drab grey linens of a servant, his eyes downcast in subservience.

We filtered around the dais. I could feel an air of excitement building around me. This was what I... what we had all been preparing for. I stood tall; proud to be given the opportunity to enter the *Fold* and join the ranks of the Awakened.

My gaze swept over the faces of the Unawakened around me, finding Simm's. Our eyes met, and she smiled. We'd been inseparable since the moment they'd placed us in the same creche all those years ago. I dared another glance at the Awakened that surrounded us. An air of authority surrounded them, and they looked regal in their finely tailored coloured robes and embellished collars of various precious metals. Each metal separating them into the Orders of the Fold. I quickly spied the bronze collars of the Realm-shapers; the order I aspired to join.

The gong tolled; a low sonorous note, and the neophytes' rite began.

"To the Light, we come new."

gong

"To the Light, we bind ourselves, and pledge service."

gong

"In the Light, we bear our souls."

gong

"In the Light, which scours us clean, we awaken pure."

gong

I shivered as the last toll faded into silence.

A similar set of sandstone doors opened at the opposite end of the chamber. It was time for the next stage of the ceremony; The Trials. We left the dais in a single file and strode down the central aisle, fuelled with a sense of purpose, before finally passing beneath a breathtaking mural depicting the seven Orders that had survived the shattering, and entered the chamber beyond.

This new chamber had three doorways on either side and one directly ahead. It was plain, smooth stone with no elaborate trimmings or murals. Our only source of light were a couple of torches, their flames licking the cold stone as they smouldered away.

I could sense confusion amongst the others. What came next was a closely guarded secret that only the Awakened knew.

The group splintered as friends clustered together, whispering in hushed tones. I found Simm standing nearby and made my way over to her.

"What do you think's going to happen next, Simm?" I asked.

She glanced around the room and frowned. "Your guess is as good as mine, Shael."

The door at the far end of the room burst open with sudden force and a group of people swept in. They wore white robes with gilded embroidery that shimmered in the torchlight. They hid their faces behind coloured masks; each representing an Order. Simm and I gasped. The people that glided towards us were none other than the Light-touched themselves, the *Ordained*.

As one, we fell to our knees; our heads bowed in reverence, honoured to be in the presence of the Light-touched.

Six of the Light-touched took up positions in front of the doors that led off to the sides while the Light-touched wearing a white mask stood before us and greeted us.

"Welcome Unawakened to the trials. Listen carefully, as I will only explain this once. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Light-touched," we said as one.

"Good. We, the Ordained, have high hopes for you all," the White masked said. "From here, we'll separate you into groups. Once that is done, you will proceed through the door allocated to you. The areas beyond will be where you all will complete your trials."

He spread his hands wide. "May you find true awakening in the Light's purity."

He looked to the other Light-touched and gave a slight nod for them to proceed. They glided through the lines, tapping shoulders until they had separated us. I found myself paired with Simm and two others from different creches.

Simm smiled at me while the two young men eyed us suspiciously. The red masked Light-touched that had gathered the four of us placed a gloved hand on the door we stood in front of. It swung open, revealing a long, narrow corridor.

"Come," the Light-touched said, and entered the dimly lit corridor.

We followed her down the length of the corridor, which eventually opened up into a large roofless chamber covered in glittering sand. Sunlight streamed down from above.

An amphitheatre surrounded the high walls of the chamber, filled to the brim with Awakened awaiting our arrival.

The Light-touched gestured for the four of us to continue on to the centre of the chamber. As we walked towards the centre, I noticed a large iron-wrought gate off to one side that was slowly being raised, revealing an entrance shrouded in darkness. I looked back to where we had entered. Seamless stone stood where the entrance had been, and the Light-touched now stood atop an observation deck. Silence enveloped the chamber as the large gate ground to a halt.

The Light-touched raised her hands and spoke.

“Unawakened, you stand before the Light untested. Here you will face your trial. Succeed and we will welcome you into the Fold. Failure is death.”

She sat, and a gong tolled.

Death?

Concerned, I glanced at Simm. She grimaced. I looked towards the darkened entrance. What monstrosity hid within those pitch-black depths?

A hulking figure detached itself from the darkness. My blood froze in terror as a stone-gorer stalked into the chamber. Beady eyes watched us from beneath two curling horns, and its hooked beak rattled in delight. It began circling the chamber, sticking to the outskirts.

“Stick together, and don’t let it get within range,” I said, turning with the creature, always keeping it within view.

Simm nodded. I couldn’t read the expressions of the other two.

The stone-gorer screeched and charged at us. Its four powerful limbs carried it across the sand at a pace unbecoming of its hulking body. One of the others shrieked in terror and broke off from the group. We watched in horror as the stone-gorer changed direction in an instant and fell upon him, tearing him apart with savage claws. It ripped off a chunk of flesh with its hooked beak and squealed in delight before gulping down the meat. The monster appeared to be enjoying itself.

“Shael, what are we going to do?” Simm hissed.

I shook my head. “I... I don’t know Simm.”

I dared a glance at her. She was shaking. I’d never seen her in such a state. Not even during the harshest training we’d gone through over the years. I looked down at my own hands. They were also trembling. My whole body shook, and I felt something deep inside me stir. I looked back at the stone-gorer. It pawed at the dead body for a moment before losing interest and looked at us with a blood-soaked face. My resolve to stand my ground shattered. I grabbed Simm’s hand and ran, trying to put as much distance between us and the stone-gorer while I scanned the chamber for anything that could help us.

The creature shrieked and began the chase.

We found ourselves trapped in a hellish nightmare. The crowd of Awakened remained silent. Nobody spoke or cried out in protest. They just watched with deadpan

eyes.

There was a scream behind us that turned into a gargle. The other unawakened had fallen. That just left me and Simm. I could hear the heavy strides of the stone-gorer growing ever closer, finding us more interesting than another dead body. I wondered how long it would take to reach us. We couldn't do this forever.

Suddenly Simm's hand slipped from my grasp. I skidded to a halt, puffs of dust rose around me as I sent sand scattering. I looked back and saw Simm lying on the floor, clutching her ankle. The Stone-gorer had almost reached her. Simm looked at me and smiled. That dazzling smile hit me like a shrieking gale. She was going to sacrifice herself to buy me a little more time.

"NO!" I cried out and scrambled back towards her. I would not let the beast have her. Not Simm.

I dived between Simm and the stone-gorer, my body acting instinctively. I reached out to a point between me and the beast, grabbed the air in front of me. It felt tangible in my hands, like a bolt of fabric. Without thinking, I heaved my hands up. The chamber shook as jagged slivers of rock shot out from the sand all around me and Simm, impaling the stone-gorer as it collided with me. But the damage was done. I stumbled backwards, tripping over Simm, and crashed to the floor, clutching my chest. I withdrew my hand. It came back red. I felt so weak. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Simm crawling towards me, tears streaming down her face.

"We did it Simm," I said, and coughed up blood. My vision darkened. By the Light's will, I was tired.

I felt Simm's hands press against my chest as fresh tears landed on my cheeks.

"Hold on Shael. Don't you dare die on me? Not after —"

Her voice sounded faint, as if it was miles away. What was she saying? I couldn't hear her anymore. I felt a warmth in my chest and then the darkness claimed me.



I awoke in a darkened chamber. How long had I been unconscious for?

"Good, you're awake," a woman's voice said to my right.

I tried to turn my head towards her voice, but my body refused.

"What... what happened?" I asked. My memories were hazy towards the end of the trial. *Had I killed the stone-gorer?*

"The Light has scoured you and your bonded clean. You have awoken pure," the woman's voice said. "That is all that matters."

My bonded?

My head pounded and my chest ached, but I dredged out the words from the murky depths of my mind.

"Where's Simm? Is she safe?"

"The time for questions will come later. Rest now, Awakened."

Too weary to argue, I slipped back into darkness.

Time stretched on into oblivion.

I drifted.

“Shael?” a familiar, yet distant voice called out to me.

I knew that voice. A face appeared in my vision. Yes, the voice was Simm’s. Thank the Light she was alright.

I pried my eyes open. A sigh of relief escaped my lips as I found I could move my body again. Simm sat beside my bed. She looked pale, but other than that, she was unharmed. I felt relieved. With Simm’s help, I propped myself up on my elbows despite the lingering protests of pain that still wracked my body.

“Simm, what happened? No one will tell me.”

She took my hand in hers, and our eyes met.

She took a deep breath. “That beast almost killed you, Shael. There was so much blood. I thought I was going to lose you. And then I, I healed you. I don’t know how. It just happened. My body just knew what to do.” She squeezed my hand. “Shael, the other Awakened say that we’ve bonded. It doesn’t happen often. But sometimes, two people awaken in order to protect one another.”

I believed her. Somehow, I could feel the bond that connected us. Held us together. It felt like we shared a life force.”

An unbidden question floated to the surface of my mind.

“What happens if one of us dies?” I asked, feeling that I already knew the answer.

The Light-touched that had overseen our trial entered the room.

“So does the other,” she said gravely. “You are both bonded for life, Realm-shaper.”

She paused before saying, “Welcome to the Fold.”

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Under One Sun

by Alan Vincent Michaels

"No tears, my love. It was a sublime close to a wonderful day. We have struggled so hard, for so long, to see this sun's setting colors, to see this majestic river bathed in the sun's waning light. I do not want to cease and no longer feel its beauty wash over me."

"My tears are of joy, dearest. I feel this sun's beauty and I sense our *Aten* in orbit. This sun and our ship lessen the pain of not seeing the Sister Suns setting into the hazy, rose-velvet horizon on our *Atia*, our home."

"I miss *Atia* deeply, too, but I am grateful and humbled that you, our daughters, and I are alive."

They stood quietly, holding each other, until the last rays of sunlight faded into a star-strewn dome with the galactic stellar arm roiled across the night sky.



"After three cycles on this world," said Akhenaten softly. "This is truly our home now. You know we had no other choice but to leave—"

"*Teyl*, I mean, my dearest pharaoh, oh, that word is so harsh on my tongue," replied Nefertiti. "We are scientists. Not politicians. Not rulers of an empire. What we did to this family, to their people, is terrible—"

"We did what we had to. That is all."

She gripped her arms across her stomach, wanting desperately to release her true, inner self from the new organic shell she now wore, knowing that it would mean all their deaths, knowing that their genetic changes were now permanent.

"We are survivors, maybe the only *Atians* remaining, my love," said Akhenaten in a raised tone. "Always remember that. We keep *Atia* alive, but only if our family flourishes. There is no greater calling for us. We must subsume our devotion to science, lest we become feared and hated. Or worse. It would mean our end—*Atia's* end—if we use our technology openly. We must never let our subjects learn who we truly are. We must be like them. Remain like them. Always. Our genetics technology ensures we will still be us inside, if not in our outward appearance."

Akhenaten stared out a window of the royal chambers, watching the *Amarnans* on the street below going about their lives, unknowing of who or what their pharaoh was and that their royal family had been replaced by beings who had made a desperate gambit, fleeing from their dying binary star system so long ago, so many light years away.

"My Nefertiti, they already worshipped gods from the stars. We do not know if one of our stellar cousins arrived here long ago and accelerated their development. The pyramids and obelisks here seem familiar, so it might even have been one of our own expeditions millennia ago who influenced this culture."

"We have no records that Atian explorers found this planet, but I admit it does feel familiar, even with so much water everywhere."

"Mothers!" shouted Meritaten from the chamber doorway.

"Yes!" replied Akhenaten and Nefertiti in unison.

"Meketaten and Ankhesenpaaten do not want me to commune with them. Again."

Meritaten bowed her head and waited for her parents' reply.

"Oh, Merit, my sweetest," said Nefertiti, smiling broadly, with only a veneer of sarcasm. "Such a troubling issue that is. One that will greatly disturb our kingdom and our rule here, unless you and your sisters can reach a compromise. You cannot expect your mothers to hold your hands for the rest of your lives, now can you?"

"Of course not, mother," replied Meritaten. "It is just that I am the eldest and they still do not like these bodies we have adapted into. They truly miss how and who we once were and how we could walk communing openly among *our people*. My sisters blame me for hiding our transformations. They scream at me about wearing these cones to hide our heads that were once so long and so beautiful. Now, they are misshaped and are still different from those small-headed people out there. My sisters are so afraid. I want to cry every moment that we cannot be us."

Meritaten whipped her arm out dramatically, pointing at the chamber window.

"The Amarnans know nothing of our sleek bodies and colors. We hide them beneath these long robes. It is sometimes too hot. Our real eyes can see a myriad of spectra. The Amarnans' eyes are so limited. Can we *try* to commune with them?"

"No!" said Akhenaten sternly. "Now, for the rest of what you have obviously rehearsed before sharing with us, your mothers have something we can speak about to all our children. We have told you many times why we must be like this, why we must be like them, and why some transformed aspects did not go as we had hoped. Now, go and tell your sisters we will commune—and *talk*—after our family dinner."

"Yes, mother," replied Meritaten as she rotated sharply on one heel and strode away into the dimly light corridor.

"Our daughters are homesick," sighed Nefertiti. "I can see it, even in their new eyes."

"I feel homesick, too. We knew Atia was doomed. We did the calculations, proving and pleading our case to the High Triumvirate. They ignored our three-body data, as did every other scientist and astronomer. 'Atia has always been and always will be,' they replied in their ignorance. So, we left. Our Sister Suns were glorious sights to behold each day, but deadly all the same. In the end, we watched helplessly as Atia burned after it was caught in the Great Confluence of the Suns."

"I remember. And I remember our Aten almost did not—"

“Do not cry for our lost world or our travails,” said Akhenaten. “Atia lives on in us. It is not just a world. It is us. Come, let us mingle with our subjects, and try to understand them better. We become more like them with each passing day.”

“Of course, dearest. And let us remind them to stop worshiping invisible sky deities, who were probably ages-old Atians anyway. It is still unnerving to be worshipped as an in-the-flesh god.”

“Our decision to gently guide their minds to think about a more tangible deity—our Aten sphere, which some of them can see—was the prudent choice,” said Akhenaten. “It also makes things less complicated for their susceptible minds, but can you expect them to give up all their old ways overnight?”

“We had to.”





"Mothers, it is unfair," cried Meritaten. "We want to be our old selves!"

"We have not changed inside, where it truly matters," said Akhenaten, pushing aside her empty food platter. "We are still ourselves. We will always be Atians, and we are still a family. Maybe, even the last Atian family. Although, I admit our assimilation of this royal family has progressed beyond what we had thought was possible."

"I am hideous," whispered Meketaten, the second oldest.

"We know and feel your pain," said Nefertiti. "We are now so like them, but we cannot risk any exposure. If we remain vigilant, we will survive. And that means acting like them every moment of every day, even when we are alone with each other."

"Remember, perfect practice achieves perfect results," said Akhenaten.

"Yes, mothers," said Meketaten. "It is so difficult for my younger sisters to give up their old ways of life. For me, to give up means—"

"Would you prefer to give up your very lives and cease to exist?" asked Nefertiti.

See looked at each one of her daughters' faces, deeply missing having their fifth daughter, Neferneferuaten Tasherit, present. Neferne the Younger was their most beautiful offspring, and the one who had adapted nearly perfectly during the genetic replacement process. She was living among the Amarnans, learning as much as she could to ensure the family's integration into the society. Maybe, a little too much learning was achieved, if her latest reports were to be believed.

"I am grateful, mothers," said Ankhesenpaaten, their third daughter.

"I am, too," added Setepenre, their sixth daughter.

Akhenaten looked at Neferneferuaten, waiting to see if she would say something.

"You are so quiet, Neferneferuaten," said Nefertiti. "You are my fourth daughter, and I expect nothing but truth from the eldest of my twins. Having found a nearly identical twin set in this royal family was a measure of success we had not anticipated, but we also expect you to commune more often with your mothers. Tell us what you are feeling now."

Neferneferuaten sighed, then took a deep breath before exhaling slowly.

"I am grateful you asked, mother. My twin is communing with me, so the family is whole. Tash's asking whether she should accept an intoxicating liquid from an Amarnan man she just met."

"Tell her 'no,'" said Akhenaten sternly.

"I have already done so."

"Good. Now tell her to come home. I will send the royal guards to—"

"Yes, mother."

"Is there anything else troubling my girls?" asked Nefertiti.

"No, mothers. May we go and watch our sequences from Atia?"

"Not tonight," said Nefertiti. "Go your sleeping chambers and reflect on today's events. Maybe when you are all older and have learned the patience and skills you need to survive here, then you can reminisce about Atia. For now, and forever, remember this world is our home. There is no going back."

"Now, off with you, girls!" Akhenaten said and smiled. She watched, with love building in her heart, as her five daughters turned and faced her and Nefertiti, then said, "Yes, mothers," before leaving.

After a few moments of shared silence, Akhenaten said, "Our *qube* predicts only a forty-five percent chance of our success of survival, especially since we must pursue the procreation process on this world instead of our own ways."

"I will take those calculated odds," replied Nefertiti, smiling. "It is still much better than what the High Triumvirate offered us, is it not?"

"Yes, it is, indeed."



"My pharaoh, the Amarnans are so peculiar," said Nefertiti. "They worship a myriad of so-called gods they say exist below and above ground—in their sky—and even in the stars, yet, they are humble and thoughtful about their own station, and they praise their physical and psychic connections to all the life on this world."

"It is a conundrum, indeed," replied Akhenaten.

"How have they crafted such an egalitarian belief system in their society, only to let that belief be usurped with their steadfastness to a pharaoh—*you!*—an omnipotent god appearing in the form of their flesh?"

"It took us thousands of cycles to become enlightened about the true reality around us," said Akhenaten. "We found a way to ascend without succumbing to godhood. I believe the Amarnans will find their path."

"I agree, my beloved. It certainly made it much easier to integrate with them. Let us hope we can influence them more efficiently and help speed up their journey."



"Guards!" Akhenaten shouted, her hand clenching tightly on the assassin's throat. "My priests!"

As the dagger dropped from the man's hand and clattered on the stone floor, Akhenaten squeezed tighter, depriving the assassin of breath and of life.

"My pharaoh!" shouted the first of the two royal guards upon entering the chamber. He quickly glanced around.

"I am unharmed," replied Akhenaten. "This would-be murderer, however, has been judged by Aten. Remove this body from my sight."

"Yes, my pharaoh," said the guardian.

The captain of the guard entered as the two guards dragged the body of the assassin into the corridor.

"My wisest pharaoh, blessed by Aten," said the captain, dropping to one knee before Akhenaten, presenting his dagger with both palms facing upwards above his head. "Please take my dagger and slay me where I kneel. My life is forfeit, because my guards allowed let this unholy demon to enter where you dreamed of Aten."

"Must we all sleep with one eye open to watch our throats?"

"No, my pharaoh. Your rest and divine longevity heal our land so we may thrive and grow."

"Stand! I give you back your life. Pledge to be my most loyal guardian and that you will protect me and the royal family."

"I so pledge."

"Good. Now, go and make sure that was the only assassin who gained entry here."



"We live now as one!" said Akhenaten from the royal chamber balcony, their subjects staring up, smiling, clasping their hands, not knowing what their pharaoh truly meant by her words.

"We live now under one sun and the Aten. And I, Akhenaten, Effective of the Aten, usher in a new age of peace and harmony. Gone forever are the Old Gods!

"We need only the Aten to bestow the life force upon us, so that our great city of Amarna and our glorious people will survive, together, forever!

"Bless Aten!"

Nefertiti gripped Akhenaten's hand tightly.

"That was a wonderful speech, my dearest," said Nefertiti, smiling, as they turned and walked into the royal chamber. "Especially for a scientist."

Repeated chants of "Bless Aten!" from the crowds filled the early evening air, then slowly faded as the crowd in the temple courtyard dispersed.

Akhenaten looked into Nefertiti's new eyes, and she thought she could see Nefertiti's old eyes shining back as they had always done in their first life together.

"We have a future now," said Akhenaten, softly, followed by a deep breath. "We have passed all the challenges and endured so many tribulations. We have new lives. For us and our beloved daughters. For Atia.

"We are now the unchallenged rulers of the people of Amarna and the green and fertile land of Kemet that flows alongside the majestic river."

"I know we will survive. Our future and our fates have always been in our hands."



Author's note: "Under One Sun" is my speculative fiction answer to the myriad questions raised by archeologists about the reign of the Pharaoh Akhenaten (~1351-1335 BCE; the tenth ruler of the Eighteenth Dynasty in ancient KMT (aka Kemet or Ancient Egypt)) who was known as Amenhotep IV before the fifth year of their reign.

After Akhenaten's reign and life ended and Nefertiti's death, the KMT people returned to their worship of the Old Gods. Successive generations of the KMT people tried to

erase Akhenaten and their family from the official history and art of their land, but they failed...

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

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Serial

The Skyring Derelicts

ISRS Part VIII – Elite of the Elite

by Peter Gilbertson

“A word, Alpha Rex?” Private Rondo’s teeth were clenched teeth. His eyes were wide and his hands were balled into fists.

Mo nodded and they walked together to the auxiliary room adjoining the MidPac conference room. It was a safe room with several signal jamming features to prevent unauthorized listening. Rondo waited until they were inside and the door was sealed before he erupted.

“Have you lost your damn mind, sir?!”

Mohamed Blackbear stared Rondo in the eye and didn’t blink, didn’t answer. Instead, he inhaled deeply through his nose and held the scent. He smelled the chewing tobacco in Rondo’s mouth, the body odor of someone who had not showered for several days. He released his breath.

“You have a complaint, Private?”

Rondo went off on his usual insubordinate curse-word-laden diatribe about command idiocy, the same one that had cost him several promotions. But rather than shout the Private down, Mo only closed his eyes. He listened to the word choices and other nuances of Rondo's accent.

When Rondo had finished, Mo opened his eyes and stared at Rondo, looking at the private like he was seeing him for the first time. He saw the sweat in Rondo’s sideburn stubble, the flecks of brown spittle on his chin, how the man’s face and neck were flush from anger.

It’s so convincing, Mo thought. I almost doubt myself.

“Why a Space Marine?” Mo asked. “You could have pretended to be anything else and still had access to the Skyrings. That's your goal, after all.”

Rondo took a step back before responding, “W-what the hell’re you talking about?”
Got him.

“You are clever,” Mo said. “I believe you have fooled most everyone else, which is remarkable given the extensive background checks we go through. Even Uncle Samantha has yet to identify you as a spy or an extraterrestrial and we make an assessment every day. You must have had help. Was the aid and interference terrestrial in nature or otherwise? It’s okay. We’re in the auxiliary. No one else can hear us.”

Rondo tilted his head and squinted, “Alpha Rex, you have gone crazy?”

“I won’t be Alpha Rex much longer. Didn’t you hear? In less than an hour you face the rest of Alpha squad with Ria as Alpha Rex. When that happens you will have a

choice, lose on purpose and be held in reserve with the rest of Bravo, which means no more access to the Skyrings for you, likely for the rest of your rotation. Unless you fake another identity and become someone else. Or you win and expose your identity; because, believe me, Ria will go over that footage relentlessly until she finds out how you out maneuvered her and defeated her and the most elite squad on the planet. If you do defeat the Marines who guard the most dangerous prisoners known to mankind, she won't be the only one looking for answers. That is, unless I help you."

"Cut the crap! This is bullshit! You better get me outta this if you wanna keep your command."

"Always towards the top of the class in every measure. You were never the strongest, the fastest, the best fighter, or the best shot; but in the field you've always come through. The master of the improbable. I know you were holding back in testing. You didn't want to stand out, but you needed to succeed."

"You ain't perfect either, does that make you an alien?"

Mo smirked and continued, "I think you've suspected I was on to you, but I haven't turned you in, or even had Uncle Samantha increase her surveillance. You even saved my life a few times with your improbable skills."

"Someone had to."

"The safer play was to let me die in the field, so you could keep your secret. Why'd you let me survive?"

The room fell silent for a long pause. Both men gazed at each other, refusing to back down or check the time.

Mo finally said, "Tell me the truth or I leave."

"You'd do it?" Rondo asked. "Just throw it all away? Your career, all the sacrifices you made to your family, your girlfriend, yourself. All on what? A hunch?"

"You know I would. And it's not a hunch."

Mo turned and walked to the door. He listened for footsteps to follow him.

There were none.

Guess we're doing this the hard way.

Mo placed his hand on the door panel, but an instant before Mo could activate the door, Rondo was there.

"Please, don't," the private asked. "You're right. I am on a sensitive mission, sanctioned by Commander Jayna, but I can't tell you the details."

"You don't need to. You're here to monitor Krieg up on the Decagon Wheel. And being a Space Marine is as close as you can get to him without risk of compromising your identity."

It was Rondo's turn to stare at Mo like he was seeing him for the first time.

"How do you know all of this?" asked Rondo.

"Not now," said Mo. "We have to prep you for your improbable victory."

"Ria is cheating right now."

"She thinks she is. We have inside help."

"The hell you say! Who else knows?"

"Who do you think?"

Rondo blew out a breath and scrunched his eyebrows together.

It seems natural. How long had it taken to master those facial expressions? Decades?

"That little *p'wherk!*" exclaimed Rondo.

"Hey, watch your language," said Mo. "Seriously, you're losing your accent."

"Last time I trust a tactical mop!"



Tactical mops aren't just cloned, they are cultivated. Each one comes from a unique batch of bioengineered sentient slime mold. That mother batch is maintained on a repurposed spirulina farm on the island base of Space Elevator No. 12 under the watchful eye of Dr. Nya Rowell. Like the soldiers they share facilities with, the slime molds are trained to be relentless and efficient cleaning and killing machines, and to follow orders without fail.

Tac Mop A15 was no exception.

Housed within its carbon nanotube janitorial chassis, the small, bristly, neon yellow, slime mold began its routine laser dust removal and diagnostic service of the Lunar Pueblo simulator training room.

TM A15 was stalwart and steadfast in its cleaning assignment, and remained on constant alert for suspicious persons and extraterrestrials, while dutifully defusing and deactivating three unsanctioned motion activated traps from the Lunar Pueblo's North entrance. According to its instructions, the traps were to be relocated and reactivated at the South entrance of the facility. Having done so, TM A15 began its wall scrubbing routine until it reached the ceiling, where it remained to monitor the South entrance, and then track and report the location of anyone who entered.

Within 15 seconds of entry, all of Bravo squad was eliminated and Tac Mop A15 resumed its primary function of clearing the debris and residue from the training facility.



"Well, that was anticlimactic!" said Commander Jayna when Bravo Rex burst into the control room.

"I demand a rematch!"

"Are you protesting being eliminated by your own unauthorized booby traps?"

Ria Gonzales paused a moment and ground her teeth before answering.

"It was supposed to be just him against us."

"And it was," answered Mo. "He was the only combatant you faced."

"That mop moved all my traps!"

"That mop didn't fire a single shot," said Mo. "And neither did Rondo."

"Enough," said Jayna. "Both of you. Bravo Rex, you led your squad into a trap. Furthermore, you disobeyed the rules of engagement that you yourself established. This is a noted pattern of leadership you have demonstrated. If that is your only talent for command, then I see no reason to honor your request for a rematch and as of this moment, your command is up for review. And lastly, today will be the last day you ever storm into my control room and make a demand. Are we clear, Bravo Rex?"

"Yes, ma'am!" said Ria.

"Good, now leave. I need a moment alone with Alpha Rex and Private Rondo."

"Yes, ma'am."

After Ria Gonzales left, Commander Jayna turned to the other two Space Marines and growled, "My office. Now."

Mo and Rondo followed their commander down the hallway. Her corner office had a majestic view of the stars above and the planet below. It also featured several signal jamming measures to prevent unauthorized listening. Jayna waited until they were inside and the door sealed shut before she erupted in laughter.

"I'm not supposed to take sides, and I'll deny I ever said this, but damn that felt good to watch! Well done, Alpha. I'll give you credit. I didn't think you'd get yourself and Rondo out of that jam, but that even surprised me. Now, got anything else to tell me?"

"No, ma'am. Just knowing my opponent and utilizing the resources at hand."

"Uh huh," she said and then turned to Rondo. "How much does he know?"

"The mop told him everything."

"The mop? It can talk? That thing has had access to numerous classified conversations."

"Sounds like it needs a promotion," said Mo. "Imagine what it could learn among the inmates up on the Decagon Wheel. Plus, it's a failsafe against any electronic interference or overrides we may encounter in a worst-case scenario."

"That would be most practical in monitoring Krieg," Rondo said.

Jayna paused, placed her elbows on her desk, and tented her fingertips in front of her mouth like a chess master surveying a board. "You are an excellent opponent, Alpha Rex. Three objectives in one day. Removed Ria, outed Rondo, and fulfilled your promise to Dr. Nya Rowell. Are you still seeing her? Your Great Grandmother wanted me to ask."

It was Jayna's turn to surprise Mo. She knew it bothered Mo that those two talked behind his back.

"It's complicated."

"I'm sure it is," Jayna said. "As a translator and consultant, Krieg is our most valuable occupant of the Decagon Wheel. In fact, it is such a unique and valuable specimen that other species have contacted us to negotiate its acquisition. They've all agreed to let us guard it on the condition that no one else gets it. One of these days, one of them will give up on diplomacy and try to break him out. That makes Rondo our second most valuable alien asset. He has vowed to not let anyone else take Krieg. In exchange, we keep Rondo hidden, as he is also a being of interest to extraterrestrials. So far, we have

denied knowledge of his existence on our planet. But multiple species are looking for him. Obviously, we are trusting you with this knowledge."

"Don't worry, Commander Jayna," Mo said. "I won't tell a soul."

"I'll know if you do," she said with a stare. "Believe it. Now get out of here. I have more important things to do."

Mo and Rondo left the Commander's office and walked back to their bunks.

"You're going to have to someday, you know," Rondo whispered, impossibly low.

"What's that?" Mo whispered back.

"Tell a soul about me."

"Why's that? To save someone's life?"

"Yes. Or to maybe save the whole planet."

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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 Agamemnae



Chapter Twelve: Into the Depths of Hell

“Run home, if you can,” Korr’s grim words echoed up to him. “Forget her. Live free and with honor... more honor than I.”

Skalos felt the rope go slack and dangle, his body tensed and moments from swinging down upon it.

“You bastard!” he said, breaking stunned silence as the line swayed limp in his hands. It became a yell lost within a thundercrack of shattering stone as the closest of the five bridges tore itself apart.

Shockwaves reverberating under his feet and throughout the central ring, the spoke upholding the hub on his right groaned, twisted, and started a slower disintegration. He threw the rope away and faced the platform’s opposite end. His half of it sank along with his stomach.

Level marble inclined as the Agamenaean crouched, snatching up the sliding khopesh he abandoned to hold on to the post.

He eyed the line of low-burning flames upon scorched fungal bodies, some still moving as their portion elevated. Veiled in smoke, massed horrors aided by the growing downward slope breached smoldering parts of the barricade and spilled towards him.

Skalos sprang and ran, weaving past fungoids with athleticism, and steps ahead of blocks spilling into darkness behind him. A dozen monstrosities skidded to pursue his flight only to plunge off or atop fragments of the crumbling structure.

He reached the crest of the incline in advance of the cascading collapse. The remaining half of the hub was level, but uneven: Intricate fitted stones drifting apart amid rises and dips as he darted around fiends left flat-footed by the rapid turn of events. Its three surviving spokes warped bearing unsustainable stresses.

The horde had lost many to Tetre’s summoned fire and stumbles off the platform as it heaved. Yet those that survived were no less tenacious than before. Skalos slipped away from the first few with the aid of surprise, but black oculi locked on him in the smoke.

A grotesque pinwheel of arms circling a biting lion’s jaws leapt onto his shoulder. Without losing a stride, he hauled the thing off and chucked his assailant into a dwarfish fungoid also attempting to grapple him. Both creatures toppled off the crescent remnant of the ring, one with the scribe’s rent off shirtsleeve clamped in its fangs.

Eyes stinging in acid fumes, he spotted the bridge. Spotted his gamble for survival, and a last fiend blocking his way to it.

As tall as Korr, a human skeleton wrapped in red mycelium hefted an archaic mace axe over its head. Unable to go around or stop, the scholar charged, sidestepping a cleave that crashed down double-handed. A wild swing with all his momentum and strength behind it smashed the khopesh into its skull face.

Bronze cleft deep into bone, and the horror staggered as Skalos withdrew from his strike. He found his hand gripping his weapon’s hilt and nothing else while the rest of it remained embedded halfway in his foe’s head, from chin to above its skinless crown.

He threw the now useless grip into the squirming polyps on the monster's chest. Its impact was distraction enough for him to dive and slide between its legs before a retaliation.

Up in a scramble, he reached the foot of the bridge and took a bare second to assess it: Warping but intact, it was devoid of creatures. A quick weave through its connected circles would return him to the passage he came from. He tensed to run, then, his face expressing recollection, the scholar checked its threshold.

He found dirty marble unmarked by Addala's scuffed-in arrow pointing the way back.

"This isn't it!" he said after a winded gulp. He turned to check the other two supports and instead saw the swipe of a mace axe.

Skalos ducked the swing of the tall fiend as another thunderous crack shook them. On the opposite end of the crescent, a third spoke shattered and renewed the ring's disintegration. Seeing the monster off-balance from its miss and the twisting platform, the Agamenaean shouldered his way past it and sprinted along the curving path towards his last chance for survival.

In his fleet-footed dash, he bypassed fungoids disoriented by dust, smoke, and unfolding calamity. No sooner would he pass them than their attention would lock onto the man. In ones and twos, horrors launched themselves into a loping pursuit until a pack numbering a score or more hounded him.

Claws, teeth, and the slash of weapons ripped chunks out of the fringes of his cloak and battle-tattered clothes. With prowess summoned from desperation, he broke away from the rush of attacks skirting along the very edge of the crumbling ring, where a single misstep would assure his certain demise. Blocks dislodged after his pounding footfalls, but his rapid scramble got him to the bridge.

He skidded, sliding on his knees and scrabbling to make the corner. His hand touching Addala's mark on the walkway, he lunged forward to restart his run. Horrors, some crashing into one another and spilling off the pathway in chaotic heaps, missed him by an instant and continued their chase.

Man and monster alike heard the stony groan coming from the fourth spoke Skalos had almost crossed. It ripped from its mooring to the tower's inner wall, the rest of it still attached to the central hub. With all its weight added to the load borne by the last bridge, they raced over a sagging, sinking and snapping structure seconds from destruction.

Paces ahead of the horde, he weaved through the short bend of its first ring, both of its sides now free of the first crimson fungus they encountered. The path widened beyond it, but also sloped more and more with every frantic stride. Heart pounding, he came to the next circle seeing a pair of fungoids, one blocking each route around its gap.

He jumped a toe's breadth from the hole, flying over it and between the monsters.

Skalos landed just past the three-yard-wide pit, a stumbling look back revealing his surprise at accomplishing the feat. He returned his eyes to the ever-increasing incline as

the pursuing mob behind him plowed into their two outmaneuvered kin and shoved them off the sides.

He fled through an unoccupied third circle while light from fires or the portal open to the sky above dimmed in billowing smoke and dust. Not slowing for caution, he threaded the final and largest ring of the path, fighting a slope about to become insurmountable. He exited it amid echoing booms of stone colliding down unseen depths. Nigh-blind, he ran, feeling the structure beneath him shudder before breaking loose into free-fall.

His feet came down unprepared to meet a flat and level surface. Tripping, he toppled and slid face-down on cold marble.

"By Mithra, I tried!" Skalos said, bracing to plummet. "Goddess, save Addala!"

A terrible cacophony of destruction muted shouted prayer. Behind him, all he crossed that hadn't yet done so slipped and tumbled into the hollow shaft of the tower. The percussion of collisions far below shook him where he lay, but as it subsided into the clatter of lesser debris meeting their terminus, he remained where he was.

He opened his eyes, panting and drenched in sweat. Rolling dust in the air stuck to him and layered with smoke it blotted out any light from above. Blind in the gloom, he coughed and sat up, covering his mouth and nose with the fringe of his cloak.

Its fabric ripped, leaving him holding a ragged chunk as the shredded remains of the garment slipped back down.

The tear also spilled the contents of an inner pocket to bounce off his lap before clinking on tile at his folded knees. A moment of groping recovered it, and Skalos rubbed the crystalline facets of the large, clear jewel Addala discovered and gave to him. "Goddess be praised."

He scanned the darkness to get his bearings, but couldn't see further than the reach of his arm through floating dust and acrid haze. "I'll have to fumble on," he said. "I have nothing to light—"

A brief flicker of illumination pulsed within the crystal he held, drawing his attention.

"My way?" he finished as it faded. He flexed sore fingers and pondered. "Light."

A weak flash answered his voice, but dissipated before it could be of any use. He observed a dim, blueish-white afterglow lingering a second around the Elder's sign encased inside, retreating into its mazelike metalwork of gold and coppery orichalcum.

"Light!" he commanded.

Again, a glimmer that waned as soon as it came.

The scholar squinted in concentration, tapping the jewel with his thumb. "Light, light," he said in mutters above its response in staccato blinks. "What the devil could be their word for it? *Eli o-tok* was for sun or sunshine. Perhaps a root for *e-tok* in a sense of vegetative growth. *Kek-e-ai* meant star or stars. Its end also a compound meaning of 'in or of night' in the Elder speak..."

He lowered the crystal. "*Kek.*"

A dim flash responded, but faded as before.

"*Li-kek*," he said.

Its facets became filled with sustained illumination many times brighter than the wick of his brass lamp ever produced.

Skalos looked away, his eyes dazzled. "*Master's Light. Fitting.*"

He rose and coughed, putting the rag back over his mouth and nose. With the jewel half-shuttered held in his other palm, he directed its radiance. Through drifting gaps in the smoke and dust that roiled in the air, he made out enough to confirm he stood on the balcony they'd first encountered entering the colossal chamber.

Weary steps began a cautious walk as he left the shaft behind him. Soon he came to the gigantic arch of the entrance. The bright beam illuminated intricate carvings upon it that were unseen before. Their details were indistinct yet unnerving within clouds of dancing motes as he continued past them and into the passage beyond.

He wiped drying sweat, grime, and foul fungal juices from his brow. The air far cleaner in the corridor, he lowered the rag and breathed deep. Walking straight to the wall, he turned and pressed his back against its damp chill, catching his breath opposite the smoke and dust on the other side of the archway.

His hand drooped to his hip, and the light of the crystal fell upon Addala's chalk arrow on the slate floor. He followed its point to the upward passage on the landing and shined the beam into it. For a long moment, Skalos scrutinized the clear route before him to the chamber above. Felt the weight of the fabulous jewel he held worth a king's ransom.

He turned the illumination left to the chalked X on the enormous, greenish hued stone blocking the corridor's downward descent.

"Am I a wolf that runs?" he asked himself.

Clawed scrapes on nearby marble drew his attention back to the archway.

Noises multiplied as he illuminated the murky air beyond. Between drifting gaps he saw limbs hauling themselves onto the platform. Black oculi atop polyp eyestalks reflected the light he shone upon them, staring back at him through the haze.

The sweep of the beacon ignited at least a dozen bodies into frenzied motion and chaotic clambering.

Skalos choked down a shriek, muting it before it escaped his throat. Instead, he slapped and wrapped the jewel in the rag to shutter its radiance. Near total darkness engulfed the passageway, but it was no deterrent. Seconds later, the remnant horde swarmed in, raking bare slate walls and floors in a blind search.

The scratch of claw, bone, and grotesque unseen appendage fell on every corner and nook of the corridor's landing.

A long minute stretched into several, but they couldn't find any trace of a man to rip and rend. One fungoid entered the upward leading passage and loped into a renewed pursuit, ascending the only avenue of escape. The rest of the mob followed its lead, and the chamber emptied as echoes of hurried, yet crooked, gaits climbed and faded.

Silence returned as Skalos listened, breathing short, quiet breaths in the dark.

Crammed into the narrow crawlspace underneath the imbedded cyclopean column, the crystal and its illumination remained hidden, pressed between his stomach and the cold floor he laid on. Feet barely tucked inside the gap he had plunged into headfirst and without a moment to spare, he kept motionless, listening for any noise of their return. None came.

He wiggled free an arm and wormed it under him to grasp the wrapped jewel. "It didn't look like it would be so tight on me in here before," he whispered to himself. "If it's a jam like this for me, Korr was right to think he'd never fit!"

Skalos retrieved the artifact beneath him with plodding tugs in the confinement. Once out, he removed it from the rag where it laid beside his cheek. Its light spilled out, and after his eyes adjusted, he could see the downward sloping tunnel far better than when he checked with his small lamp.

Never wider than an uneven coffin, it stretched on for yards until the corridor's descent and perpetual curve rightward obscured the rest from view.

Under a gray-green granite ceiling that scuffed the hairs of his craned head, cobwebs clung: To it, its strip of dark schist wall, and the slate floor that completed the wedge-shaped space. From thick to thin in patches, he watched dirty spider silk waver from the otherwise imperceptible motion of stale air and his pinched breaths.

The scribe grunted, working his other arm free and just ahead of him. Tunnel constricting his shoulders, he inched forward on elbows. After sweeping aside broken remnants of ridged stonework with his chin before his fingers could reach it, he pushed the jewel and its precious illumination alongside him.

"I am a wolf that runs," he said in the grip of near suffocating restriction. "For her, I will run into the depths of hell!"

He crawled on his belly with little benefit from his legs, the ceiling scraping his back. His pace was worming and arduous as constriction nipped his skin and bit-off scraps of tattered clothing. He made only a few yards of straining progress over minutes before a faint clunk echoed its way down to him.

Skalos stopped and listened. Motionless and sweaty, nothing more came to his ears except his rapid heartbeat.

A laborious crawl renewed as a tall fungal horror dangled from a one-handed grip. On the balcony edge beyond the archway, an archaic mace axe head clunked beside skeletal fingers, this time its blade hooking a hold on marble tile. Now, with the leverage needed to finish ascending, an emaciated figure wrapped in blood-red mycelium climbed onto the platform.

It walked forward with measured steps. As the scribe struggled on, wiping cobwebs from his eyes and spitting them off his teeth, the persistent straggler passed under the arch and into the passageway.

Streaks of light mixed with long shadows of motion upon the floor and drew the scrutiny of soulless oculi. The gentle tap of bone and fungus footsteps on tile brought it

to the alcoved beginning of the corridor's downward descent, to the gap underneath its tremendous blockage.

It squatted down with inhuman flexibility. Polyps twisted on its chest and shoulders, observing the man fighting for each inch of progress. The clack and drag of the mace axe head dropping onto slate halted him.

Skalos tucked his head, an icy rush flowing through his veins after hearing the metallic scrape behind him. He lifted his body as best he could, creating enough space to get an upside-down glimpse past his feet. The empty eye sockets of a skull divided by the embedded blade of his khopesh stared back vacant.

"Gods below," he said as slender limbs guided the thing into the hole.

Teeth clenched, he redoubled his efforts to move. The dull bronze edge of his former weapon began to rake and grind against the floor, its rhythm starting and stopping as the fiend's chin pushed it forward.

The surrounding wedge became tighter as the steady noise crept closer, despite his added haste.

He reached the end of the monolith wedged into the tower above him. Instead of finding an exit, he swore in frustration. The gray-green granite of the ceiling ceased only to transition into compacted schist blocks that continued as the new roof of the tunnel. It stretched as far as the bend of the passage would let him see, and worse, the entrance into this section hung crucial inches lower than before.

With a growl, Skalos shoved the glowing crystal into the gap, then hauled himself in. Cold, chipped stone cut him on every side. The ripping tear of already ragged clothes becoming more so didn't drown-out the steady, metallic scrape continuing to gain ground on him from behind. Squeezed, he grasped and huffed, unable to draw anything but the shallowest of breaths.

Just an arm's length ahead of him, the jewel's light revealed the descending angle of the corridor restored the hole to its prior width. But as fingers clawed to secure some handhold to pull himself through, he only snapped off a nail.

The scratch and drag of old bronze and bone drew closer still.

He strained and thrashed to worm past pinching stone. It gained him no inches as a sharp thrust beneath him pained his ribs. Skalos shifted to remove whatever jabbed him. Finding no injury nor a jagged chunk of slate as the culprit, he instead pulled the offending object out from an inner pocket within the remains of his cloak.

The Agamenaean blinked, webs clinging to his eyebrows as he held the tribal *kocosa* up to his face.

"Belay's gift," he said after a gasp. Shaking off his surprise, he slammed the spike of leaf-shaped iron down ahead of him with a clang. Wedged into a seam between floor tiles, he affixed his hands on the tool's hilt and heaved forward at last. "Thank you, friend. You've saved me again."

It pounded into another crack and Skalos tugged himself farther with the handhold. A skeletal hand with fungal tendons grazed the sole of his sandal, only for it to be

yanked through the narrow gap.

With increased space for his elbows, a new rhythm of clatter drowned out the methodical scrapes of his pursuer.

He pulled ahead, clanging the tool into gaps and using those grips and the strength of his shoulders to advance. A slap with every crawl kept the jewel beside him as he left the monster behind, but the clunk of bronze on stone and angry scuffling drew a glimpse from his eyes.

The khopesh blade through the abomination's skull was wedged in the narrow confine he'd only just escaped.

Skalos spit at its trapped plight. "Burn in hell!" he yelled, returning to his escape until a wet, tearing noise filled the tunnel moments later.

In a glance back, he saw the skeleton in demonic contortion. Its limbs reoriented, feet sliding past its head. Mace axe dropped and abandoned; arms became rear facing like the legs of an arthropod. Its torso bent and folding, neck vertebrae snapped as the horror ripped free of its skull.

His eyes turned away from the gruesome sight, betraying their terror as it continued coming for him in an inhuman and inverted foot-to-hand crawl.

Focused on the way ahead, he plowed through nests of webbing to keep distance between them. In feverish action, Skalos entered a third section of tunnel with increasing room on all sides. With space to move on hands and knees, he matched his pursuer's speed and kept away from it without needing the kocosa to gain handholds.

The crystal skidding before him revealed a mosaic of jumbled schist blocks above, riddled with fractures and cracks. The jewel clinked off the first of numerous chunks of broken stone littering the floor, and with the way no longer clear to slide it, he grabbed it with his free hand and scrambled on.

He shoved aside a hunk of rubble in the way and came face to face with a hairy, cat-sized spider. It lunged hissing, forelegs raised and fangs flared, but a swipe of his kocosa kept it at bay.

Blocked, he glimpsed the headless monstrosity scuttling closer. Hesitant and studying the red spider's intimidating display, he noticed the white skull-like shape on its spherical abdomen.

"Belay's dinner," he said, "A bite from these will hardly hurt a man!"

He stabbed with the tribal iron spike clenched in his fist. Missing the quick arachnid, it leapt onto the ceiling. He let the creature skitter into a significant crack, then clanged a jab off the edge of the fracture to keep it in retreat. He received a faceful of falling fragments for his effort and mercy.

After shaking stone flakes off his closed eyes, he opened them and found the amalgam of bone and fungus almost upon him.

With no time to turn and regain his lead, he scooped backwards past the section of crumbling blocks. Dropping the crystal beside him, he wedged the kocosa with both

hands into the last seam of the jumble above. He pried it loose, bearing down on the tool and pulling it away as a schist cube crashed with a weighty bang to block the tunnel.

On his back, Skalos panted. He listened to the thing's muffled scratching on the other side in drifting webs and dust. A minute later, he sat up, exhausted. Clothes shredded and rendered bare-chested with cuts and abrasions aplenty, the Agamenaean inspected the ton of stone that almost crushed his toes. It sealed the way except for a slit too narrow for the fiend to enter.

He left it untouched as he reached to pick up the glowing jewel and a skeletal arm shoved itself through the crack. Crimson tendons flexed while it clawed empty air, and he shook his head at its tenacity crawling away. The end of the tunnel in sight, he abandoned it in encroaching darkness.

Trapped, it beat against the barrier with escalating violence as he exited into the corridor beyond the cave-in. The blows became so extreme the sound of shattering bone joined them.

He stood and breathed deep. "Destroy yourself in there. I don't care."

Skalos paused after taking two steps away, not because of more noise, but a sudden lack of it. Something jumped and slithered onto his back before he could turn.

A tentacle on his ankle toppled him to his knees. Crimson ligaments, now free from a skeleton's frame, lashed around him, pinning his arms and constricting so tight on his waist that it squeezed the wind out of him. He loosed a gag for air as stringy tendrils coiled over his throat from behind.

Choked by a dozen garrotes, he struggled, but broke its hold on his leg to rise. The thing upon him was all tentacles and amorphous mass, every ounce of it relentless. Each strangled breath he took became shallower than his last. Desperate, the scribe dropped the crystal and clawed with his now semi-free hand.

Thin whips bound it fast in a moment, but the reaction withdrew squirming limbs from his other arm still holding the kocosa. A frantic pull got the weapon to his throat and slid the spike under coiling fungal muscle as his vision grew dark. Its iron edge severed several tendrils, allowing Skalos to take a precious gulp of air while the maimed appendages squiggled and slapped his face, smearing yellow ichor.

More choking strands replaced the injured ones, withdrawn yet again from other grapples upon him. Coiled strength pinched his windpipe closed once more as he staggered and stumbled over the ribbing of the passageway floor. Attention drawn to it and how it ran up the adjacent wall, he angled his back against the ridge and began slamming into it.

Vicious repetition bashed the soft body of the boneless fungoid into the blunt, raised edge. His vision reddened. Cartilage cracked inside the thing's center. Perception swimming on the fringe of unconsciousness, he shouldered it a final time.

Its grip slackened, and Skalos pried away weakened strands with the kocosa. He downed gulps of air as the monstrosity whipped tendrils from his neck to his hand

holding the weapon. They grappled back and forth, its choke abating as the wounded horror devoted more effort to keeping the man's arms restrained and failed at the task.

Thudding onto the floor, the scholar twisted around in a cephalopodic embrace to face the tenacious foe.

With it pinned under him, down plunged the spike, again and again piercing the squirming mass. Mustard-colored fluid splattered everywhere as furious stabs savaged spasming polyps and the emotionless black oculi upon them. Tentacles slid off him amidst brutal violence to writhe in mindless, aimless seizure. Then all drained to stillness from both man and monster alike.

Skalos huffed on his knees, triumphant, fists coated in fungal gore, not looking away from its hideousness made worse by mutilation. From a spreading yellow pool, he rose and leaned against the wall.

In the elder jewel's light, he caught his breath over a few minutes. "I should be dead. I'm a translator of books, not a slayer of monsters."

The Agamenaean put down the kocosa and wiped what foul-smelling ichor he could off his hands. He stopped just after starting, instead lifting and inspecting them, amazed.

"What has happened to me?"

His lean arms, reflective of a scholarly librarian's duties, now bore athleticism and muscle. Scrawny and thin would no longer describe him.

"This is madness," he said, patting himself down in a quick check. "I'm hallucinating. Poisoned. Insane!"

He found this new physique consistent across his body. No taller than before, given the fit of his remaining clothes. He was also far from approaching Korr's tigerish brawn and build, but few men ever would.

"When could this have happened? If I've not lost my mind, it must have been during the fight or my flight. But someone should have..."

Face becoming dour, he examined his hand again. "Tetree. She said sorcery was a bridge already crossed. A danger already ventured risking the god's attention, and not by her."

Skalos picked up the crystal and his weapon, beginning a descent down the curved slope of the passage. "I've somehow done this to myself. Mithra, give me strength."



Author's Note:

This installment concludes Shadow of the Black Tower's second act of three, and the serial is now entering a planned hiatus until early next year. It will be continued

and concluded. The reason for the hiatus is my desire to complete its last act so that I may release the story in its entirety as a novel. Because I want to coordinate the release of the book so it coincides with the serial reaching its climax in SciFanSat, I must finish its manuscript and do all the work to have the book ready for prerelease first before restarting it in the magazine.

Thank you to everyone who has read the story so far. Those interested in beta reading new SotBT chapters or ARC copies of the book when it's ready are more than welcome to contact me. Take care!

*Jason H. Abbott
September 28th, 2024*

Find the Author

 JasonH.Abbott.com

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SciFanSat News

The Bartleby B. Boar Nomination



goes to

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for their work

Better Halves

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 Thursday of the month.

Next Issue Prompt

SciFanSat

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

Issue 15
Theme is
NIGHT

Submission Deadline Thursday, October 17th, 2024

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