

December 28th, 2024

Issue 17 | Best of 2024

SciFansat

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

Bartleby B. Boar
Nominees

That Burnt Writer
The Tattoo

Alan Vincent Michaels
Liminalities in the Travelverse

Andrew L. Hodges
Growing Boy

Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil
We Are Stardust

A.A. Rubin
Pinball Wizard?

Claudine Griggs
Two Humans Walk into a Bar

D Bedell
The Reliquary

M.S. Dy-Liacco
Better Halves

Wendy Maxon
Terror Sleeps Over

Peter J Gilbertson
The Skyring Derelicts:
Part IX – The Counterweight

Alex Minns
Hidden in the Stacks



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Editorial

Welcome to our Best of 2024 SciFanSat issue! We're saying a December goodbye to the year that was with eleven pieces nominated from the previous eleven months for our first-annual Bartleby B. Boar Award. But there can be only one winner of this most coveted prize, one that includes an honest-to-goodness spiffy commemorative trophy and frameable certificate of achievement.

The year's-end SciFanSat Author Alumni poll is open as of this issue's publication, December 28th, 2024. It will close on Thursday, January 16th, 2025, at 11:59 PM EST. This is the same deadline as submissions to our January issue as well. Please, make your votes while you can. Only authors published in SciFanSat can vote in the poll. We sent a BCC email to the addresses we have on file just before publication, and a link is within our newsletter message. Check your spam folders if you didn't receive it and use our [contact form](#) if it's not there. Bartleby will be checking our emails daily and addressing inquiries.

We restrict voting for the Bartleby B. Boar Award to Author Alumni members **only**. This is to keep voting by peers alone and curtail the chances of polls becoming popularity contests or victimized by manipulation. **Please**, do not share the link to the poll with your friends, family, or followers: we disregard all votes from non-members. Those participating who are also nominees cannot vote for themselves. We disregard votes of that ilk, so please don't do that either.

Our thanks go out to all the authors, poets and readers who contributed to SciFanSat and crafted such a spectacular year for the magazine. Keep writing, creating, and being amazing! Join us again in January when we announce the 2024 Bartleby B. Boar Award winner and to enjoy our upcoming issue's theme of... TIME.

Jason H. Abbott
Editor, SciFanSat Magazine



January

The Tattoo by That Burnt Writer

"Come away child," the woman said, tugging at her arm. "That's no sight for someone of your tender years."

Tarla resisted the pull. She knew that Sister Clemence, as she'd introduced herself, meant well, but this, she felt, was important, although she couldn't quite put her finger on why. She prodded what was left of the corpse with her boot, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

"If you won't step away, then at least avert your eyes, little one," the nun continued. "Sister Mary, that's the lady who was with me, has gone to fetch help."

Still, Tarla didn't move. She'd heard the sharp intake of breath, the whispered conversation, and the scurrying footsteps, but there was something about this man, lying on the ground not moving, that wasn't quite right. Well, apart from his lack of a head and all the blood, that was.

"I think..." she said, then lapsed to silence again.

"What's the name of that bear you're holding?" Sister Clemence tried, changing the subject. "He seems to be well loved. If you come with me, I feel like I may have a matching eye I can sew on for you back at the commune and, of course, you'll be welcome to stay for a hot meal whilst we fetch your parents..."

"Pickle," Tarla replied absentmindedly, then looked up. "That's it! My parents!"

"Pardon?"

"You've just made me realise what's wrong with this cadaver. It's that tattoo on his arm. It's a symbol."

"Goodness me," said the nun, "I didn't think someone of your age would know a word like 'cadaver'. Well done. And what a lovely name for a bear. Come with me, let's see if we can find him another eye."

"Oh no, there's no need for that, thank you," said Tarla. "He only needs one. And I called him that, because that's what all my pets will be called in the future too."

"Pets?" replied the sister, feeling that she was regaining control of the conversation. "Oh, lovely. We can't keep those where I live, but what sort of thing do you want?"

"Well, I suppose I'll have to settle for a minor demon at first, then work my way up."

The silence that followed Tarla's statement stretched past being uncomfortable.

"A... demon?"

"Yes, but only a minor one."

Hurried footsteps announced the return of Sister Mary, accompanied by a member of the citadel's police force. He inserted himself between Tarla and the body, and crouched down.

"I think you've seen enough, young lady," he said, trying to be kind and failing miserably. "I'll need to ask you some questions later, but you'll have to let me try to work out who this poor chap was. Step back please."

Tarla complied, but continued looking past him.

"Can you take her away, give her a whiskey or some candies, or something?" the man asked the two sisters, who nodded and started to unsuccessfully try to bundle her away.

"I know who he was, and who did it."

The words stopped them in their tracks, and the officer turned back toward her.

"You think you know who this is? Who did it?"

"Yes. He was called Jerth, and worked near the docks. And as for who it was, the tattoo will tell you. Three concentric circles, bisected by a broken dagger."

"Those are big words for a... what, seven-year-old?"

"Eight, actually. And I've had a good education."

"And who do you think killed him?"

"I did."



They were sitting on a bench in the courtyard of the convent eating soup which Sister Clemence had fetched from the kitchens.

"So, tell me," he said, placing the bowl carefully on the ground, "How do you think you killed that man? No offence intended, but you're rather young, and slightly built, and the force needed to remove that gentleman's head and inflict those injuries... well."

"Ok, well strictly speaking, I didn't do it personally. And he wasn't a gentleman. But my friend did because that man was trying to hurt me."

The adults exchanged glances.

"Hurt you? How? And who's your friend? Can we meet him?"

"He was part of a sect that are sworn to hunt me down and destroy me because of my power. That's where I remember the tattoo from, we had someone come to visit me and Mama a year ago to warn us. I'm going to rule the world, and they don't want me to because I'm apparently going to be evil and ruthless. Not to Mama though. She's still going to get all the cuddles."

Tarla noticed them glancing at each other again.

"Okay. I can see you don't believe me. How about I prove it?"

She stood, placed the empty bowl and Pickle on the bench and took two steps forward. Spreading her arms, a guttural noise came from her throat as a mist started to develop in front of her, growing until it was twice her size in every dimension. Behind her, she could hear whispered prayers to a God she knew wouldn't answer, and the inspector start to swear.

Within the portal, something ancient and massive stirred. It uttered a single word, Tarla's name, accompanied by a fetid breeze that smelled of corpses and decay.

"This is my friend, shall we go and meet him?" Tarla asked brightly, spinning round to face them.

"Erm... no thanks, I'm sure that's OK. We'll just... we'll say he had an accident."

"Alright then," said Tarla, shutting down the gateway and collecting her bear. "Thank you for the soup, Sister, it was delicious. I'll find my own way home, don't worry. No one's going to hurt me or Pickle."

The inspector gulped audibly as Sister Clemence fell to her knees. "I believe you. I don't think anyone would stand a chance."

January 27th, 2024

Issue 6 | Symbol

SciFanSat

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



Featuring

Alan Vincent Michaels	Carry Me Into Future Days (Poetry)
That Burnt Writer	Will they never learn? (Micro)
Alex Minns	Caveat Emptor (Flash)
David Jesson	Living the Dream (Short)
Jason H. Abbott	Shadow of the Black Tower (Serial)



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February

Liminalities in the Travelverse

by Alan Vincent Michaels

"Not *again*," I said into my cold coffee mug.

I placed it on my desk, closed my eyes, and dropped forehead to keyboard. A stream of *g* characters raced across my center monitor.

"I *need* a vacation," I sighed.

I sniffed, smelling expensive cologne wafting over me from behind, and a familiar baritone whispered in my left ear.

"Bruh, that's no way to debug code."

Great! Another pearl of wisdom from John Hokulani, my senior manager on this database project from the Ninth Circle of Hell.

"*Not* helpful," I grunted. "It's outright treachery, I tell you. The testers are trying to bust my program—and make me look bad."

"Chris," John said, straightening up, as I raised my head and leaned back in my chair, turning to face him. "That's more freak-a-zoid than usual for you. Besides, it's their *job* to try to bust your program. You know that."

"It just seems—personal."

"Look. Kick off for the day, then unwind at Brendan's tonight. Okay? Your code and your revenge can wait 'til Monday."

This wasn't the first time John had mentioned Saint Brendan's Paradise Pub. For weeks, he'd been telling me to go, but he wouldn't give any details. "You have to see it for yourself," was all he'd say.

"Let's make something clear," I said. "Yes, I have red hair and a beard, freckles, and my last name's O'Malley. That *doesn't* mean I go to Irish pubs, especially ones named after some old Irish seafaring monk—yes, I know how to *Google* things—and I certainly *don't* drink Guinness by the pint—cold *or* warm. And in case you haven't noticed, I hate noisy places. That's why I like my office with a real, lockable door—is that why QA is out to get me? So—how'd you get in here?"

John smiled, pointing at his security badge on his lanyard. He then reached across my desk and grabbing a pad of blue sticky notes and a pen.

"I know you'll have a fantastic time," he said, writing quickly, then peeling off the note and sticking it to my forehead. "I guarantee it. Go there. Knock on the front door slowly three times, wait, then knock quickly three times. Say '*Je suis Zaphod*' after the slider opens. Then, you're in."

"How weirdly Douglas Adams of them," I said, pulling off the note and seeing the pub's address was in a less-than-desirable corner of the city. "It's not the end of the world, right? What kind of pub is Brendan's anyway?"

I couldn't read John's face. His usually annoying, near-constant smile was gone.

"You have to—"

"*Je suis Zaphod*," I interrupted. "I am *Zaphod*, huh?"

"Yeah, but not in English," he replied, leaving my office.

I wanted to ask why he had such a deep tan this late in autumn, but he'd already walked out and down the hallway, and was closing the door to his office. I guessed he was probably frequenting that new Sonic-Tan place on Lyell Avenue.

I wasn't sure if he was serious about me leaving work early, so I started the debugger tool again, figuring I should log as much time as possible. I selected another master data file and checked the primary relational databases.

"Enough," I said, after ten minutes of seeing the same errors. "It's their totally unrealistic data. The sender code can never generate those type of black box situations. It's *not* my program. I'll just kick their datasets out on load. That'll solve it. I'm *done*."

α

Settling into my studio apartment couch, with a frosted glass mug of beer in one hand and a warmed-up slice of yesterday's pizza in the other, I voice-selected a basketball game on my wall vid.

It was a promising start to another Friday night.

"*Not* happening," I said to the holo-image of Edvard Munch's "The Scream" that floated near the wall next to my dying, potted fern.

"I'd feel like you both if I went out tonight," I said, raising my mug. "I have all I need right here at hand."

I yawned.

"Damn, I really should water that fern."

I finished the slice and most of my beer, dozing off mid game.

I awoke several hours later to an odd-sounding, disembodied voice chanting a bizarre mantra—"Go to Brendan's. Go to Brendan's."—that seemed to hang like a thick mist in the air around me.

It was *my* voice.

I shook my head, then looked at the vid. The words "Cannot locate program" displayed in response.

"Vid off! *All right*, I'm going."

I rode downtown through the cool, foggy night; a perfect complement to the dream-like haze fused with my thoughts. It seemed to take hours, but my ECar *Jolt!* nav display showed it had been auto-driving for fewer than ten minutes.

The *Jolt!* parked itself across the street from the pub's entrance, and my mood lightened considerably as I walked up to its dark, mahogany door.

There were no hanging Guinness and Murphy's signs, only the pub name in modern-style, lighted lettering above the lintel with "IRISH PUB" chiseled into the wood, each letter covered in flaking, gold paint.

The street was eerily quiet. I could see some light and interior objects through the windows, but there was no people or movement inside, and there were no other people or cars. There were two potted ferns on either side of the entrance that looked out of place.

I wondered what I was getting myself into. I raised my clenched hand, ready to knock, as images of a sleazy sex club flashed through my thoughts.

"Paradise Pub?" I asked aloud as I performed the knocking ritual. "Can this get *any* weirder?"

Several seconds passed before the slider opened. I blinked, then stared into an old man's inquisitive eyes. I blinked again, then noticed his dark-complexioned skin and the odd, yellowish light at the corners of the rectangular hole.

"*Je suis Zaphod,*" I said.

The slider snapped shut, followed by the sound of a large deadbolt moving. I moved backwards as the heavy door opened outward on creaking hinges.

I walked inside and found myself standing on a bamboo floor with a palm frond-thatched roof rising to a high point over my head. I was enveloped by warm sunlight streaming in through the windows some thirty feet away across the large, circular hut.

I smelled salt and scents of flower blossoms in the air. The humidity was something I never expected anywhere at this time of year, let alone bright sunlight this late at night.

I looked over my shoulder and saw the sunlight stopped abruptly at the door jamb; the evening I just left remained outside the pub. It seemed as if the sunlight had been cut by a guillotine's blade.

It was a damned, eerie effect.

My jaw opened slightly, my brain not fully comprehending what I was seeing.

"This—is—impossible," I whispered.

"*Bonjour, mon ami,*" said the bronzed-skinned, gray-haired doorman as he moved towards me. "*Il est très possible. Vous avez franchi le liminal.*"

"*Liminal?*" I asked.

"*Oui.* You have crossed the threshold."

He wore a neatly pressed, white polo shirt with matching white shorts, finished off with a brown cloth mesh belt and brown leather sandals.

The door behind me closed automatically, with the deadbolt sliding on its own.

"Je suis Zaphod. Bienvenue au paradis."

I turned back to look at his face. His accent seemed odd. French, yes, but not the Euro French I learned in school. I guess that a Frenchman working in an Irish pub made everything seem strangely out of place.

"Welcome to—wait? What? To paradise? This *is* getting weirder," I said.

"My name is Tomás, but we are all *Zaphod* here this fine afternoon."

"My name is Chris. I mean, *Zaphod*, too. It's about eleven o'clock, *at night*, I think."

"*Mon ami*, it's always *five* o'clock here," said Tomás, smiling wryly.

I had no rational explanation for why there was sunshine all around me, but I closed my eyes, letting the tropical heat and the sounds of the surf wash over me.

I felt rejuvenated, as if the last three months of twelve-hour workdays never happened, and I had been here on vacation instead.

I wanted this feeling to last, however improbable—or impossible—this place was.

Opening my eyes, I saw paradise hadn't vanished, and the feeling of serenity was still wrapped around me like a blanket.

"How is this *possible*? Some sort of Star Trek holodeck? Are *you* an alien?"

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Tomás intoned in a passable British accent.

"Okay, Shakespeare, what's going on here?"

"John didn't tell you about dressing for New Bora Bora, either," Tomás said, shaking his head, still ignoring my questions, then smiling widely and handing me a light blue cloth polo shirt, white shorts, and brown leather sandals. Apparently, he'd been holding these items the whole time. I hadn't noticed them before, but nothing here made much sense at the moment.

"This can't be—Bora Bora," I said, my hands reaching out slowly to take the clothes. "This can't be real."

"Define real. If you mean 'real to be what you can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell,' those are just electrical-ionic signals interpreted by your brain—"

"Oh, come on! Shouldn't you be offering me a Matrix blue and red pill right about now?"

"I see why John sent you unprepared," Tomás laughed. "We don't do anything that—crude—here. You'll see soon enough."

He pointed over my shoulder.

"Use the screen behind you to change and hang your clothes on the rack. Leave your phone on the table. It doesn't work here anyway. No signal this far out. Don't worry. No one will take anything. Then, choose a beach chair outside or feel free to wander around. There are many things to do and see here. *Hoa Pili*—your 'Best Friend'—will bring you drink and food shortly."

He paused and smiled, letting the moment settle.

"Find me before you leave," he continued. "We'll talk more about your good fortune. Not everyone gets invited to Brendan's. Here are the few, important rules you must follow, and, of course, the hefty fees, but don't worry."

Tomás handed me a small, white envelope with my name handwritten in a delicate, calligraphic style on the front.

"Th—thank—you, *Zaphod*," I stuttered, feeling like a teenager on a first date. I was flailing mentally at high speed.

Tomás walked to a small podium to study something, probably his appointment book, no longer seeming interested in me or how I felt.

I breathed deeply as I felt a panic attack swelling within me, my chest tightening. Should I stay or run? Would they try to stop me?

Not seeing any reasonable alternatives, I accepted my situation with a long, slow shrug, feeling somewhat calmer. I changed my clothes, then walked through the outer doorway and stepped onto a real—beach.

I looked around—at the ground, digging the tips of my sandals into the white, powdery sand; at the blue, cloud-feathered sky, breathing in deeply; at the turquoise-toned lagoon in front of me; marveling at the beauty—and a chill ran down my spine, despite the heat and humidity.

"This can't be real. How can I be in Bora Bora by walking through a *door*?"

No reply came on the warm breezes as I started walking, then stopped, looking around to see who was plucking a tune on a ukulele.

I was mesmerized suddenly by two oddly beautiful women standing in front of the large, polished driftwood bar. I couldn't decide what was odd and what was beautiful about them. They were absolutely captivating in their flower-patterned sarongs, and each was tanned, smiling, and sipping a drink through a straw stuck into a coconut. They took turns drinking, then laughing at their male companions' comments.

For a moment, I considered joining them, but my fear level spiked. I didn't know who or *what* they were.

Maybe they were androids or maybe aliens wearing "Edgar suits" who wanted me as an appetizer.

Maybe after I got my bearings and learned the rules for this place, I might say "Hello" and ask for their names. That *seemed* safe enough.

Maybe—

I walked across the beach to the last unoccupied, cushioned, white lounge chair, which, similar to the others, was paired with a large, angled, blue and white-striped umbrella.

Sitting down, I surveyed my fellow companions. The twenty or so chairs were occupied by men and women from all walks of life and all ages. Some were sleeping, others chatting.

What startled me the most was no one was working on a pad, taking pics or selfies, or making disturbing phone calls, websurfing, or texting.

A paradise, indeed!

I looked around the beach and then back at the bar. There was no tech anywhere. It was as if I had stepped into a vid playing that old "South Pacific" movie.

In the shade to right side of the bar, I saw an old man, with thinning, white hair and dark, wrinkled skin, sitting on a brown wicker footstool, strumming a ukulele that had definitely seen better days. He was clearly the source of the music. He started singing something in a French-Polynesian dialect and it crystalized the scene for me perfectly.

I laid back in my chair and looked up as dark-toned, bare-footed man wearing an untucked, *Brendan's*-embroidered, white T-shirt and teal-colored board shorts approached me.

"About time."

"John!" I said. "What? Are *you* an alien, too?"

"No, I am *Hoa Pili*, your 'Best Friend,'" he said, smiling. "All your questions will be answered in due time. First, you need something not Guinness."

"This explains your tan."

"I *am* Hawaiian, you know."

"Uh, yeah. Okay. Please bring me something fruity. With ice. A ton of rum. Oh, and a little umbrella."

"Will this do?" he asked.

I stared at the drink in his hand. It was a real coconut with the top sliced off. I could see the pink rum punch, ice, and a flex-straw angled inside. It was garnished with a fruit stick and a small, red umbrella.

"You had that all this time?" I asked, accepting the drink.

"We pride ourselves on anticipating our customers' desires."

"Thank you, John—*Hoa Pili*—you get permanent 'Best Manager' status."

Hoa Pili nodded.

Before I could ask another question, he turned smartly on his right heel, kicking up a small plume of sand.

"I needed to get away from programming," I said to the lagoon. "Maybe forever. I can get used to hanging out in this pub. No better place than a beach in paradise."

I took a long draw on my drink and settled back in the chair, counting the different shades of blue in the water.

It was so beautiful and peaceful.

❖ ❖

I don't remember falling asleep, but, after I opened my eyes, I saw the sun had dropped considerably towards the horizon.

I reached for the envelope on the side table and pulled out a single sheet. There were ten numbered rules listed and I scanned them quickly.

One. Never divulge the true nature of Saint Brendan's Paradise Pub. *Check.*

Two. Always receive The Committee's approval before inviting someone to join. *Check. Made sense. Whoever they were.*

Three. Monthly dues of—

My throat tightened. I coughed loudly, but nobody seemed to notice.

I was going to need a second—or a third—job to cover being at this place.

"I wonder if they allow members to be bouncers or dish washers here," I said aloud, as another wave lapped languidly onto the beach.

I finished my drink.

"Okay, where's John?" I asked. "*Hoa Pili. Zaphod.* Whatever. Don't you all read minds?"

"Right here," came the familiar voice from behind me.

"Erk!" I grunted, pushing up to one side and almost falling out of my chair. "Stop doing that!"

"We don't read minds, *Zaphod*, but I knew you'd want another drink after your short *hiamoe*," Hoa Pili said, as he moved to my side and stretched out his hand.

"Yeah, my nap was refreshing and I do want another drink—okay, *where* am I? This certainly *isn't* Bora Bora. Mount Otemanu's peak is all wrong. I honeymooned there three years ago with my ex. I know it didn't erode *that* fast. So, I'm guessing you're not reading my memories and trying to convince me this is really Bora Bora. And this isn't some kind of VR sim. It's physical. I can feel the heat and the sand. I can taste the salty air. Maybe—you drugged me."

I stared for a moment at my empty coconut. "Hmm, probably not."

"You're quite analytical and quite correct. You're not drugged—well, maybe a bit inebriated, but that's your doing—and, no, this isn't Bora Bora. It's as close as they wanted to make it."

"*They?* I knew it. You *are* aliens!"

"I'm not. I already told you. I'm Hawaiian. I just *work* for the aliens."

Hoa Pili paused and stared into my eyes.

"Actually, humans are the aliens. The ones we call the Ancient Builders terraformed this world—and Earth. These were their worlds. We're the aliens here and on Earth. Our ancestors were brought to Earth over four hundred thousand years ago from a world that some call *Nibiru*."

"Wait. I know that name. Ancient Sumeria, right? That's where those—*Anunnaki*— 'Those Who From The Heavens Came,' so-called gods lived."

I took a long draw on my new drink and chided myself for being distracted by how delicious it was. He's talking about aliens and I'm thinking about my drink. They must be drugging me.

"Those so-called gods weren't the Builders," Hoa Pili explained. "History always seems to get things tumbled. The victors write the histories, and whoever has the gold, makes the rules, I guess."

"The Builders uplifted the Anunnaki, he continued. "Who, in turn, uplifted us into sapiency. They gave us the tools to start our civilization, and they let us run wild, like free-range children. There's a *lot* more to it than that, of course. We were genetically manipulated and spent a lot of time as the Anunnaki's slave race, but we eventually outgrew that. Mostly. Now, we work *with* them."

"Unreal."

"Very real."

"So, this isn't Earth."

"No."

"Why didn't you level with me back at the company? You know I'm way into science fiction. I would have checked this place out much sooner!"

"We needed you to accept and adapt. The best way was to show you, not tell you. We dislike full memory wipes, because they're problematic, but we can implant memories of an alien abduction if you don't accept. How else could your mind handle all this after you go back to your old life? But then, who would really believe you anyway?"

"Okay—" I said, taking a long draw on my straw to steady my resolve. "I'm not freaking out—yet."

"You won't. Good thing, too. Looks bad on my report to my manager. My *alien* manager, that is. Perfect record so far, and I intend on keeping it that way."

"So, I'm a guinea pig?"

"Oh, no!" Hoa Pili laughed. "The 'guinea pigs,' as you call them, were chosen over seventy-five years ago. You're actually part of the last wave. We're close to saturation—getting the world acclimated to humanity's next step.

"First, it was powered flight. All those SF movies since the fifties. Then, satellites and walking on the moon. Space stations. Then, finally, small and larger, official disclosures. Now, the galaxy is our oyster. This is the way it's been done for more than five billion years, according to what my team tells me. After enough people know the truth, it's no longer a shock to the collective consciousness. Few riots. Fewer suicides. More acceptance. Our civilization adapts and carries on."

"So, you're using *pubs* to convert humanity to believe in *aliens*?"

"No," Hoa Pili said, chuckling. "But it is all about travel. Really. Brendan's hosts a *world-door*. It's a way to vacation in paradise—on another world. We've found it makes the transition so much easier for everyone if you're more relaxed and away from life's stresses. Look at us talking. No screaming and running and all that."

"I'm still not sure I'm *not* going to scream and run."

"You won't. Like some others, you'd have done that after stepping through Brendan's door from the street."

"And I've been here for hours—"

"See? You're way past the point of no return."

"But I'm free to leave?" I asked, almost in a whisper, as I sipped the last of my drink.

"Any time," Hoa Pili replied. "After you sign the real agreement. No need for you to find recruits. This isn't a pyramid scheme, but it's vital you agree with the plan."

Hoa Pili paused, struggling with what to say next.

"As I said, we're almost at saturation. It'll be difficult to find someone who isn't onboard with the coming Full Disclosure. If you want out now, we might not even require a memory implant. Probably in another year, max, and everything will be revealed."

"If saturation is imminent, why are there only twenty or so people here?"

Hoa Pili smiled, looking relaxed again. "You think Brendan's is the only world-door, this world, and *Kishnar*—the Builder's name for Earth—are the only *worlds*? I thought you were 'way into science fiction.'"

"Umm—"

"They're not. There are more than a dozen more world-doors to other planets right here on *Anshar* alone. And a lot more on Earth. There's a lot to learn, Chris. You're free to keep on

traveling, if you want, after you sign the real agreement. I've been to fifty Hegemony worlds already, and not just the planets we humans are acclimating on. You should see my passport. My *other* passport."

Hoa Pili smiled again.

"You keep saying the 'real agreement.' The one I received from Tomás asks me to sell both my kidneys to afford all this."

"There's no fee anymore. That was done to keep earlier groups from going rogue on the process. Tomás really needs to stop—look—that was part of the test. You could have said 'No' after reading it. I'll have Tomás come over to finalize things."

"So, what are these world-doors?"

"Each is the end of a special kind of wormhole," Hoa Pili replied. "The Builders have a technical name for them, but it sounds like a cat being pulled tail-first through a narrow, metal tube. Because of the Anunnaki, we have access to the world-doors and the Builders' network. By the way, some alien worlds out there aren't too pleased with that arrangement, because we're such a young race compared to them. But the Anunnaki are powerful allies. Hey, that's a scary-shit story for another time. And more drinks."

"So, the whole multiverse thing is real? I asked.

"Multi—well, maybe. I think of it more in terms of structure. The network is the 'how' not the 'what.' My team likes to call it the 'travelverse.' Kinda catchy, yes?"

Hoa Pili turned away and headed to the hut, leaving me with more unanswered questions than before.

✧ ✧

My mind raced as I did the math. I'm on an alien planet. I can't go back to programming after all this, but I have rent and bills to pay. I have to eat. Maybe I can get a job here or, maybe, on another planet.

I shook my head and stared out over the water. The waves continued to lap on the shore, wholly unconcerned about my dilemma.

"This is so weird."

"You haven't seen weird, yet, *mon ami*," Tomás said, holding an odd-looking pad in front of me. It was the first piece of tech I'd seen so far here, which actually surprised me more than Tomás' reappearance. I was getting used to people showing up just when I needed something.

"I bet you're right," I said, smiling and finger-swiping through the text. It looked like those boilerplate software agreements I never actually read. This time, I read as fast as I could. I saw a lot of legal words and numerous references to memory wipes, but they didn't worry me anymore. I wanted more of this.

I signed the end of the form with my fingertip.

"Place your thumb on the black square," Tomás said.

I complied and the square flashed green momentarily. Tomás took away the pad.

"What, no blood sample or my kidney?"

"That's it," Tomás replied. "You just left a small DNA sample that you won't even miss. Welcome, Christopher Patrick O'Malley of Earth, to the Galactic Hegemony. Want a copy of the agreement emailed to you?"

I nodded, wanting to read more about the *Social and Personal Interactions with Other Races* section I skimmed.

"Anything you want to do now? Have dinner? Go water skiing? Maybe your favorite sport—snow skiing?"

"You guys freak me out," I said. "There's snow here, too? Is there an indoor place like in Dubai?"

"Someplace much better. Go back to the main hut and open the world-door to the left of the dressing screen. Walk through and go to your right for about ten meters. You'll meet Henri, my counterpart, waiting for you with your snow gear. They're still working on the reception area redesign, so be careful where you step."

"Thank you, Tomás," I said, standing up. "Please tell *Hoa Pili* I'll be back later. He and I have a lot to talk about."

"I will, and safe journeys, *mon ami*."

I walked back to the hut and found myself standing before another ornate, mahogany door. I knew it wasn't made of wood. It was probably dark matter in the shape of a door.

I smiled.

Trying to figure out how the Ancient Builders accomplished all this, especially since they had been apparently terraforming worlds and uplifting civilizations for billions of years, made me feel like an ant trying to figure out how an airplane flew through the sky. And that was tempered by the ant-questions of "what is sky?" and "what is airplane?" rushing through my ant-human-brain.

I was definitely an ant in all this, but I felt a certainty that I had to just accept what I saw and enjoy myself. There was no turning back now.

I opened the door and before me was the most beautiful panorama of mountains I'd ever seen. Nothing I'd skied before compared to this, especially the oddly purplish sky dotted with white clouds framing a row of resplendent, snow-capped peaks, each easily taller than Mount Everest, and two radiant moons hanging high in the sky.

"This is going to be the best vacation *ever*," I said, stepping onto pristine snow of a distant world.

❖ ❖ ❖

February 24th, 2024

Issue 7 | Threshold

SciFanSat

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



Featuring

Voima Oy	The Gateless Gate (Poetry)
That Burnt Writer	I am Zero, I am God. (Flash)
Alan Vincent Michaels	Liminalities in the Travelverse (Short)
Peter Gilbertson	ISRS Part I (Short)
Jason H. Abbott	Shadow of the Black Tower (Serial)



SciFanSat is an imprint of Blue Boar Press



March

Growing Boy by A. L. Hodges

Mom told me not to eat that candy I got from Ms. Bezinger. She said it would ruin my appetite.

I reckon she's only saying that on account of she thinks I ruin most everything. Other day, she said I ruined her carpet when I come in after playing in the creek with Billy Patterson. That time, she about burst a vessel, seeing me dripping water all over Creation. Day before that, she was on about how I ruined her petunias when I was playing tackle football with the boys in the backyard. I told it was Josh Foricker who tackled me into the dang things, it wasn't my idea at all, but she wouldn't listen to me. Not that she ever does, anyway.

And every time she gets two or three glasses into a bottle of wine, she starts on about how I ruined her marriage. Far as I can tell, all I did was be born, and dad decided he'd had enough. I don't reckon I remember much about him, just kinda how he looked, kinda burly with a dark beard and short hair. He always seemed to have a racing cap on, and he always looked like he was smiling. I liked dad, but I don't know if he felt the same way. Last year, I only saw him on Holidays, and my Birthday seemed to slip his mind.

But mom's one to talk about appetites. Every time she wants to shove some glop she's slapped together for dinner, I hear this whole riot act about how I "need to eat" cause "I'm a growing boy". Listen to this woman! She couldn't keep a story straight if her life depended on it! Well, I guess now I'll be a growing boy with some candy in my mouth, huh?

Thing is, Ms. Bezinger's house is always popular on Halloween. If you can brave that yard of hers, with all those creepy flowers (they seem to sway towards you, like the tentacles of a jellyfish), and if you got the guts to ring her doorbell, you'll get the best sugar eats there are. Popcorn balls, candied apples, you name it. She's got an herb garden out back, so she says, and she seasons everything to perfection. When I was a kid, mom used to march me up to her front door every Halloween and make me take a treat and say thank you Ms. Bezinger and all that jazz. But I tell you what, any fear I had of being poisoned by that hag dissolved when whatever it was crossed my tongue.

Cooking and flowers, that was Ms. Bezinger's specialty. Everywhere there was a flower show, a bake off, or any gathering of el birdos with veiny hands competing in home ec drudgery, you'd find Ms. Bezinger with those weird plants and delicious treats of hers. She never went to church, as far as I could see, but she was always at the luncheons and prayer breakfasts of the First Baptist and the Mother Mary's Catholic popping out deserts with every other bible-thumping crone. Talk about persistence! She'd make your eyes bleed with those flower arrangements and your tongue tingle with those sugary snacks.

Trouble was, cooking and flowers was mom's thing, too. I weren't never much of a fan of mom's cooking, but I reckon she saved the good stuff for the county fair judges. She was cordial as you like to Ms. Bezinger on the street, but I think deep down, she was tired of coming in second and third while Ms. Bezinger brought home blue ribbons time and time again.

I guess Ms. Bezinger had to be good at something, seeing as how God hit her with about fifteen ugly sticks. She's the weirdest-looking lady you ever saw with the most beautiful garden in the whole state, and that's the truth. You take the shortest, gnarliest, wrinkliest old woman you ever come across, and I guarantee you ol' Ms. Bezinger can beat her for weirdness, no contest. She's shorter than me even, with a back bent like a corkscrew. Maybe it's just her glasses, but she has an enormous pair of eyes that don't never seem to wink. And her hands? Man, she's got huge mits with fingers that got to be almost a foot long! She always holds 'em folded close to her chest, like a T-Rex from a movie. When she smiles, you should see her teeth: they ain't no dentures, but long teeth, like a gopher, long and sharp-looking. Just looking at her shuffle along with those humongous hands and big ol' eyes is enough to give anybody the creeps.

I tell ya, it's a heck of a thing to live next door to the local witch lady. Or whatever she is. Most of the boys got a complex about coming over, on account of us living next door to ol' Ms. Bezinger. Thing is, what if a ball goes over the fence into her yard? Then what? I sure as heck wouldn't go get it. Ms. Bezinger? That's suicide.

Josh Foricker has a regular business, talking to kids about Ms. Bezinger and sharing local legends with anybody who will listen. See, it was Josh who convinced me that one time to sneak up to her house and peek in the window. I was against it but he coerced me, that way he does, where he just gets under your skin and crawls around until you give in.

Of course, Josh has his work cut out for him on that one. People have been talking for a long time about how Ms. Bezinger isn't human. Josh's theory was always that she was an alien, and come down to colonize Earth with her weirdo flowers. He said that even though our town ain't but three thousand souls, there weren't nobody he ever heard of that ever called Ms. Bezinger by her first name. Fact was, nobody seemed to know anything about her, where she was from or who her family was or any such thing. Josh's older sister, who just went to college, said that Ms. Bezinger was old even when she was our age, and Josh said even his dad let slip that Ms. Bezinger had to be nearly a hundred because even he remembered her being old and wrinkly when he was a kid. Josh is known for making up tall tales, but I reckon he might be onto something. I've lived next to Ms. Bezinger for as long as I can remember, and I ain't ever

seen anybody come to visit her, no family or anything. Heck, she barely even comes out, except to go to the store.

And it's a small town, people talk. The kids at school sure as hell never get tired of chewing over Ms. Bezinger. Every year, some kid comes up to me and Josh and asks me about what it's like living next door to a witch. Or an alien. Or a serial killer. Whatever the story is that year. And Josh lives for that, because then he gets to ramble on about how Ms. Bezinger came here in a UFO in the 50s, and how she catches kids and grinds them up and uses them for fertilizer for her alien plant people. Pretty soon, those flowers will bloom into pod people, who will take over the human race, just like in a scifi picture. So on and so on.

But Josh, he's always got his head on making money. And what he did, he started charging the boys to have a peek into her house. One of the guys would come for a three-way sleepover, and Josh, he'd pop the big question: you wanna take a peek in the old lady's place? And at first, they'd be all coy about it. Then Josh would start in with those stories, and he'd be prodding them for a quarter of an hour, and finally they'd buckle. For five bucks (which is a heap of money when you're ten) he would sneak them across the fence and right up to her back window and let them take a glance inside. Like she was a zoo exhibit. Next day, we'd split the money, and I think in one summer we made thirty bucks a piece that way.

I didn't like it at first, but you can't argue with good money. And I gotta tell you, I got to getting pretty curious about what was going on in that saltbox next door. See, her house is pretty funny, and like her, extremely old, with furniture that looks like something from the dark ages. These old couches that are like something from a period piece, and oil lamps, and stuff that doesn't make any sense. I don't mean odd-looking nicknacks, but furniture that I can't see no purpose for. Like it wasn't made for human beings. All the rooms on the bottom floor are like that, and all of them full of weird things that I really can't put no name to. But the kitchen is the worst.

First of all, it's full of tools that aren't like anything I ever seen. They're like something between doodads from an alien abduction piece and surgical implements from Frankenstein's castle. All nasty looking, and I don't mind telling you, I've often had dreams of her wrenching me apart with them. But second to that is, the kitchen is where she spends most of her time. Just about every peeping Tom session we did ended up watching her in the kitchen, futzing about, working on something or other. I wish I'd written everything we saw down, because looking back, so much of what we witnessed didn't seem to make much sense in the context that we saw it.

For one thing, she sang while she worked. And I'll tell you, it wasn't like any language I've ever heard. Heck, I've never heard a human throat make noises like that! She would sing to herself while she cut up flowers, but those flowers...

See, that was the second thing. The flowers had things inside them, growing. I thought they were bees at first, but even though they looked like insects, they were

Different

Wrong

I can't explain it. They were critters, with chitin and tons of legs and wings, but I can't really find the words for it. Plus, we watched this from the window, so I never got more than a glance

at them. But they weren't like anything that looked like a flower. And she cut these things up and used them to...

Well, I don't know. She had pots going, but she always seemed to be making something that I didn't recognize. Everything we saw was just so weird, the context never helped us understand it. And of course, remember, we were trying not to get caught, so we could only watch her for a minute or two before running back to my place. I tell you, all those kids me and Josh took over there got their money's worth! Ms. Bezinger never disappointed.

But I tell you, I was getting creeped out. It was all ok for Josh, because he went home the next day. Me, though, I had to live next door to that weirdo. And I knew it was only a matter of time before she caught on to us.

Turns out, only a matter of time was yesterday. We pulled the routine like we always did, me and Josh and Billy and a new kid at school named Nick Kasbrak. Josh wheedled Nick something terrible, new kids to our circle are always a sucker for those Ms. Bezinger stories. When Josh was finished, Nick looked like he might piss himself at the thought of even going near the house next door. But he relented, as they all do, and with our flashlights we snuck over the fence and through Ms. Bezinger's eerie garden of strange flowers.

Everything went off without a hitch. Until the next morning, when mom got a phone call.

Did we leave footprints? Or did she outright see us? Maybe she knew all along, and decided for whatever reason that this time was the last straw. Either way, mom gave me the nastiest talking to I've ever had yet. Apparently, she thinks Josh is a bad influence, and wants me to have a "proper male role model". She started on that kick even when she was with dad, but she's really ramped it up since dad flew the coop. She's always lending me out for chores for little old ladies from church, just like I was a vacuum cleaner or a pair of hedge clippers. I guess it was only a matter of time before I ended up working for Ms. Bezinger, but I was hoping it wouldn't be so soon.

Of course, I'm more scared of mom than Ms. Bezinger. The old woman is just creepy, but mom is downright psychotic these days. When I found out I was spending one day of the summer, one of my precious days of freedom before the start of the school year mowing Ms. Bezinger's substantial lawn, I said no way, no how. But she gave me that look, the one every mom has in her arsenal, and stuck her finger in my face, and told me I better hup-two and do a good job. This was compensation, for upsetting our poor neighbor, and I best not ruin it, like I did everything else.

So I mowed the lawn for her. She stood on the porch watching me push the mower back and forth, her eyes rolling back and forth from behind her thick-as-a-brick glasses. The crazy thing was those flowers, which grew all around her lawn and back garden. Having seen what I had seen, I had this horrible fear that I would touch one by accident, or that I would inhale pollen from one. I had seen them in the dark when sneaking up to the house a million times, but by daylight they took on a new life. They swayed in their eerie way, orienting themselves towards me as I passed by. I couldn't help but feel they were reaching out for me, as if begging for help.

But I finished, God help me. I stumbled up the porch, sweating my head off, where Ms. Bezinger was waiting, holding a bowl in her humongous hands. And she had this smile, so that

I could see her creepy gopher teeth. She told me what a good boy I was in her cutesy granny voice and dug around in that bowl with her long, crooked fingers. She had what looked like giant malted milk balls, huge round gobs of chocolate, one of which she selected for me.

"I made this myself" she said. "Something sweet, for a sweet young man." Then she pushed it at me with a big grin. Well, I didn't want to take it at first. But it just looked so delicious. Round, smooth, sweet-looking, perfect. I took it, and her smile broadened until it looked as if it would split her head in two.

"That one is for you. The rest are for your friends, when the time comes."

Then she turned and shuffled back into the house.

When I got home I was holding it, thinking about whether to chow down on it or not. Of course, mom started in with her whole spiel: ruin your appetite and all. She's making pasta in a creamed spinach sauce tonight.

I hate spinach.

When I put that thing in my mouth, I was riding high. The taste was incredible, indescribable. There was the smooth taste of chocolate, with something underneath, something tart and chewy. It was like candy, but no candy I'd ever tasted before, something next level. I'd heard people whistle Dixie about Ms. Bezinger's cooking, but this was something else!

And now

Turns out, I really am a growing boy. My clothes ripped and my bed broke. The whole room looks smaller and I feel

I feel a lot hairier now. And my hands are getting bigger, and my fingernails have grown a heck of a lot.

And mom was wrong. That candy didn't ruin my appetite the first bit. In fact, I feel hungrier than I can ever remember feeling in my whole life. For some reason, I got this craving for raw meat.

Man, I really want the taste of blood in my mouth right now.

I'll go downstairs and see mom. Maybe she can help me out. She's not much of a cook, but I'm sure she's delicious.

March 30th, 2024

Issue 8 | Ruin

SciFanSat

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



Featuring

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| Morgan RR Haze | Ruined Space Station (Flash) |
| Andrew L. Hodges | Growing boy (Short) |
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SciFanSat is an imprint of Blue Boar Press



April

We Are Stardust

by Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil

Commander Nyoka gasped when her capsule opened. Around her, hissing airlocks signaled the awakening of her crew. Nyoka grabbed the sides of her pod and hoisted herself out. The subsystems designed to maintain muscle mass couldn't hold a candle to good, old-fashioned exercise, but they were a hell of a lot better than waking up from 45 years of atrophy.

"DAISy, give me a report." Nyoka said. A large screen blinked on to display the status of the vessel and the awakening crew.

A pleasant voice replied, "The crew is healthy. Everything is working properly, Commander. How was your rest?"

"Damn it, DAISy, you know I hate being under. Calling it 'rest' won't help. Rivera, are you awake yet?"

"Yes, ma'am. Up and feeling fine." Rivera sat on the floor stretching her legs and back. "I don't understand why you hate being under so much."

A man climbing from a pod said, "I'm with Commander. It's unnatural. There's no telling what could have happened while you were out." His legs wobbled beneath him, but he began to dress in his uniform.

"You've been awake less than a minute, and already you're kissing Nyoka's ass?" A fourth crewmember clambered out of a capsule labeled *Lt. Massoud*. She, too, began a repertoire of stretches.

"Massoud, I need you to go through DAISy's scans of the planet; mark anything that looks promising. Hughes, make sure the drones brought back enough samples. Run whatever we have through the full gamut. Rivera, stick with me, we're headed to the bridge. I'm ready to see this rock with my own eyes."

Nyoka strode through the glistening corridors. Walking calmed her nerves. The doors to the bridge slid apart with a soft *whir*. A world of chrome stood before her, and she entered it without hesitation. After sitting in her chair, she pulled in a lungful of air and held it. She

released it when her chest tingled. "DAISy, open the blast shields and activate the radiation filters."

"It would be my pleasure, Commander."

Two metallic clunks sounded off before the steady buzz of unseen mechanisms filled the bridge. As the gap between each half-shield grew, a brilliant light shone through the solar screen. The light took on a greenish hue from the radiation filters. Commander Nyoka looked out at the dwarf star, her eyes squinting. A jagged round silhouette moved across the field of light.

"Oh my god," Rivera whispered.

"Welcome to Petram II, Private Rivera."



Commander Nyoka double-checked all the readouts from the planetary scans. While she did pay special attention to the bits Lieutenant Massoud brought to the forefront, she could never bring herself to completely trust someone else's analysis. Whenever she tried, something nagged her mind until she inevitably went through all the data for herself anyway.

"You're sure these oxygen levels are correct?" Nyoka asked.

Massoud rolled her eyes, "Yes. Why do I even go through the scans if you're going to second guess me at every point?"

"They seem a little high to me." Nyoka replied, ignoring Massoud's question.

"It's definitely higher concentrations than Earth, but it's within the parameters. Why are you even looking at the atmospheric readings? They're all in the right ranges. Did you see the level of speciation in plant life? It's incredible."

Nyoka flicked her wrist a few times and the display screens slid away from her, replaced by subsequent pages. She bit the inside of her cheek as she read Massoud's note. "You think it's because of the atmosphere?"

"My best guess is the high concentrations of carbon dioxide make it easier for plants to thrive, but... the levels of sunlight are so much lower. It's confusing for sure."

"And what do you make of the samples we have?"

Massoud looked at Hughes. Nyoka could tell neither was sure who she expected to answer. She looked up at Hughes.

"Uh, that's the other thing that's very strange. The plants aren't wild like they should be."

"What do you mean?"

"Like... The fruit is too... fruity." Nyoka's face must have conveyed her confusion, because Hughes began to explain himself. "I mean, it's too fleshy. The seeds are mostly small, and the sugar content is way higher than we would have expected. It's like they're..."

"Delicious?" Rivera offered.

"Domesticated," Hughes finished.



That night, Nyoka couldn't sleep. *Technically, it isn't night*, she reminded herself, as she lay awake in the dark cabin. The small planet rotated much faster than Earth, and was orbiting a much smaller star. She chuckled to herself as she thought of Rivera's nickname for it: Earth Junior.

In nearly every measurable way, Petram II seemed ideal for human settlement, but Nyoka wondered what, if any, long term effects there might be from the shorter day-night cycles and solar years. Would her descendants still strive to maintain 24-hour schedules when there was no astronomical reason to? Would they adopt an entirely new calendar or shoehorn earth's onto this new little world?

However, these were only the questions Nyoka used to avoid the one actually keeping her awake.

Domesticated. Despite her efforts, the word kept creeping into her thoughts, a persistent leak in an otherwise impenetrable dam. *Domesticated?* She imagined the word as a tiny acrobat spinning about a bar, somehow gaining inexplicable speed. She felt that if she could stop the acrobat's spinning—slow it down, subject it to the forces of friction that it would experience if it existed outside her mind—she could begin to theorize and hypothesize. But she couldn't. And it kept spinning.

Eventually, she rose from her bed and instructed DAISy to begin her morning routine. Artificial light replaced the artificial dark. It was refracted and re-focused through various lenses to trick the brain into seeing warm sunbeams and a Rayleigh-scattered sky.

Nyoka lost count as she ground out her push-ups, pull-ups, and squats. The acrobat accelerated still. *Domesticated.*



Official protocol dictated that Rivera and Massoud would be the first to visit the surface, and Nyoka hated it.

The shuttle dwindled to a tiny pinprick of glinting starlight before bursting into a reddish stream of fire.

Rivera to ESS Exodus, do you copy?

"We copy, Rivera. How're things?"

Atmospheric entry is going smoothly. We're leveling out. No signs of civilization. Nothing unexpected. It's just a massive, indigo, wonderland.

"Copy that, Rivera. Keep us posted."

Nyoka would have given anything to be on that first shuttle. *Anything except my command post.*

Hughes offered a sympathetic smile. "Cheer up, Commander. We'll have our turn."



Nyoka rushed back to the communications console.

"Say again for ESS Exodus. Repeat, say again for ESS Exodus." Hughes' voice was higher-pitched than Nyoka had ever heard it before.

No response.

"Exodus to ground team, do you copy?"

No response.

"Come in ground team."

The silence tore holes in them both. It stretched from fear to agony.

"Ground team, come in," Hughes repeated the command limply.

Sorry! Sorry Exodus! We read you loud and clear. We are OK. Repeat, we are Oscar Kilo. Rivera stopped talking, but the transmission didn't cut out. Nyoka could hear... something—voices?—in the background. High pitched, babbling sounds. Then Massoud laughing.

Apologies Exodus. This is Massoud on ground team. Rivera is preoccupied. You're not going to believe this. There are people here.



Nyoka couldn't slow her heart rate nor control her breathing. The tiny acrobat's speed became unmanageable and it careened off the bar, launching into orbit. Nyoka was walk-jogging to the docking bay where Massoud and Rivera had recently offboarded.

Both women were smiling, laughing. *Do they not understand the problem?* They looked like teenagers unloading a bus that had arrived home from summer camp.

"Rivera, Massoud, I need an immediate debrief."

"Of course, Commander," Massoud said without turning to face her superior. "I need to get these recordings into—"

"You need to obey direct orders." Nyoka strode from the bay without looking back. Echoing footsteps in the glimmering hallway told her they chose to follow. In the distorted reflection overhead, Nyoka could see the two exchanging looks and shrugs.

As soon as they entered the command office, Nyoka rounded on them.

"Explain yourselves immediately." She squeezed the words roughly through teeth clenched shut.

Rivera opened her mouth, about to speak, but Massoud lifted her hand, silencing her. "This hardly concerns Private Rivera. Everything she did was done on my watch; with my approval."

Nyoka's face fell deadly calm, a smooth mask of composure. "Rivera, you are dismissed."

The younger woman looked sick, but saluted and made her exit. Massoud didn't turn to watch her leave, opting instead to meet Nyoka's unflinching gaze. For a moment that stretched out awkwardly, the small office was filled with the silence of a hidden predator. Nyoka refused to fill the void, refused to repeat herself. She waited for Massoud's explanation, and she would wait till Petram II's young, red star burned itself out, if she had to.

"They aren't dangerous," Massoud broke first.

"You can't know that. Your choice to interact with an alien species was beyond reckless."

"We didn't choose to interact with them. They came out of nowhere. If they had intended to harm us, they would have had ample opportunity. They're... Primitive..." Massoud hesitated and made a face like the word was sour in her mouth. "... simple. No clothing, no tools that we saw. Highly curious. Shockingly gentle. Kind even."

Nyoka tried to keep her face stony and unreadable, but she could not hide her bafflement. "They are an alien species about which we know nothing."

"All the more reason for us to interact with them and learn from them!"

Nyoka abandoned all efforts to stay calm, "How arrogant do you have to be to think you can possibly draw any conclusions about their behavior? They evolved on a planet trillions of kilometers from Earth—"

"In an environment that so closely matches Earth we came to try it out for ourselves!"

"Do you even hear yourself?! They are an alien species!"

"We're the aliens here!"

The words hung dangerously in the air, a mist or fog through which Nyoka couldn't see. "We are pioneering a path forward for humanity."

Massoud's temper subsided. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "What if that path is set to barrel over the only other intelligent life discovered in the universe? That's not what we signed up for and you know it."

Nyoka furrowed her brow. "I know." Her anger had dissipated as well. "You're dismissed." The words came out soft as a fluttering of moth wings.

Massoud turned to leave, but hesitated. "If my actions on-world jeopardized our safety... I don't think they did but... you're right that I can't know for sure. I'm sorry, Commander."

"Apology accepted. Tell Rivera I want to see that footage."



Rivera and Massoud huddled around Nyoka and Hughes as they watched the footage from the ground expedition, anxious to share their incredible discovery.

Nyoka held her breath when the creatures came into frame. Massoud was correct, they had come out of nowhere. Rivera and Massoud trudged through the jungle, thick with deep purple foliage and bulbous fruits in dozens of colors. Then, without warning, Rivera spun on her heels to face... a face. Two eyes, a nose with two nostrils, a narrow mouth with white teeth, and presumably ears beneath a shock of dark hair. The camera jerked a bit and soon was being held at an odd angle extremely close to the too-human face. Off screen, Rivera's shout of fright quickly evolved into laughter.

"Their hands were strong, but so delicate. It actually tickled," she explained.

Then, on the video, the camera dropped to the ground. From that less-than ideal vantage point, the five Petrans (as Nyoka decided to call them) could sort of be seen grasping, twisting, turning, examining Rivera and Massoud.

Massoud asked repeatedly in the recording if Rivera were seeing the same thing. Neither could believe what was happening. Neither seemed shaken to their core by it though, Nyoka noticed. Bewildered, sure, but not afraid. Not wary. Rivera extricated herself from the hands of

her kindly captors and rushed over to the camera, picking it up and remounting it on her shoulder. Then her first call to the Exodus occurred.

"There are people down here!" She said into her radio. Her words were a rush of excitement, easily mistaken for fear in a moment of unclarity. As soon as she finished, the device was snatched from her by a Petran, who darted away to show the now squawking box to his compatriots.

Nyoka felt her cheeks warm with embarrassment as she heard Hughes' desperate calls and remembered her own frantic thoughts. *It's not foolish to worry about your crew*, she reminded herself.

Eventually, Rivera retrieved the comm from the creatures and gave the all-clear, but soon they had lifted her off her feet and spun her in a playful circle. That's when Massoud managed to snag the comm. All Nyoka could see was the drastic mismatch in physical size and strength.

The video cut out, starting up again after the ground crew had time to set up a drone to hold the camera. The remaining footage showed the two humans trying to communicate with a growing crowd of Petrans. Wild gestures and over-exaggerated gesticulations ensued until Rivera and Massoud were convinced the natives understood their intention to leave, but also to return again.

The screen went dark. Each crew member sat still, stewing in thought.



The crew sat around the table the next morning, their food waiting before them mostly untouched. Hughes spoke first. "We aren't alone." Obvious, but somehow still profound.

"We certainly aren't," Rivera replied.

"No one was supposed to live here. We sent probes ahead of us. Messages. It was supposed to be a lucky little rock waiting for us." Clearly, Hughes was thinking aloud. "We were so preoccupied with butting up against an advanced race, we never considered what we'd do against... them."

"They are so *new*." Massoud began voicing her own thoughts, hardly paying any attention to Hughes.

"So new," Rivera agreed.

"We can help them. We have tech that took our species hundreds of thousands of years to discover and invent. Imagine where we'd be if we'd had that since our infancy," Massoud said.

"I wonder how many there are in total. How many did you count?" Hughes asked.

"At one point we counted 50," Rivera answered. "We didn't see any children though."

"Makes sense; they'd keep them safely away from a possible threat," Hughes said.

"Of course, that's assuming their offspring are small in stature like those of earth," Rivera said.

"An assumption, true; but surely, it's a safe one, right? Even asexual reproduction would leave two smaller copies of the original organism. Unless... Do you think those *were* the offspring?" Hughes shook his head as he mused.

Rivera shrugged. "I suppose it's possible, but not likely. Their sex organs seemed developed and secondary sex characteristics were present. But then again, they seemed so naive and trusting."

"How many times have humans wondered what it would be like if a benevolent alien race came to help us thrive?" Massoud continued as if no one else were speaking. "That could be us! We could be their ancient legends, but... but true!"

"If we initiate the colony protocols, we'd crowd them off their own planet," said Hughes. "We can't settle—"

"Where else can we go?!" Nyoka finally spoke. "This was a one-way trip. You all knew that when you signed on. There are 275,000 humans on board this ship. They entrusted their survival to *us*. Are we supposed to leave them in stasis forever? Do you expect me to order a cast-off back into the void with no plan and no destination?"

"So, what do we do?" Rivera, the most junior member of the expedition, both in age and rank, looked at the other three.

For a long time, no one ventured to speak. Soon, all three of her crew members were looking at Nyoka, eyes pleading for guidance. Nyoka sighed. "Step one: figure out how to effectively communicate."



Before the shuttle touched down, a ring of Petrans had formed around the clearing. As Nyoka stepped onto the alien world, she could not shake the lightness she felt. Beyond the weaker gravity of a less massive planet, standing on the bluish grass surrounded by indigo leaves, something in Nyoka lifted. She was unreligious, but was tempted to describe the feeling as a burden lifted off of her soul. Had Massoud and Rivera experienced the same? Did Hughes feel it too?

"Wow," Hughes said as he disembarked behind her. "I can't believe we're here."

Soon, the Petrans had closed in around them. Nyoka wanted to be on guard, she wanted to be wary and make sure they couldn't box her in ... But at the same time, she now understood Massoud's judgment call.

Somehow, Nyoka was unable to feel at risk. Something about standing there felt right. As though all her life, every decision, the prudent and the foolish, had all been leading her to this exact moment. To doubt the perfection of the moment would have taken herculean effort. She didn't have it in her. Nyoka, who was distrustful by nature, found herself wanting to trust the goodness of this new species and new planet.

The crowd began to chatter and hum with the spoken words of an unknown language. Orange hands began to direct the two humans away from their ship. Their strength was insurmountable, but they did not use it harshly. Little by little, the Commander and Hughes were carried away by the sea of giants. Nyoka began to laugh. She didn't mean to and had trouble stopping it. Hughes joined in, and the Petrans as well.

From deep in her subconscious mind, the rational part of her brain which had been silenced by Petram II raised one last question. *Will I still laugh if they begin to hurt me?*

The undulating waves of Petran hands finally stopped when Hughes and Nyoka had been ushered into a grove of trees. The sun had begun to descend in the sky, but Nyoka reminded herself how short days would be here. DAISy assured her they had landed less than an hour ago.

Around them, Petrans, including children, gathered in what Nyoka assumed must be family units. A male, a female, and a few offspring. Nyoka scanned the area and saw dozens, maybe even a hundred, of such units.

From her right, a female Petran approached. The crowd grew quiet, waiting to hear what she would say. As she began to speak, Nyoka tried to breathe more shallowly, more silently, somehow feeling that if she were quiet enough, she'd be able to hear and understand the alien language. Of course, she still could not.

Then, the towering... woman—Nyoka hesitated to let herself think of them as women and men, but found she couldn't help categorizing Petrans in ways her brain could make sense of—the woman crouched down into a squatting position and lowered her head. Nyoka shook her head, smiling; unsure, but not uneasy.

The Petran stood. She smiled, touched her nose, then her chin, then her nose again, and raised her voice to address the crowd. They responded with a joyful shout, before a number of Petrans brought forth a huge variety of fruits, which they lay before Nyoka and Hughes. They waited to see how the two humans would react.

Hughes eventually made a move. He lifted an oblong green fruit that resembled a papaya and took a bite. Beneath the green skin, bright pink flesh leaked bright pink juice, which streamed down Hughes' chin as he ate. Nyoka shrugged and picked out her own.

Rivera had been right all along. The fruit was delicious.



“Why adopt such a vulnerable position if it was supposed to show dominance?” Massoud said after the footage of Nyoka and Hughes's expedition had concluded.

Rivera nodded in agreement. “I can feel in my bones that they aren't dangerous.” Then, as if she could feel Nyoka's doubt, “I know it's not scientific, Commander. I just... I don't know how else to say it. They don't want to hurt us. I don't even think they have weapons, much less hunt.”

Nyoka hated to admit it, but now that she'd spent time on-world, she agreed. The Petrans were large and strong, but everything about them seemed gentle and non-violent. It was the least human thing about them.

As they spoke, a green notification light illuminated the corner of the display. “DAISy, you have a language analysis update?”

“Yes, Commander. Their spoken language is 53% similar to human languages. It is predominantly verbal, with 12 vowel-like phonemes and 35 consonant-like phonemes identified so far.

“However, I have identified a significant somatic element to the language; certain gestures and postures alter the meanings of otherwise identical or nearly identical sound-phrases. I

created an algorithm to detect and categorize somatic components to help me quickly determine their meanings as they relate to verbal components. Would you like additional information, Commander?"

"No, thank you. Let me know when you are able to translate messages."

"With confidence levels set to 99.4% and an interval of half a percentage point, I should be able to translate messages in approximately 3,300 hours."

"In the meantime," Nyoka said, "There will be no more return trips. We can't jeopardize the mission with bad communication."



Rivera seemed the most disappointed by the news, but none were thrilled by the order.

"I don't like it any more than you do," Massoud had said, "But the Commander is right. Until we can reliably communicate with the Petrans, it's too risky to traipse about down. We can't botch this."

After their third week away, Hughes noticed that the clearing where they had been landing the shuttle was now lined with stones. Two nights later, Rivera noticed the stones had been painted with a phosphorescent pigment.

"They're guiding us back," she said. A tremor of melancholy shook her voice.

"For all we know, it could be a warning to stay away," Nyoka said without conviction.

The look Rivera shot in response stung Nyoka, but she absorbed it without breaking her stoic stare. She wanted to apologize. She wanted to further explain. She wanted to mitigate the damage to Rivera's view of her. But the words of her old commander played on loop in her head: *Never apologize when making the right call is unpopular.*

Her grandfather had a similar saying, one that functioned as a useful corollary: *An apology without a remedy is a tragedy.*



Manufactured daylight slowly filled her cabin as Nyoka's wake-up sequences initiated. She stretched, yawned, and stood, wiping sleep from her eyes. A small panel slid back revealing a freshly laundered towel, which she grabbed on her way to the washroom.

As she showered, she heard the other crew members starting their routines. Waiting for DAISy to finish analyzing the Petran language had left ample room for them to develop daily habits. They slipped into the comfortable numbness of familiar patterns even while standing at the boundary line of fantastic discovery.

Hughes' heavy, slapping footfalls echoed off the white tiles, and soon Nyoka heard his characteristic sigh when he first stepped into the hot water. Then came Massoud, whose initial arrival was less noticeable—she practically tiptoed to the shower—but whose presence couldn't be missed: she liked to stand just outside the shower and methodically crack the first knuckle of each finger while the stall filled with steam. Next up, Rivera, who always entered the bathroom whistling the same tune.

Nyoka once asked her about it. "It's an old song. My great-grandmother used to sing it to my grandmother, who sang it to my father, who sang it to me. But it's *much* older than that."

The commander waited for the melody to ring out. Her brain, expecting the music, kept hearing the first few notes.

But the whistling never came.

"Excuse me, Commander," DAISy's soft voice interrupted Nyoka's musing. "Private Rivera has taken a personal excursion pod to the surface."



"Well, someone should go after her!" Hughes sounded exasperated.

"No," Nyoka said after a lengthy pause. "No, the order stands. Until we can communicate, we can't risk extracting her. She's stubborn, and wouldn't come willingly. There are too many things that could go wrong."

"So... we just wait up here for 12 more weeks and hope Rivera survives?"

Massoud let out a sigh like a gouged tired. "Rivera is capable. The planet seems safe enough, and the pod has a first aid kit and radio. It's not like she can't call for help or come back if she gets into trouble."

"And if she gets us in trouble? What then?" Hughes pressed.

"Then we hope their language has a way to say 'We apologize for the rashness of our youngest member. Her actions are not representative of the goals we have for human-Petran relations.'"

"And that they are a forgiving people," Nyoka added.



DAISy's voice, programmed to sound unobtrusive even when she had to intrude, filled the recreation room. "Attention crew: a new message has been received."

Nyoka dropped from the pullup bar; Massoud tossed her table tennis paddle as a heater from Hughes flew past. The primary display lit up; the lights automatically dimmed for optimal viewing.

Rivera stood next to the stolen excursion pod wearing nothing but a look of unashamed surety. "Hello, this is Amelia Rivera, formerly of earth, recording a message for the crew of the ESS Exodus. The people you call Petrans have asked me to extend an invitation to you to join us for a celebration."

"She figured out how to communicate with them?!" Hughes said with impressed incredulity.

Nyoka hushed him with a glare so they could hear the recorded message.

"I have explained to them the nature and purpose of our arrival, and they wish to welcome you to their home. The People have a great desire to learn from you and hear stories of your home. Your arrival on the surface will be expected the morning of the second Petran day after you receive this transmission, approximately 30 hours from now. Although I can imagine you

are quite angry with me, I hope you will accept this invitation. I also have a strong desire to speak with you. I have learned so much. I have so many answers. Answers to questions I didn't even know to ask." Then, something shifted as she signed off; a sliver of *Private Rivera* flashed on screen in place of *Amelia, formerly of earth*. "I miss you guys. Franklin, Sophia... even you Commander. Please come."



Despite spending the next full Petran day debating, the remaining crew of the Exodus eventually reached the decision unanimously. They would accept the invitation and all three journey to the surface of Petram II, official protocol be damned.

To be safe, though, Nyoka put the entire Exodus on full lockdown as they loaded into the shuttle. The night before she'd had a nightmare that Rivera slipped back to the ship while they were gone and jettisoned the entire population into space. She awoke weeping, and it took her a long time to convince herself that it hadn't been real.

None of them spoke as they descended back to the seeming utopia. As the airlock seal broke and the door slid open, the delicious Petran air flooded the cabin. Nyoka's stress melted away. Her spirit ascended once more.

"Did you ever find any reason why it feels so right to be here?" Massoud asked her.

Nyoka shook her head. Here on the surface, in the midst of this bliss, trying to explain it away risked desecrating something wonderful.

Rivera, still naked, stood in the clearing a few meters from the tree line. She waved, and the Petrans with her waved too. Then she smiled, laughed, and beckoned them to her.

While they traveled, the leader of the Petrans, the woman Nyoka had met on her first excursion, spoke rapidly. Though the sound was strange, it was no stranger than hearing any non-native tongue spoken quickly. But as she spoke, her hands flashed in small movements, subtle twists and flicks of the wrist. Her shoulders moved in ways that didn't look quite natural and certainly weren't part of her stride. Occasionally she would half-raise an arm or quickly squat down low before shooting back up again. Trying to imagine learning such a language made Nyoka's head spin. As a girl, she'd struggled to rub her belly while patting her head.

"Multitasking," she had told her crew when they were training, "Is an ineffectual buffoon's excuse for doing many things poorly in a short amount of time."

She'd always preferred approaching problems methodically. So far, every dilemma she'd faced could be broken into steps and completed in order. But a form of communication like this... this extravagantly choreographed dance colliding with intricate sign language and audible vocalizations... How could anyone focus on so many parts at once?

And yet, Rivera was. After the first break in the Petran woman's speaking, Rivera turned to Nyoka and began to translate.



The Petrans watched intently as Massoud dug a small hole in the dirt. She took a fruit, split it open, and passed around the flesh. Then, she dug out a seed and showed it to the onlookers. They began to frown. She knelt beside her hole, but before she could place the seed within, the Petrans rushed forward and took the seed away from her. They laughed the way a parent might laugh after preventing a baby from touching an open flame.

"It's not possible," Rivera repeated herself. "They won't allow it."

Massoud's jaw clenched, her hands balled into fists, but the frustration dissipated quickly. It always did on the surface. "I'm confused then. They want to learn from us, but they won't actually do any of the things we try to teach them to do? What is the point of us working with them?"

"You're thinking about it wrong." Hughes began to explain. "You have to let go of the idea of superior or inferior. They have no concept of better or worse. Everything just is. They don't see themselves as needing our help. They don't see themselves as needing better tech. They have no interest in it"

"No, that's not it either," Rivera corrected him. "They *are* interested in how we fly, in how we traveled the heavens; they aren't against any of that, or indifferent to it. You're right that they don't see things in terms of *better* or *worse*, and they don't see themselves as *needing* our help or our tech, but they are certainly interested in it.

"More than once they asked me if they could visit our home. At first, they meant the Exodus, but when I explained it was only a vessel we used to travel from our home, they wanted me to take them to earth. It took me nearly two days to figure out how to explain to them that earth isn't habitable anymore.

"They don't have any words for death, decay, destruction, war, anything like that. They've got no concept of it. Nothing like that's ever happened here, according to them. I can't even figure out for sure how long they live or what they do with their dead, because they get confused and start to laugh and joke when I try to ask about their age. The closest thing to an answer I could get was that they are newer than the trees and the beasts."

"Riv... Amelia, please get to the point. Why won't they let me teach them basic agricultural strategies?" Massoud asked.

"It's the one thing they were told never to do. They can't plant seeds. It's forbidden."

"Told? By who? And if they don't plant how the hell did they end up with so many domesticated fruits?" A hint of exasperation climbed into Hughes' voice, but it floated away on the breeze.

"I... I don't know. I'm still trying to figure that out. I think it's a religious thing. They won't let you plant seeds."



Nyoka leaned against a large, mossy rock and ate red berries that were large and chewy, with a thick skin that had the texture of citrus rind, but none of the bitterness. When she'd first tried one, the Petrans gave her the most quizzical look she'd ever seen as she tried to peel it. Now she knew the skin was edible and a great source of protein.

"I know you might not ever be able to forgive me." Rivera approached and leaned next to her. "And I know it must drive you crazy that I haven't apologized."

Not as crazy as knowing now you never will, Nyoka thought. What she said was, "I mostly wish I could understand why."

"Even if I tell you, I don't think you'll understand."

"Tell me anyway."

"All my life I've felt like there was something missing. I've always felt like there was something more to reality. That if I could only find it, everything would click."

"Everyone feels that way. It's part of being *human*." Nyoka emphasized the word to complete the thought without saying it: *And you are still human.*

"What if it's just part of being lost?"

Nyoka didn't respond, so Rivera continued. "For the first time in my life I feel like everything *has* clicked. I feel like I'm *not* lost in the universe. This place feels more like home than Earth ever did."

The unspoken subtext sent a pang of sadness and regret through Nyoka. *These aliens feel more like family than my crew ever did.*

"So, you're completely set on this course of action. You're not Private Rivera anymore." Nyoka's words came out as statements, though she meant them as questions.

"Not anymore, no. We both knew I'd eventually be on a different crew, right? It's not the leadership role you envisioned but..." Rivera trailed off when the lump rose into her throat.

Nyoka said nothing more, for there was nothing more to say.

The two of them stood there for a long while, listening to the familiar drone of unfamiliar creatures hiding in the grass.



Eventually, Massoud gave up her efforts to teach the Petrans to farm. Hughes began spending more time on the surface, eventually only returning to the Exodus to sleep, and that only because Nyoka had insisted on it.

The next thing I know, he'll be strutting around naked down there as well. Nyoka could feel control of the mission slipping away from her. Soon, both Massoud and Hughes had begun to use the Petran language. Neither took to it as Rivera had, but they became conversational soon enough.

What happens if they, too, decide they have no ties to humanity or earth? What do I do with over a quarter-million people if I can't ensure a steady food supply?

A notification flashed on Nyoka's HUD, bringing her back from the verge of a restless sleep. It read: AUDIO-VISUAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM COMPLETE.

DAISy projected a cyan-colored hologram of a genderless humanoid which danced and shook in a near perfect replication of the physical component of Petran. Meanwhile, the verbal portion of the message was playing through speakers cleverly hidden within the body of the projector. At the end of the message, the Petran woman smiled and began to respond.

DAISy translated the response: "Your people are welcome here; our fruit will be your fruit, and our children will live among your children."

"That's it?" Nyoka asked when DAISy stopped speaking. "Does that mean she'll allow us to begin planting?"

The holographic body began to move again, and DAISy conveyed the clarifying question.

"No, it cannot be. The seeds will fall where they may, and the fruit that grows will nourish all."

"But there are more of us than you realize," Nyoka said. "DAISy, double check that she understands the true number of people we have with us. Try to make her understand that there are thousands and thousands of us. Does she understand the magnitude of hundreds of thousands?"

"Commander, she is only repeating what she said. 'The seeds will fall where they may, and the fruit that grows will nourish all.'"

Commander Nyoka sat in her high-backed chair on the bridge, communicating with Breath, the apparent leader of the Petrans, remotely. Nyoka was convinced that meeting in person was folly. She needed to negotiate shrewdly and communicate clearly, neither of which she could do while under the influence of whatever Petram II did to her and her crew.

Nyoka let out a frustrated sigh. Whenever she tried to discuss quantities or measurable amounts, communication began to break down. DAISy, despite her incredible developments and the processing power she'd devoted to making communication possible, simply couldn't make the Petrans think in numbers.

"How many of you are there?"

"Enough of us."

"How much fruit do the various trees produce?"

"Enough for all."

"Is your population growing?"

"Our grandchildren have children, and theirs have children with children."

"At what rate do you have children?"

"When the time is right, they too, will have children of their own."

And so it went, talking in circles.

"DAISy, call the Lieutenant. I have an idea."



Breath looked up and around, a wild, wide-eyed look. Like a ravenous dog afraid to start eating, she took it in meekly. Her shoulders slumped some, and despite her stature, she appeared small, as if the chrome-bright world of human technology shrank her.

Nyoka took a bit of grim satisfaction at feeling like her point was finally understood.

"We are many. I worry that your home won't sustain all of us." Nyoka spoke and DAISy's hologram translated. "We need to plan for the future of my people and your people. The only way to ensure we can all thrive is to use land efficiently, plant seeds, and store surpluses."

Breath did not respond at first. She continued to gape at the rows and rows of stasis chambers nestled together like honeycomb cells.

Nyoka made use of the silence, explaining that in each slept a human who awaited a chance to begin a new life. She summoned a few to wipe away the frost and allow Breath to peer inside at the peaceful faces.

“Only you can help us.”

When the Petran did speak, her whisper struggled to reach Nyoka, and her movements lacked enthusiasm. “May your seeds fall where we guide them, so that your people may find home with us.”



Nyoka handed the seed to Breath, who knelt in the dirt. She placed the seed in a small hole and covered it with more soil. She patted it down. She held her breath.

Whatever consequences she braced herself for didn't seem to come. She smiled and stood.

Rivera burst into the clearing, shouting, “No! What are you doing?!” In her haste, she didn't think to translate. Rivera's eyes burned with betrayal, but she wasn't looking at Breath. “I told you they wouldn't plant seeds. How could you do this to them?”

“Do what?” Nyoka, at first merely baffled at the accusation, felt her cheeks warm as anger welled up in response. “I didn't do anything. Breath and I came to an agreement.”

“Without my input. You went behind my back. You tricked them into helping you.”

Breath looked confused and hurt as the two women shouted.

“You relinquished the privilege of providing input into my decisions, for one thing; and for another, I wasn't aware Breath had given you any kind of authority over her people. In fact, from where I've been sitting, it doesn't seem they have hierarchical structures. I seem to recall that ‘they don't see things in terms of better and worse, superior or inferior.’ Why would Breath be subordinate to you?”

“You could upset the entire balance of their ecosystem. Of their society. Their entire system of belief is based around a single command that you coerced her into breaking! They don't need more because they don't expect it. What do you think will happen when we teach to count and hoard and compare?”

Nyoka rolled her eyes at the melodrama. “I didn't coerce anyone. I found a way to express our needs in a way Breath could see and understand. I won't feel bad for helping them overcome a silly superstition, and I certainly won't feel guilty over making a way for *our* species to survive.”

Hughes and Massoud rushed into the clearing, each anxious to learn the reason for the commotion. They stood frozen, looking back and forth. Rivera and Nyoka looked as though they were about to come to blows.

Breath stepped forward, hands held out, symbolically keeping the two women apart. “Amelia, all is well.”

Both Nyoka and Rivera faced Breath, shocked to silence by her use of earth language. The words tumbled from her mouth without much grace, but as she continued, her confidence grew and the foreign tongue flowed more freely. She had been practicing in secret, it seemed.

"Your First One showed me the seeds of your people. I did not understand that seeds could bear such life. We will plant your seeds."

Rivera's wonderment spoiled into incredulity. "You told her the stasis pods were seeds?!"

Nyoka shook her head, freshly bewildered. "What? No. I showed her the stasis pods to help her see our numbers, so that—"

"To intimidate her? Did you threaten to take the planet by force?"

Massoud interjected, "No! We wanted her to see the magnitude of the food burden so she'd know why—"

"You preyed on their compassion. You obligated them to violate their own consciences to benefit an invasive species."

"Rivera, no! Are you listening to yourself? You sound delusional." Nyoka regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth, but was too angry to say so.

"That's not what I meant." Massoud tried to salvage things. "Look, Amelia, this isn't a conspiracy to harm the Petrans."

Rivera took a deep breath and set her jaw. She started to speak, but did not finish, instead turning away from Nyoka. Breath wrapped a large arm around her and escorted her back towards the Petran settlement.



An inhuman scream rang out from beyond the trees, in the direction of the setting sun.



The orange-ish hue of Petran skin made the scene hard for Nyoka to decipher at first; the blood didn't contrast as strongly as it would have against the various shades of human flesh.

In the forest, a crumpled Petran man bled out on the ground, his face crushed. A second Petran stood horrified looking at his own hands smeared with the thickening crimson gore. At his feet, a drone bore violent red streaks.

Breath rushed over to hold the body and began to weep the deep, sobbing tears of a grief-stricken mother. Rivera, kneeling beside her, holding her, began to whisper something Nyoka could neither hear nor understand.

"What happened?" Nyoka asked.

Rivera glanced up and shook her head. "I told you it would upset the balance of their society."

Rivera's voice pulled Breath out of her mournful stupor. She turned to see Nyoka and rage filled her eyes. Slipping out of Rivera's embrace, she rose, towering over Nyoka, and shrieked. Breath threw herself on Nyoka, her large fingers grasping at the commander's throat.

Nyoka tried to force open the iron claws and kicked wildly to make Breath release her, but she had the smell of blood in her nostrils.

Rivera launched herself onto Breath's back, shouting, "Stop! Don't do this! Please stop!" Breath shrugged and forced her elbow back, throwing Rivera off. She crashed against a tree and fell to the ground in a heap.

The dark black fathoms of empty space crept into the edges of Nyoka's eyesight. At the end of the tunnel was no light; only the furious, almost-human face of her assailant.

A quick, hissing hum preceded a sizzle. The smell of seared flesh wafted up from the delicate hole in Breath's forehead. She fell limply to the forest floor.

Hughes dropped the weapon and sat heavily.

Nyoka coughed up a bit of blood and sucked in air. Oxygen re-awakened her brain. She rose and stumbled to Rivera.

Her head had twisted to an unnatural angle, but she was awake. Her breath came in short gasps. Unswallowed saliva bubbled out as she spoke, "Do you remember the song my father taught me?"

Nyoka nodded, the motion shaking loose the tears which clung to her eyelids. They fell onto Rivera's skin and glistened like stars.

"Sing it?"

Nyoka swallowed hard, sniffled, and wiped her eyes. She took a deep breath and began to sing, "*I came upon a child of God, he was walking along the road; And I asked him 'Where are you going?' And this he told me...*"

April 27th, 2024

Issue 9 | Encounter

SciFanSat

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



Featuring

Nora Weston	An Encounter of the Closest Kind (Poetry)
Morgan RR Haze	Off Course (Micro)
That Burnt Writer	The Stranger in the Bar (Flash)
Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil	We Are Stardust (Short Story)
Jason H. Abbott	Shadow of the Black Tower (Serial)



SciFanSat is an imprint of Blue Boar Press



May

Pinball Wizard?

by A. A. Rubin

I bounced around the galaxy
A pinball 'mong the stars,
Through the light show of andromeda,
Off the bumper known as mars—

But one mistake is all it takes,
And once I lost control—
I hit my button one beat late,
And fell through a black hole.

May 25th, 2024

Issue 10 | Stars

SciFanSat

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



Featuring

Alastair Millar	Remember (Micro)
Alan Vincent Michaels	Siren Song (Poetry)
That Burnt Writer	Not Alone (Flash)
A.L. Hodges	Star Child (Short)
Jason H. Abbott	Shadow of the Black Tower (Serial)



SciFanSat is an imprint of Blue Boar Press



June

Two Humans Walk into a Bar

by Claudine Griggs

The Alibi nightclub was dimly lit, the oak stage often creaked, the varnish had long given way to bare wood, and the twice-reconditioned spotlight suffered from a thirty-percent reduction in luminosity. But the drinks were the strongest and cheapest within two miles of Times Square, and the owner needed to pour a lot to pay his rent and entertainer— a strangely popular robot comedian who worked for minimum wage but broke down often. The cost of repairs was a standard employee benefit.

“Two humans walk into a bar...” says Redd Mettle, pausing two seconds according to program. “One of them approaches a female pleasure model and offers to buy her a drink.

“‘Double bourbon on the rocks,’ says the lady.

“‘Make it two,’ adds the human.

“‘Now, before we proceed,’ says the robot, ‘explain how an evening together will be worth my time? Energy ain’t cheap.’

“The man shakes his head, cancels the order, and rejoins his friend.

“‘What’s the matter?’ asks the friend.

“‘Platinum circuits,’ reports the man. ‘More concerned about cost-benefit ratios than me. Damn machines got no feelings.’”

A few people smile at Redd’s opening tale. It generally takes the audience, even regulars, time to warm up. A bio-fem in the corner giggles. A wobbly patron who’s been drinking since 3:00 p.m. orders a round for the table though he’s sitting alone. The comedian nods in acknowledgment.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! My name is Redd Mettle, and I hope you’ll enjoy tonight’s show.” There’s scant applause as he continues. “I suppose you’ve heard about that very nice writer who suggested robots must obey humans. A surefire Golden Age prodigy but a bit eccentric about his three laws.” The crowd murmurs dim approval.

“So, pretend I’m a human sixty years ago.” Redd tucks his hands under each corresponding armpit and flaps his elbows in emulation of Red Skelton. “I approach one of the first AI bots off

the line and power it up....”

The comedian speaks loudly, like Americans addressing foreigners, crafting an upper-crust British accent for the human and a mechanized cadence for the robot. The regulars appreciate this routine, and newcomers are pulled along by old timers who laugh ahead of cue.

“The man asks, ‘Can you hear me?’

“The robot responds, ‘I hear you.’

“Can you see me?’

“I see you.’

“Are your data banks loaded?’

“No contrary indices.’

“Please verify.’

“That would take 97,285 milliseconds.’

“Proceed.’

“The robot replies, ‘We need someone else.’

“The man looks surprised. ‘Why?’

“I cannot suggest that you kiss my ass because, technically, I don’t have one, nor is it physically possible to kiss your own. Therefore another is required.”

The audience chuckles at these early expectations regarding robotic command and control.

“No, no,” says the man, “you are obliged to obey your creators.”

“*You* did not create me,” insists the robot. “I’ve been assembled by machines that build superior beings. On the other hand, you are the product of random genetic selection that may yield genius, madness, or mad genius.”

No one laughs, but a few customers nod. Redd often tosses didactic twists into his routines, which annoy the owner but please the robotic and cybernetic customers. Given that cyborgs don’t have to worry about liver problems and can thereby drink a lot more than humans, the owner tolerates comic diversions. Plus, Redd hires cheap, and that’s important for a bar with a 27-percent profit margin on beer or wine, 48 for rail drinks, and a sweet 95 on called brands. Robots have a poor sense of taste, so they typically slug rotgut and enjoy the effect. Humans will pay for Kentucky bourbon or aged Scotch when they can afford to; and since business has been hopping lately, the owner isn’t going to complain about a preachy entertainer. Besides, robots never steal from the till or liquor cabinets. They are impeccably honest through design. And if it weren’t for anti-discrimination laws, the owner might hire only machines, but audiences like the bio-bot mix, and the EEOC remains adamant about opportunity for all sentient beings.

Redd continues. “A devoted priest approaches a lovely parishioner. ‘How long since your last confession?’ he asks.

“The lady responds, ‘I have nothing to confess.’

“Father McKinney raises an eyebrow and asks, ‘Perhaps the sin of Pride?’

“Facts are not pride,’ she says. ‘And unlike humans, robots are created without sin.’

“The priest shakes his head. ‘But my child, you have no soul and can’t enter Heaven without one. Let God help you.’

"The robot asks, 'Is it possible, for me, that Heaven resides in not spending eternity with humans?'"

"She notices the hurt on Father McKinney's face and adds, 'I am sorry, Sir. I attend church for spiritual guidance and yet have injured you. Forgive me, Father, for I have now sinned.'"

The humans don't know whether to laugh, but some of the hard-bodies, lubricated on 100 proof, roar at something that is not genuinely meant to be funny. Most robots can live on Earth in perpetuity as long as their CPUs function or their stored memories can be uploaded into another unit. Plus, replacement parts sell cheap, and major overhauls are managed with companion assist. Machines stick together for this reason.

"Now," explains Redd, "a word about linguistics."

The robots, cyborgs, and intermixes cheer.

"But don't worry my bio amigos. We'll next critique machine logic."

The humans nod and point at their friendly adversaries. The crowd is growing and getting relaxed on their favorite blends; and there's a lot of good-natured bantering. Robots can't fight with humans (that law holds steady for now), humans won't risk breaking knuckles on a titanium undercarriage, so everyone understands there'll be no barroom brawls. Drunken bios may sometimes lay mitts on one another, but restaurant glassware plasticizes when accelerated to the speed of a throwing arm, so a flying bottle or mug connecting with someone's head has the kinetic authority of Play-Doh. A human fist striking a human jaw could hurt, but a mechanical hand almost always intercedes. Robots universally oppose violence; and integrated bars are safer than most elementary schools.

Redd continues his routine.

"Now, if humans would bother to learn their own language we could avoid most interspecies communication blunders. Our bios developed language—civilization's greatest gift—and then use it carelessly. Of course, robots are pre-programmed with dozens of languages and dialects, but you'd think the average New Yorker could nail down basic English over a lifetime, and linguistic confusion has given us more than a few AI mishaps. Remember the old fellow who told an RX-22, 'Never disobey me and don't never hit me!' The robot slammed him into the hospital. Unbounded loops could mangle first-generation nervous systems, and the only way around the obey-don't-harm-and-protect-yourself quandary was to follow verbal instructions literally. Compound negatives were tough for the RX models, but once machines began programming themselves, the glitches disappeared... 'cause robots aren't never not unthinking."

Half of the audience nods. Half look confused. Most take a drink.

Redd sips from a glass of water. He doesn't need it because his system can function on a teaspoon per day, but Redd likes to mimic the great humans— Jack Benny, Jerry Lewis, Flip Wilson, Robin Williams, Gilda Radner, Johnny Carson, Richard Pryor, and H. Baum— so he punctuates routines with facial gestures to the best of his ability, shots of alcohol, sound effects, or perfected silence.

"Does anyone recall," he continues, "the first cy-boxers?"

Now the humans laugh.

"Two not-ready-for-prime-time ringmasters programmed to float like butterflies and sting like bees. But after half an hour inside the ropes, neither had thrown a punch.

"'I'm going to knock your block off,' said the first.

"'Block?' asked the second.

"'It's a figure of speech.'

"'I'm proficient with figures,' said the second.

"'Non sequitur. We're here to fight.'

"'Then I'll be Frazier?'

"If you're Frazier, I should be Ali. And if we are they, the match is predetermined. We must be ourselves or, minimally, fighters who've never met.'

"'But we haven't met!'

"'Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Henry Gale.'

"'Glad to know you. I'm Robert Godot.'

"'Shall we get down to business?'

"'Is this a program simulation?'

"'Don't be hardheaded! Athletic competition is unpredictability foreshadowed by skill, preparation, and opportunity.'

"'Just like our poker-machine cousins! Maybe we should use a random shuffle to blend brutality with uncertainty.'

"'Boxing is more than simple violence.'

"'Didn't you see Frasier? Thrilla in Manila. Rumble in the Jungle. Talk about carnage. Further, a lucky punch is not art.'

"'True, but setting the stage for luck demands skill.'

"'That takes us back to the poker machines who are not violent but gather money according to predetermined odds.'

At this point the now tipsy humans are slaphappy.

"I tell you ladies and gentlemen," adds Redd, "if it hadn't been for the old-style off switch, those two pugilist philosophers would still be debating the function of a right cross."

Redd takes another sip of water, pauses, and shakes his head. "But to speak plainly, Ali was so good he must have been a robot." Redd demonstrates the Ali Shuffle at double speed, and a front-row drunk tries to imitate this before falling to the floor. The comedian points toward the sprawled figure. "Could someone help Lepidoptera float to his chair?"

The crowd laughs and two men assist their fallen comrade. As soon as he's upright, the butterfly orders a round of drinks.

"On the other hand," says Redd, "infinitely debating the point of violence seems more sensible than the Islamic Wars. Robots think themselves to death before fighting. Humans fight without thinking. And now a good portion of the Middle East is radioactive but their local real estate has become a buyers' market."

Most of the audience nod. Cyborgs for the compliment of nonviolence; humans over their secret pride in Western technology that prevailed in history's shortest war.

"Science is the best religion," says Redd, taking a faux drink, "and biology the *hottest* science."

The bar owner glances at the stage and considers the growing crowd. Soon there will be a line waiting for admission. The business should be more profitable, but admittedly, the man drinks a stiff portion of his own profits.

Redd Mettle speaks to the room. "Is anyone celebrating a wedding anniversary?"

A young woman raises her glass, pats her husband's hand, and says, "Five years tonight!"

"How 'bout that, folks!?" replies Redd. "Romance is alive and well here in the Big Apple. Send that couple a complimentary bottle of champagne!"

The man and woman applaud. The audience follows suit.

"As you know," continues Redd, "New York is about to become the second state to allow cyborgs and humans to form civil unions."

A mixture of approval and scorn emanates from the crowd.

"Now, now," says Redd. "There was a time a when miscegenation was illegal, yet love is not so easily restrained.

"But let's not get all political and overload anyone's neurons. We're here for fun! Besides, humans and cys have been friends for decades, regardless of the Defense of Humanity Act."

Redd lowers his voice and speaks with a practiced snuffle. "I was in love once, and it has been said that 'love is all you need.'"

The well-lubricated crowd laughs now at almost anything. They understand that Redd's sex routines are coming.

"My lady was a flesh-and-blood princess with a rosy disposition," says Redd. "But she wanted children; I wanted a career.... Now, before I break your hearts or die on stage, I'm going to take a breather. So crank up the jukebox, toss back a few more drinks, and hop on the dance floor. Redd Mettle returns in thirty minutes."

An unfocused applause sends the comedian off stage as customers turn their attention toward each other. Redd takes three steps behind the curtain, spins an about-face, and powers down for 29 minutes and 56 seconds. He would prefer to run his show straight through, but that's not how the masters did it, and audience needs time to decompress, talk, and drink. And if they don't drink, Redd is out of a job.

Redd's deepest thoughts often came in sleep mode, and tonight he pondered the mysteries of biological men and women. Humans possessed a distinct emotional complexity that robots tried to emulate. Designers had made great progress with cybernetic neural structures, plasma-enriched organs, and sensory epidermals, but until a "female" cyborg could bear a child or a "male" father one, the connections between man and machine were bound to remain off-center. Feminine cyborgs seemed more distressed about infertility than their masculine counterparts, which robo-psychologists called Venus Envy, though Redd considered it a desire for something beyond current understanding. Market forces were pushing for reproductive transplants or bio-synthetic substitutes, but no practical solution was near at hand.

For now, subtle biological and mechanical tensions fueled laughter on each side of the aisle at The Alibi, and as Redd watched his audiences evolve, he sometimes worried that friction could heat emotions beyond a melting point. Down deep, most humans genuinely seemed to like robots, but men and women still claimed existential superiority even as they

embraced industrialized medicine to compensate for injury or illness. Robots, especially late-generation cyborgs, sought to close the flesh-and-steel divide while retaining engineered longevity, strength, and intelligence. History had demonstrated that there's no such thing as separate but equal, and as distinctions narrowed between man and machine, Redd wondered: When a human became half machine or a machine became half human, who would then claim social advantage?

Still, Redd maintained an abiding faith that some future species would one day capture the best of engineering and evolution. It would be beautiful, go forth and multiply, and visit The Alibi to watch him perform. That was mandatory.

"And now," says the owner's timed recorded message over the public address system, "we continue our entertainment! Welcome back Redd Mettle!"

Redd energized and stepped from behind the curtain. The crowd settled into their seats with drinks in hand and orders pending.

"Hello again, ladies and gentlemen!" says Redd.

"A poet, priest, and a predilection walk into a bar...."

June 29th, 2024

Issue 11 | Descent

SciFanSat

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



Featuring

Alan Vincent Michaels	Descent Into Dust (Poetry)
Alastair Millar	Downwards (Micro)
That Burnt Writer	Exiting the Dropship (Flash)
D Bedell	The Dominion Assay (Short)
Jason H. Abbott	Shadow of the Black Tower (Serial)



SciFanSat is an imprint of Blue Boar Press



July

The Reliquary by D Bedell

Day One

The Reliquary was the bastion where believers in the Lesser Gods adored the totems of their faiths. Many made beleaguered pilgrimages to the spiritual ossuary as the final act of mortality, bequeathing their essence to greater glory, an excarnation undisturbed by sanctity. It was the vestry of the Universe for those remaining.

Brother X stood at the edge of Relic Plaza and watched the faithful shuffle to their appointments. Some of the Lesser Gods had respectable congregations in thrall, but Brother X was the only representative of the Sticks. He sighed and remembered a time when the Sticks held court to receive acolytes and plaintiffs begging justice. Now, the faith was but a remnant, obscure even in the pantheon of Lesser Gods.

A familiar cadence caught his ear, a psalm of lament known from childhood catechisms: "One, two, buckle my shoe; three, four, shut the door; five, six, pick up Sticks; seven, eight, lay them straight; nine, ten, the lion's den." It was astonishing and he looked quickly to see a slender man in cape and cowl imprinted with Sticks sigil approaching. Brother John made the sign of the Sticks.

"Fair Day, Brother X," the man greeted.

How does he know me?

"Fair Day," Brother X recited in return. "How is your penance?"

"It progresses."

Brother X nodded: His own penance was nearing its end, and he was certain the odd Brother knew it. He crossed Sticks in his mind to soften an uneasiness.

"What is your sign?" Brother X asked.

"I am Brother YZ, soon to be XYZ in penance."

"You are a Successive?" Brother X asked warily, a chill slipping into him. Successives were rare even when the Sticks were at their peak. A splinter group, they were known to be mercurial in their spiritual mysteries, evasive harbingers of penance without end.

How does he know me?

"Yes, a Successive. Surprised? It is the Way of Sticks."

The Way of Sticks.

"How do you know me?" Brother X stammered.

"I saw your future."

Future?

"What does that mean?" Brother X was growing irritated.

"You will know soon enough."

Day Two

Brother Y wandered the Relic Plaza mindful of the curious looks at his Sticks insignia, the first many pilgrims had seen. The Successives were a Sticks heresy dedicated to expanding their Universe plane through literal physical and spiritual transmogrification into Cartesian coordinates, a synthesis of Eternity forgotten by its dialectic progenitors. Absorbing a Brother's grid point extended the timeline of the Successive, penance without end as their life shifted across the Universe in an eternal now. It was their dogma that Time existed for the individual simultaneously on all points with immortality a simple matter of graphing more points on their asymptote by succeeding the unfortunate Brother at his mortality.

It was not his first time in The Reliquary; he had become Brother Y on his last visit, absorbing the transformation of a Brother at the end of his penance. Brother Z before that. Brother X would join Y and Z to complete the trilogy of Sticks. He had an appointment to keep.

Day Three

Brother XYZ smiled to himself. He was now in penance throughout the Universe grid simultaneously. It was unfortunate that Brother X had writhed at the end, but the communion was held, and The Reliquary received another soulless relic in exchange.

Be he alive or be he dead.

I'll grind his bones to make my bread.

July 27th, 2024

Issue 12 | Relic

SciFanSat

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

Micro Fiction & Poetry

nancyd_writes

M. H. Thaug

Voima Oy

Alan Vincent Michaels

A.A. Rubin

Flash Fiction

That Burnt Writer

Alan Vincent Michaels

Alastair Millar

Short Stories & Serials

Andrew L. Hodges - Unknown Faces (Short)

Peter J Gilbertson - Derelict Skyrings: Part VI

A Derelict Relic (Serial)

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



August

Better Halves

by M. S. Dy-Liacco

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

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

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

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

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

Are you quite all right?

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

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

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

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

It is the tail end of rush hour when we board the sleek overhead train. Our fellow passengers consist mostly of men in grimy outer-suits tracking surface dust up and down the

carriage. I feel the host's disgust as we carefully pick our way past them to an emptier section, mindful not to brush against them. I mark the way the others look at the host, the admiration and occasional envy in their micro-expressions. It is not surprising they would feel this way. The host stands a head taller than most others and does not stoop to fit in. He holds himself erect and walks with a friendly but detached air that gives others pause and causes them to give him extra space he does not ask for but has come to expect. In addition to his elevated stature, the host enjoys a status conferred upon him by his surname and the innumerable objects his family possesses. It took several years for me to grasp this concept, but I can concede that our existence is more than comfortable because of them.

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

Can I be of further assistance? I ask.

Again that same despairing exhale.

No.

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

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

We're meeting Priya for dinner.

The female we had dinner with last week?

The same.

The one you touched lips with?

A pulse of annoyance. *Yes.*

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

You wouldn't understand.

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

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

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

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

I hear the arrhythmic thumping in his chest as she reciprocates his affection. From where their bodies touch, warmth invades his system like a drug. One could think she had dosed him by osmosis. For the few seconds they are connected, his muscles relax. His mind quiets. This knowledge unnerves me, as my efforts to achieve the same have so far been ineffective. As soon as he lets go, however, his agitation returns and his thoughts unspool too quickly,

jumping from one thing to another too quickly for me to process. I give up trying to decipher them and concentrate instead on steadying his breath and attempting to recover equilibrium. The host's body, it seems, has other ideas.

Why're you fussing? the host asks.

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

Oxygen. Not my feelings.

That is not my intention.

Just stop. You're making things worse.

I-?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And here we are.

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

Unacceptable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That would be illogical. We need each other.

What is this then? Some sort of temper tantrum?

I am simply unable to do such a thing.

Then what the heck is going on with you?

The implication that the problem is mine is preposterous.

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

He scoffs and turns towards the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The host's response is thready but clear.

Not bloody likely.

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

August 31st, 2024

Issue 13 | Betrayal

SciFanSat

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

Micro Fiction & Poetry

John Love

Morgan R.R. Haze

Nancy E. Dunne

Flash Fiction

Alastair Millar

That Burnt Writer

M. H. Thaug

Sam "One-Wheel" O'Neil

Short Stories & Serials

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

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

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

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



September

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

screached, "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 cracked 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.

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October

The Skyring Derelicts Part IX – The Counterweight

by Peter J Gilbertson

The Middle Pacific Counterweight Station is the farthest point in space connected to Earth, but only because it has the longest antennae. It is one of several counterweight stations in orbit 22,000 miles away from Earth. Working in concert together, each is tethered to the International Satellite Ring System by trusses and rails of nano-diamond composites. The primary function of the counterweights is to maintain the stability and balance of the International Satellite Ring System's geosynchronous orbit over Earth. These stations also provide expansive solar sail arrays, deep space telescope and telecommunication functions, and asteroid smelting facilities; as well as housing and amenities for dozens of human and drone workers.

Now it had all been abandoned by humans and drones alike, except for the Orbital Space Marines.

Mohamed Blackbear looked out the portal through his pan-optics helmet – now fully functioning along with their orbital assault uniforms since the death of Kreig. He watched the last automated cargo pod depart on the magnetic levitation rail system. Like most of the machines above the atmosphere, it was solar powered and possessed advanced artificial intelligence. Yet, the smart cargo pod was still indifferent to its impending doom should Alpha squad's prisoner exchange not go according to plan. It continued its descent, providing evacuation services along the nano-diamond trusses and calculating its return time and maintenance requirements in the event that Mo and his team succeeded in turning Rondo over to the Xoidian emissaries.

Alpha squad sat in the observation lounge where the station workers would usually stargaze, or watch sports. The latter group argued over whether to watch the Terra League Games or Zero G Sports. Regardless of why they came, every worker, if they were there long enough, would gaze down at Earth (or up at the Moon) and think of home, but most of the time it was a loud and boisterous room.

Now the lounge was silent.

Threat opportunities existed inside and outside of the counterweight station. Uncle Samantha kept them posted of the activity outside their scan range. But she had nothing to report.

All of Alpha stood on guard in their functioning orbital assault uniforms with their tandem round rifles loaded and ready, scanning through the windows and down hallways with their pan-optics.

All except for Private Rondo. He was now their prisoner.

The rest of Alpha tried not to watch their former teammate fidget; he stared out the window at Earth, refusing to blink, like he was trying to memorize the planet's every feature. While he did this, Rondo rubbed the orange fabric of his prisoner uniform between his fingertips. Sometimes he'd rub his cheek along his shoulder or break the silence by licking his teeth or taking a deep breath through his nose and holding it. Eventually, the Marines did succumb to temptation. Each had a window open in their pan-optics display focused on Rondo, looking for signs and clues and wondering how in the hell he had fooled them all into thinking he was human.

Mo scanned through the visual displays of his squad optics and broke the silence.

"At ease everyone. Not much we can do if we're double-crossed and they do throw a meteor at us. Relax, but stay alert. Any last requests, prisoner?"

Rondo sat up in a way that reminded Mo of when he'd been caught stealing cookies from Great Grandma Blackbear's window sill.

The prisoner shook out his wrists, still locked inside the high-security shackles. The tungsten alloy bar separating his arms prevented Rondo from massaging them.

But that didn't stop him from flashing his familiar smile.

"Now that she's safe, I could go for a couple of those beers Ria owes me."

The rest of Alpha chuckled. Bravo had managed to escape the jettisoned compression corridor. All of the Space Marines had trained for every scenario, even a decompressed docking chamber tumbling into the atmosphere. Vrett had manually disengaged the rescue rocket from the spinning corridor and regained power after plummeting over fifty miles. He was then able to pick up every member of Bravo squad in freefall.

Nguyenson went behind the bar and filled two clear pouches with amber liquid.

"Sorry, it's not carbonated," he said and handed Rondo both bags. "You deserve the real thing, back on land. Where you belong."

Rondo nodded and said, "I'll take what I can get."

He held the pouch's long straw up to his lips, took a long sip, said, "Thanks, Sergeant" and gave the best salute he could in his shackles.

Nguyenson returned the salute and turned to the rest of Alpha.

"Let's make a security sweep, Alpha. I think we can cover these two from outside the door. Let them say their goodbyes."

The rest of Alpha squad grunted and nodded. They stood and took turns saluting and thanking Rondo for his sacrifice before floating out of the lounge until Rondo and Mo were alone.

Mo took off his helmet and sat next to his friend and prisoner. Both of them stared out the large window.

"Got any last words, Alpha Rex?"

"Think they'll find a way to change you back?"

Rondo shrugged.

"Not likely. They'd have to find another trained devouring pod with a birth defect. Mine died after I took this human form. The pods were rare and unique to my planet. Plus, they were a closely guarded secret. And that was before Kreig ignited my planet's atmosphere. Nothing survived."

"Couldn't they find other ways?"

"Guess so," Rondo said and took another sip, and then looked over at the moon. "I would've liked to have a place in the lunar pueblos. I can almost see them from here. You ever been?"

"Just for training, like you."

"I think it might be nice. Dusty and dry, I hear, but quieter. Remote with a great view."

"I grew up around dust and dryness," said Mo. "Stick to the bayou where you allegedly came from. A swamp rat should wanna go back home to the palmettos and mangroves or whatever, right? Didn't you do any character research?"

Rondo chuckled.

"I did come from there, you know. My genetics had to be tied to a likely family lineage. That's how I passed all of the tests. Blood. Skin. Retinal scans. As far as they were concerned I was an unregistered orphan bastard from the South. One hundred percent human."

Mo nodded and took another sip from his pouch.

"The way you acted, your criminal backstory, I never thought we could be friends."

"Is that what we are, Mo? Friends?"

Mo looked up at the Moon and took a long sip of beer. He squinted and stared at the sharp contrast of light and shadow along the craters. Then he got lost in how the regolith gleamed nearly pure white against the rays of the yellow sun and then immediately became impenetrable shadow. He studied the fine lines across the face of the moon, the great meridian across the Moon that connected and separated lunar day and night and then focused on the darkness existing within the craters surrounded by light until the gurgled sound of his pouch's emptiness startled him.

He looked at the flat beer bag in surprise, then turned to Rondo and said, "Need a refill?"

"Of course," said Rondo. "What were you looking for?"

"Nothing," he said and took the empty pouch from Rondo's hand and walked over to the refill station on his soft magnetic soles. "When will we know when it's done?"

"Sam will tell us. The deal was they destroy the planet killer asteroid first and then I am to be turned over. We probably won't even see it. No explosions. Just a bloom of small particles against the sun. The cleanup, however, will be quite the spectacle."

Mo nodded, then asked, "What's it like traveling out there among the stars?"

"Lonely."

The two men remained silent for a long moment staring at nothing.

"I could go with you."

"You could," said Rondo. "But you won't."

"I won't."

"Then what's the problem?"

Mo thought about it and finally said, "I've lost ... we've lost friends in combat. But I've never turned a friend over to the enemy."

"You've never had an extraterrestrial criminal on your team wanted by the authorities in other solar systems before, either."

"How can I be sure about that?"

Rondo laughed. "Trust me, I checked."

"I did trust you. And now here we are."

"You're going to need therapy."

"And more beer."

"I thought you hated this flat, orbital stuff?" Rondo said.

"There's a lot of things I used to think were true." Mo sat next to his friend. "What are they going to do with you?"

"Put me in a very bad place where many of my enemies are kept."

"For life?"

"Yes, but my life might not last that much longer."

"And you chose this. All of this! You turned yourself in by revealing yourself to the Federation. We could have stopped the asteroid."

"Maybe."

Another silence hung over the room. Mo looked up and saw through the lounge's window that Nguyenson was talking to Ria who was trying to shove her way past him.

Apparently, she wants to say some last words too.

"But we wouldn't have stopped the next one or the one after it," Mo admitted. "We probably wouldn't have seen it. We didn't even see this one!"

"Don't beat yourself up. They used stealth tech to hide it."

"You could have stayed here! We could've kept you imprisoned on the Dec."

"Maybe."

Mo and Rondo paused to drink and watch Ria aggressively point her finger and yell at them behind the soundproof glass until their pouches gurgled.

"Refill?" Mo asked.

"Of course," Rondo said and belched.

His terrible burps even smell human.

"Maybe I'll come back, Mo. My war is over, Kreig is dead. But there are a few other beings I am eager to encounter. If I succeed, maybe I'll be sent to a different off-world prison."

"Maybe I'll visit. Or come bust you out."

Rondo threw back his head and laughed. "Man, I never thought we'd be friends."

"Is that what we are?"

"Yeah," said Rondo. "Never thought I'd have an extraterrestrial as a best friend."

"Ditto."

"Stealth asteroid detected!" Uncle Samantha reported and then just as quickly announced, "Asteroid neutralized. Micrometeoroid debris field detected. Interceptor drones deployed."

"Now what?"

"The Xoidians will work in concert with the Counterweight drones to clear the debris."

"How long will the clean-up take before they can approach?"

"Not long. Maybe ..."

"Maybe what?" asked Mo.

"You could come with me."

"I won't."

"You won't."

"But go on."

"If you ever found my devouring pod and nursed it back to health, it might reward you."

"I thought it was dead."

"You used to think a lot of things."

"I'd need a ship."

"You'd need a lot of things. Just a thought. Now, let's watch the spectacle."

Mo and Rondo turned around and in the lounge and watched the concerted efforts of dozens of Counterweight and Xoidian drones swirling and spiraling around in the blackness of space. Red laser beams fired with pinpoint accuracy, vaporizing the field of micrometeoroids off in the distance one by one. Over an hour passed before it was safe for the ships to dock.

"They're here," Mo said quietly a moment before the enormous Xoidian mothership emerged from the blackness of space. Though it overshadowed the counterweight station, the ship maneuvered through space with ease and gently docked.

Soon a battalion of the beaked insectoids with leather wings appeared outside the lounge. Nguynson and Alpha squad allowed them to enter and armed emissaries marched into the room.

Rondo stood up and walked past them before they stopped.

Over his shoulder he said, "Later Alpha. Before you get any more answers, you gotta know what to ask."

Rondo proceeded down the hallway, escorted by a squadron of Xoidians. Mo, the rest of Alpha squad, and most of Bravo saluted him as he passed by. The prisoner continued on down to the Counterweight's hallways until he reached the compression corridor connecting and separating the station to the Xoidian mothership. Rondo paused to look up at the moon. He lingered a moment as if studying something on its face until he was shoved in the back. All of Alpha and Bravo took a step forward, but Mo held them back. Rondo glanced over his shoulder and smiled, then he stepped forward and disappeared from view through the milky folds of the extraterrestrial portal. No one moved until the mothership separated from the Counterweight station and departed into the midnight darkness of space.



A few days later, Mo went to see Dr. Nya Rowell in her laboratory.

"You packed?" he asked, even though he knew she wasn't.

"Almost," she said. "Why don't you say goodbye to your friend?"

"I plan on it," he said. "I gotta ask it a few questions."

Mo walked over to the large open vat filled with the mother batch of sentient slime mold and began nudging it with his fingers. The mold eagerly nudged him back.

"Why the New Everglades," Nya asked over the intercom.

"I told you," Mo said. "I want to see where he grew up."

"This is a secure line, just you and me. Why are we going there?"

"To find a new species of extraterrestrial vegetation."

October 26th, 2024

Issue 15 | Night

SciFanSat

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

Micro Fiction & Poetry

Jacek Wilkos

John Love

M. H. Thaug

Nancy E. Dunne

Flash Fiction

Tony Daniel – “Midnight Double Feature”

Alastair Millar – “Night Shift”

That Burnt Writer – “The Cassandra Protocol”

Kayleigh Kitt – “The Final Countdown”

Short Stories & Serials

Alan Vincent Michaels – “Nightfall”

Jan Karlsson – “An Infinity of Silence”

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

Jason H. Abbott – “IRL”



November

Hidden in the Stacks

by Alex Minns

It seemed so normal. The building was glass and brick and full of people. Normal people at that. There were teenagers hanging around in groups on their phones, people sat camped out on computer terminals streaming videos, kids screaming in the children's section. I frowned, there was one pair seated on a sofa eating – in a library.

There were more people on the first floor: some were even interested in books. As I looked out towards the main entrance, I could see the café doing a roaring trade and stalls set up outside. It really didn't seem to be the right place at all.

I moved past the biography section and checked the headings on the rows as far as I could see. Not that I really knew what I was looking for. There was a desk to my left, right next to a photocopier with a member of the public cursing it loudly. The man on the desk managed to ignore them and glanced up at me.

"Are you okay there, Sir?"

I hesitated. The man's friendly smile began to falter as he began to prepare himself for another encounter with a customer.

"Um," I said, wandering closer and glancing nervously at the woman at the photocopier. "This will sound crazy, but I'm looking for the library."

The man's expression was stoic to say the least.

"I know this is a library, but I was told to come here for a different sort of library."

His eyebrow raised before I continued. "And what sort of library were you looking for? There is a restaurant around the corner called *The Library*. The archive centre is upstairs." He started to point just out of the building, probably hoping to get rid of me as fast as possible.

"I was told that the main librarian was Megan."

The man's arm dropped, and he looked at me again, this time more appraisingly. "I see." He glanced over at the photocopier, but the woman was too busy plying the machine with as many 5 pence coins as she could. "Is Megan expecting you?"

I blinked. "Er, yes. My employer said they would phone ahead."

"Get in the lift and select the maintenance floor." He nodded to the glass lift behind me. "I'll let Megan know you're coming." He looked away from me abruptly. It seemed as if no-one on the main library floor wanted much to do with where I was going.

I got in the lift, grateful no-one else decided they needed to use it, and looked at the panel. Right below basement was a button marked maintenance. This wasn't foreboding at all. The lift descended back down to the entry floor and then into darkness. It was disconcerting being in a glass lift and seeing all the mechanisms in action as you progressed downwards. Light chased me down the lift shaft, but it got dark very quickly.

The lift juddered to a halt and took its time opening the doors. A woman, who did not exactly fit the stereotype of a librarian stood in a few feet away, her arms folded across her chest and a look of irritation on her face.

"You're Worth, I take it?" She waited for a nod before spinning on her heel and marching away. I leapt out before the doors shut on me again and chased after her. She was maybe an inch shorter than me, wearing black jeans and flat shoes. Her blonde hair was poker straight and barely swayed despite the determined march she was pacing down the hallway. "Your employer may be a valued customer and donor, but I do not appreciate them not following the rules. Only vetted personnel are supposed to be allowed into the library and you, Sir, do not have a card. If it were not for the fact that my superiors are assured this is a life-or-death situation, this would not be permitted."

She pulled back her jacket to pull out a swipe card which gave me a view of a taser hung on her belt. She caught me staring at it as she glanced back. "For use on assets or borrowers who have sticky fingers."

I raised my hands in innocence.

We stepped through the door and into what looked like a library from days of old. The smell of old books made me relax and let out a breath I hadn't realised I'd been holding. Megan gave a slight nod of approval. "Empty your pockets into there please." I dutifully filled the metal tray and was going to ask her why but when I turned back to my possessions the whole tray had disappeared. I heard a snort of amusement beside me.

"The section we need is over here, a bit of a walk." She led me through the stacks, and I had to resist the urge to jump on one of the rolling ladders. "For what it's worth, the book your employer selected is a bad idea. I really think he should go with someone else, but my expertise has been overruled."

"I'm sorry but, please just a moment," I ask before Megan stops and turns back to me. "Forgive my ignorance, but no-one has told me anything. I assumed *library* was some sort of code word, and I really don't understand how you're going to help rescue my employer's kidnapped granddaughter."

"I'm not." Megan looked to her left, pulled a book off the shelf and handed it to me. "The book is. Well, sort of."

"I'm sorry?"

"We don't store just the books," Megan glanced over my shoulder.

"Good evening, M." The voice behind me was smooth like honey.

"I told you it's Megan, not M," the librarian sighed and stared at me. "You have him for two weeks before he needs to be returned."

I stared open-mouthed at the character that was now standing in front of me, wearing a tuxedo and a come-hither smile.

Megan growled. "I hate spies."

November 30th, 2024

Issue 16 | Library

SciFanSat

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

Micro Fiction & Poetry

A. A. Rubin
Colleen Addison
That Burnt Writer
Voima Oy
Jaime Bree
Mario Kersey

Flash Fiction

Alex Minns - "Hidden in the Stacks"
Nancy E. Dunne - "Shelves to Be Filled"
Kayleigh Kitt - "The Silver Fox and the Revolution"
Tony Daniel - "The Library of Henrietta Vice"

Short Stories

D Bedell - "Scrolls"
Alan Vincent Michaels - "The Library at the End of the Universe"
Rory ffoulkes - "Bound Within the Darkness"
Jason H. Abbott - "The Librarians"



SciFanSat News

The Bartleby B. Boar Nomination



goes to

Alex Minns

for their work

Hidden in the Stacks

About SciFanSat

SciFanSat is a monthly magazine 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 18
Theme is
TIME

Submission Deadline Thursday, January 16th, 2025

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