

April 26th, 2025

Issue 21 | Adventure

# SciFansat

The Monthly Magazine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

## Micro Fiction & Poetry

John Grey

A. A. Rubin

Sylvain V Paquette

Ken Poyner

## Flash Fiction

Corina Morera – “The Final Line”

Alastair Millar – “Call of the Wild”

Morgan RR Haze – “A New World Opens”

That Burnt Writer – “Cassie and Eydís”

Nancy E. Dunne – “The Nature Walker’s First Adventure”

## Short Stories

Kayleigh Kitt – “Robots Are a Girl’s Best Friend”

Peter J Carter – “From the Fire”

D Bedell – “The Man on the Dark Side of the Moon”

Alan Vincent Michaels – “Our Adventure of a Lifetime”

S.J.C. Schreiber – “A Fairy Tale”



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# Editorial

by Jason H. Abbott



SciFanSat's twenty-first issue is here urging us to escape, as best we can, into adventure within the speculative realms of science fiction, fantasy, and more!

And escape we should, and proudly so. In her book *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, author Ursula K. Le Guin eloquently said:

*"The oldest argument against SF is both the shallowest and the profoundest: the assertion that SF, like all fantasy, is escapist."*

*"This statement is shallow when made by the shallow. When an insurance broker tells you that SF doesn't deal with the Real World, when a chemistry freshman informs you that Science has disproved Myth, when a censor suppresses a book because it doesn't fit the canons of Socialist Realism, and so forth, that's not criticism; it's bigotry. If it's worth answering, the best answer is given by Tolkien, author, critic, and scholar. **Yes, he said, fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? The moneylenders, the knownothings, the authoritarians have us all in prison; if we value the freedom of the mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can.**"*

With that in mind, let's all escape. For a time, at least. And take a friend or two along with us if we are so fortunate.

To facilitate our jailbreak this month, John Grey, A. A. Rubin, Sylvain V Paquette, Ken Poyner, and more have smuggled literary lockpicks and hacksaws within the sweet cake that is their microfiction and poetry contributions to April's issue. Equipped with tools to open barred prison doors, we slip past a buffoonish orange guard in a flash...

And into flash fiction!

Here, Alastair Millar makes an appeal to our sense of adventure, within budget restrictions, in "Call of the Wild." From there, Morgan RR Haze and Nancy E. Dunne have characters both embarking on new capers with their stories, "A New World Opens" and "The Nature Walker's First Adventure", respectively. Writers may want to heed Corina Morera's "The Final Line" before questing too deep alongside their muse, and would-be astronauts may adopt more caution after Alan Vincent Michaels points out the potential pitfalls of amateurs folding spacetime in, "DIY Interstellar



Exploration". That Burnt Writer ends the flash selections with an adventure about the need to end, and a trek to a far too-long delayed conclusion in, "Cassie and Eydís".

Having jumped the prison walls and now running wild with freedom, we have come to our five featured short stories this month. Kayleigh Kitt offers ice cream, a loveable automaton, and a lighthearted science fiction heist in, "Robots Are a Girl's Best Friend." Peter J Carter's engaging "From the Fire" tells a grounded tale of friendship, loss, and of the fine line where speculation, heroism, and the paranormal intersect. Once more in outer space, author D Bedell rejoins us this month with a hard sci-fi journey both internal and external in, "The Man on the Dark Side of the Moon". S.J.C. Schreiber flutters us back down to earth to land with humor and whimsy into "A Fairy Tale", wherein an erstwhile wish-granter struggles with the ongoing ramifications of her hubris. Lastly, Alan Vincent Michaels keeps us unwillingly earthbound with, "Our Adventure of a Lifetime", contemplating our present — in that special way science fiction can — with a speculative near-future.

Now that I've given an overview of this spectacular and adventuresome issue, and speaking of contemplation and possible futures, SciFanSat is considering a change to how we run submissions... and would like your input!

Currently, we announce themes and open submissions only for the upcoming issue, for a period of about three weeks on average, starting when the previous issue is released. This is a very short submission window for authors. We are pondering a new method where we announce all of our monthly themes for the year as a resource instead. This would allow authors to submit to any upcoming issue, possibly months in advance. The current theme will be as actively promoted as it is now, but with access to the full years' worth of them, those that want or need more time to get a submission ready would now have that option.

We would modify our current form system with the ability to submit pieces to any upcoming issue in the year as well. For example, if you had a story written that you feel would be excellent for our August issue's theme, but it's only February, you could submit it well in advance. Or if that August theme sparks a new idea, you would have a lot more time to get it written. Submissions for the current month's issue would still close nine days prior to its release date, but future months would remain open.

This change would have potential benefits for the staff editing and assembling each SciFanSat issue as well. It would allow us to begin crafting issues with accepted submissions months ahead of time, avoiding the crippling time-crunches our current, monthly, nine-day production window is ever more prone to as the magazine continues to grow in popularity.

What are your thoughts? **[Make them known on our new poll](#)** with a simple vote.

Alright, now off to awaiting adventures! From I and the staff of the magazine, we send our gratitude to all the authors and poets who contributed to this installment of SciFanSat. You, along with our readers, are the magic that keeps this journey going. Keep-on writing, creating, and supporting each other!

May you enjoy the issue, and please, join us again in May, when our upcoming

Jason H. Abbott

*Editor, SciFanSat Magazine*

theme turns into... DISASTER!



# Poetry

## A Day in the Life Of A Four-Year Old Warrior Princess

by That Burnt Writer



We're going on an adventure!  
*Where're we going Mum?*  
We're gonna find an elephant  
and kick it up the bum!  
We're going on an adventure!  
*Where're we going bro?*  
We'll ride a dragon to the gate,  
and then, well, I don't know!  
We're going on an adventure!  
*Where're we going Dad?*  
*Oh, never mind, let's please leave quick,*  
*that smell you've made's quite bad!*  
*We're going on an adventure...*  
*that's what my parents said,*  
*but I'm too sleepy, done too much,*  
*so night, I'm off to bed.*



# Standing Guard For The Expedition On Boelerian

by John Grey

All night, I watch,  
fearful I'll be surprised, unprepared.  
The forest ripples black.  
Far mountains no longer trace the heavens.  
With nothing beyond,  
everything visible comes closer,  
threatens to crowd me out of my stance.  
I key on sounds,  
a crack in the ice of silence,  
almost imperceptible  
through the static of wind.  
And my ears pay heed,  
for a rock that is not a rock,  
a shape that creeps apart from shadow.  
So hard not to lose concentration,  
for memory to play the role of dream.  
Both light years and years  
confound my needs.  
No more thoughts of blessed reunions in heaven.  
Should the beast kill me here,  
where would I be dead?  
Another night  
when nothing happens  
but everything could.  
We're a team.  
We must protect one another.  
Responsible together  
but we're loved alone.





# The Explorer Special

by John Grey

Wind was blowing fiercely,  
it was cold,  
sand ripped the skin off my face,  
as I nibbled away  
at shrunken grasses  
on that near barren landscape.

So I make no excuses  
when my ears perked up  
at the sound of footsteps  
and my head turned,  
and my eyes glared unabashed  
at the searing hunger  
they represented.

A party of explorers  
may be the headline of the month  
in your human world  
but to me, an omnivore  
reduced to piddling vegetation  
for a diet,  
they're an 8-headed menu item  
heading in my direction.

No, I do not apologize for stalking,  
leaping upon and ultimately devouring,  
one Harvard professor, a noted animal tracker,  
three Yale graduates, an esteemed biologist,  
a NASA scientist and an imbedded journalist.

No doubt, sometime in the near future,  
a ship will come looking for the missing

In the meantime,  
I'll bide my time,  
browsing on stunted grasses.  
Once again, I'll be near starving.

But, when they get here,  
I'll be the one rescued.



# Micro Fiction

## May The Shmaltz Be With You

by A. A. Rubin



--Adventure, heh. Excitement, heh. A Jedi craves not these things.  
--What do we crave then?  
--Hmm. A nice, juicy hamburger, I crave. Hmm. With lettuce, mmm. Tomatoes, mmm. Fried onion—  
--A burger?  
--Right you were about the stew. Terrible food. Bob's Galactic Burger the galaxy travels in his food ship. Arrive soon, he must. Our only hope is he.  
--When is he scheduled to come to this planet.  
--Hmm. Difficult to see. Always in motion is the future.  
--I hear the Dark Side has cookies.

My short story, *The Vibrations, Louder*. A modern retelling of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* is now available on [Pseudopod](#). The story is available to read on *Pseudopod*'s website, or you can listen to episode 968 on any major podcast platform.



# **We Aren't Alone**

**by Sylvain V Paquette**



What or Who exactly went further away from Earth so far? Two Voyager probes are still travelling microscopic distances in proportion to time itself.

Knowing the Universe offers highly various locations between everything, all we can imagine is that IT will ever be nearly infinite and likely flooded by some intelligent life forms.

« We surely will find them or they would, sooner than never. »

(Space is a limitless adventure!)



# **The Three C's**

**by Morgan RR Haze**



We met at the old oak with our backpacks full for the adventure. We only brought the necessities, candy, comics and cola. The three C's.



# Companion

by Ken Poyner



Lennie knows he will have to plug in to navigate the service elevator. But Control likely does not know that Lenora has been downloaded and taken off grid. Even if they do know, they will not suspect that Lennie has her on removable storage.

If he can get to the street, then down into the scrap layers with the day-jobber machines and the disowned robots, the upgradeless chatterers, he can stay hidden from the technicians and bounty hunters. Over time, he can collect enough spare parts, perhaps develop a workable husk. Then reload Lenora.

They will data tether deliciously again.



# Flash Fiction

## The Nature Walker's First Adventure

by Nancy E. Dunne



Gin shook her head to clear it. The human was advancing. The guards at the lift to the tree city were advancing. The guards, her family, her kin in the Great Forest.

This was her chance. She ran toward the human, casting transport magic as she stuck her hands out toward him. The spell landed and they winked out of existence together.

Landing in a heap far from the tree city but still on the southward path, Gin opened her eyes. The human was staring at her. "What did you do that for?" His voice was booming and he spoke the common tongue. She got to her feet and moved back a step or two.

"You're searching for your sister?" she asked, carefully. Common was tricky.

The human nodded.

"Out, there?" She gestured away from the familiar forest, toward the Grasslands to the south, and again he nodded. "Then I will help. That is why I did that."

He got to his feet, then shrugged. "Fair enough, little elf. Fair enough." He started walking and Gin followed, a silent prayer to the All-Mother on her lips.

This is where her life would really begin. This was her adventure.





# Cassie and Eydís

by That Burnt Writer



"And I suppose," Cassie whispers, as a dark mist descends and I slip into unconsciousness, "that, at the end of our lives, we *did* have an adventure..."



I never expected the Universe to be so beautiful, but from here, it feels like I can sense it all, from the enormous sweeps of galaxies down to individual particles. It's breathtaking, a riot of color; endless incandescent pitch-perfect harmonies that soar and weave in and out of each other.

It was almost worth the agony.

My story starts an aeon ago. It's tough to get attached to anything, or *anyone*, when all around you crumbles to nothingness, ultimately dispersing back to the stardust it came from. I've seen empires rise and fall, stars be born, burn out, and become black holes, and lives come and go in the blink of an eye.

I loved, once, but she was taken from me; time is less a healer than she is an unforgiving mistress.

My pain, my anger, seared hot and bright and, for a while. I was the scourge of all that was living, but soon, even that became dulled. I found myself sickened by what I had done. It wasn't anybody's fault, after all, that I had lived and she died. Just a twist of evolution, a faulty DNA strand that meant I was forever twenty-eight whilst everything rotted around me again and again.

She burned brightly, my raven-haired beauty, a guiding light in my life when everything went wrong for me, and I went off the rails. She was my savior, and I her cause, but then we became so much more. We'd chase the sun astride a thirty-foot dragon who belched flame and attitude, silhouetted against the moon, and children would point, stare, and wonder. Swooping through the atmosphere, we'd whoop and wail our delight, stopping only to sleep and eat. We were mercenaries for hire, for who would stand against us?

Our mount was named Eydís and was as much a part of us as we were of each other. I suppose that, if you're gifted a weapon and a friend in one being, you find yourself drawn to a particular way of living. Cassie always used to tell me to make the most of life, you never knew when it would be taken from you. I remember her hair flailing behind her as we flew, her eyes alive, her laughter snatched away by the wind. Her smile.

She was taken by a blade in the night. Eydís trapped the assassin under one gigantic clawed foot, but not before he'd slit Cassie's throat. She bled out as I cradled her head and screamed for her to stay with me, but as her essence faded, she squeezed my hand one last time.

Eydís dismembered the wretch who took Cassie's life, and I fell into a spiral of despair and cruelty. I discovered I was immortal shortly after that. I'd tried to end myself, but every time the wounds healed, the flesh grew again almost instantaneously. Insanity danced on the edges of my mind, before rolling in to breach its defences. Eydís and I would lash out at anyone we saw, take what we wanted. We became the greatest terror in The Seven Kingdoms.

But somehow the destruction didn't fill the void, and when Eydís finally died, I wept hot, bitter tears. The last of the dragons was gone and passed, first into legend, then mythology. Yet still I aged not, cursed for eternity it seemed. Coleridge used my tale as his inspiration in 1798...

Generations came and went. I had a few who would get close to me, almost close enough that I could share my burden, but they too became ashes. So, I waited, working here and there, moving on before too long, never staying in any one place long enough for people to realise that I wasn't like them. I know how society works; anything different, and they'll dissect it, find out what makes it tick. I had the key to many people's infinity dreams in my genetic makeup.

I figured it was better they didn't find out about me; dreams can become nightmares all too quickly.

It took longer than I'd have thought to get off-world. People became too distracted by passing fads to make any real progress most of the time, but eventually, we started to expand out into the galaxy, and I saw my chance.

...

And so it was that I found myself in deep space, hoping that something out here would kill me, finally; let me be done with life and join my darling in whatever came after, even if it was nothingness. I flew too close to suns, tangled with quantum jump-nets inside hyperdrives, fought battles with vast alien civilisations, but nothing worked. I'd heal, continue.

It was, I have to say, a bit of a surprise the first time one of those extraterrestrials decided to enslave, then decapitate me. Even more of a surprise to them when I rose again from the apparent dead to slaughter it mercilessly.

This, however, was my final gambit. I'd set a course for the event horizon of a supermassive black hole and, as I neared it and my ship began to unravel around me, Cassie returned to me. Her voice, a flash of that wicked, teasing, quirky grin, the eyes that held so much love and mischief.

As a final act, I ordered a full medical scan, for I feared I was hallucinating. When the results were revealed, all I could do was wonder at the universe that had decided that no, I wasn't going mad, and that there might be tiniest sliver of hope that we might be reunited.

I heard Cassie's voice one last time, and for the first time in millennia, I was at peace.

...

We are together in eternity, Cassie, Eydís and I, and inside the black hole, the tranquility which eluded me for so long is finally here.



## A New World Opens

by Morgan RR Haze



Standing on the balcony, looking out at the beautiful beach below, it felt like such a waste to be mopey. Yet she couldn't combat it right now. Caregiving had taken most of her life so far. She didn't regret it. But relationships, career, everything took a backseat. Now her parents were gone, she wasn't sure what to do next.

They had always said they had funds for her. Unfortunately, medical treatment, supplies, medications depleted everything they had saved.

Yet, here she was, splurging on a fancy tropical vacation and moping in the hotel room. The hotel was offering a hike to a private waterfall on the property tomorrow. She really should try to explore some of the island before she had to leave.

The group that gathered for the tour was very small, only a family of four. The children were full of energy, requiring the close attention of both their parents and the guide. It allowed her to trail behind, which suited her just fine.

"Now when we reach the waterfall, be very careful. There are some areas that have fallen recently." The guide warned.

Again, the group's focus was on keeping the kids safely away from the dangers.

When they reached the viewpoint, the view was amazing. A waterfall poured over a cliff and down into a deep pool below. The guide said, "we'll be here for an hour or so. There's a small greenhouse along the jungle path, or simply enjoy the view."

The others decided to visit the greenhouse. She stayed. Once alone she closed her eyes to enjoy the feel of the location. So different from the sterile environment she had become accustomed to.

She was pulled out of her thoughts by a sound that felt out of place. Exploring, she noticed a small trail leading behind the waterfall. A sudden desire for an adventure, maybe even recklessness, enveloped her.

She should wait for the guide, but he'd probably say it wasn't safe. The stone was wet, covered by moss. But she had developed her core through lifting her parents, and other things she definitely hadn't wanted to spill. It helped her safely reach a small cave opening behind the waterfall. She was surprised to see a glow emanating from it. She hadn't expected glow worms here. Would the waterfall glow at night?

She was so enthralled she didn't take care of her footing. Small pebbles acted like marbles making her tumble further inside.

When she stopped, the glow no longer reached her. Of course she only had a dumb phone, so no flashlight app or signal. Feeling around her, there seemed to be lichen or moss, meaning there must be a light source. She stepped into a puddle, which glowed in response. "That's weird."

The small amount of light allowed her to see her new surroundings. It wasn't any moss or lichen she knew of that covered the stone; a purplish instead of green. The glow began to fade so she stepped in another puddle. As she continued things got stranger. Mushrooms appeared, but they were almost as tall as her. Though being short, that wasn't hard

The puddles became a stream, every ripple glowing.

If it weren't for the real scratches and bruises, she would think she was dreaming.

She should turn back, go home.

But home was gone. There was nothing, no one to go back to. So instead she followed the river.

Stepping into fading sunlight, she was met by a fantasy world. The trees were more purple and blue toned than green. The river became a waterfall, glowing as she had thought the one on the other side might.

A nearby scrambling made her jump. She stood there, trying to catch her breath when a pair of cat-like green eyes met hers. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. She could only describe it as a dragon. It neared her, sniffing like a dog would. It must have decided she wasn't a threat because it started rubbing against her. Was it marking her life cats do? It finally curled up on her foot, purring?

"If you're like a cat, just wait till I'm actually dead to eat my eyes, okay?"

It let out a huff, as if offended.

"Don't like the comparison? I always wanted a cat, but mom was allergic. I never had pets."

Her stomach rumbled, causing the creature to launch into the air. Though it was getting dark, she could see the golden color of its wings in contrast to its black body.

"You're a lovely surprise."

A chirp was her response as it settled back to the ground. "I'm getting hungry and thirsty, but what's safe to consume here? Everything is so unfamiliar."

As if in answer, the little dragon drank the water then stared at her.

"Okay. I'll trust you. Though I'm starting to worry about my sanity."

The water felt wonderful, cool with a slight hint of citrus. As her little companion preened, she couldn't help but smile. "I should call you something. What do you think I should call a lovely critter like you?"

Once again, when she said lovely, the dragon chirped. "You like being called Lovely?"

Chirp.

"Or do you prefer Critter?"

She was sure this sound was as close to a snort as "Lovely" could produce.

"Okay. Lovely it is."

Lovely sat up, again, staring at her as if waiting. "You want to know my name?"

Chirp.

"I assume that's an affirmative. My name's Aisha Quinn. My mom heard the name and thought it was spelled with an I. Even though she was wrong, she nicknamed me IQ. Never felt like I lived up to it though." Aisha sighed, looking into the foreign sky. "The only places with colors like this were the poles. . . But as pretty as they are, they won't feed me. Unless things work differently here?"

Lovely just huffed.

"Well, lead the way. I can only embrace the adventure."



# Call of the Wild

by Alastair Millar



The Head of the Interplanetary Survey Corps watched on his holo set as the warprider separated from the orbital station, and smiled. His star hires were heading for the stars.

Two years ago, things hadn't looked so rosy.

"Well?" The Secretary for Outward Migration had demanded, stomping in from an uncomfortable session in the Senate, and obviously in no mood for pleasantries. He'd tactfully ushered her further into his office, and waved her into one of the comfortable chairs by the window.

"I know what the problem is," he'd said, letting it hang as he carefully measured out two glasses of Cetian Cognac from his personal supply. Then he'd added "But I don't know if you'll like the solution," as he set a drink in front of the woman who was, after all, his boss.

She'd sat back and looked at him over steepled fingers "Tell me. The Development and Industrial Committees are finalising the next Five Year Plan, and I need something."

"Okay. When you put me in charge, we had three main issues: recruitment was down, applicant quality was declining, and survey report quality was getting, let's say, patchy. My predecessor ramped up trying to get the best and brightest, but wasn't offering competitive pay rates, so most new xenoscience grads were going to the commercial sector."

A raised hand cut him off. "Budget cuts. Don't ask me for money, you won't get it."

"I know. But the real key is, we're just not sexy enough."

"Excuse me?"

"We make careers in the ISC sound like any other job Earthside – some training, some travel, good retirement package, dental cover, blah blah blah. Boring!"

"It's government service. Exciting is not what we do," the Secretary had replied drily.

"But that's just it, it should be! There are safe jobs everywhere. We should make people realise that exploring new planets is dangerous! Exotic places, strange worlds. Shuttles can crash. Machinery can fail. Flora and fauna might be deadly. And just because we haven't found intelligent aliens yet, that doesn't mean they aren't out there."



"You want to play up the risks?"

"Yes! We need enthusiastic frontiersmen, not keypad warriors or lab rats. Finding the resources we need to support Earth's society *is heroic*, dammit! If they fail, people die!"

"So, your solution is—"

"To take a leaf out of the Corporations' book. Run marketing campaigns on the social networks, make a sensie show, get out on the infocasts, tell people what we actually do! Probes and robots can't give you a real feel for a planet – they just generate numbers and data. They can tell you if the atmosphere's safe to breathe, or the water's safe to drink, but not whether an entire ecosystem is dangerous, or if there are pathogens they don't know how to identify, or if the natives are likely to be friendly. Only a human explorer can do that. So, let's forget the geeks and academics, and find some outdoorsy types. They're easier to find, and of course," he'd looked across slyly, "they're cheaper to hire."

The debate had lasted another hour, but as he'd expected, that was the argument that had ultimately won her over.

And now his boys and girls were heading out into the unknown, nervous perhaps, but mostly unafraid. He sat back, confident that despite other departments' misgivings and the bureaucratic hurdles he'd had to overcome, they were what Earth needed: perhaps not the most gifted, but certainly the very best that it had to offer, adventurers all.



## DIY Interstellar Exploration

by Alan Vincent Michaels



"Who's the more foolish,' Joss?" Marya asks. "The fool or the one who follows him?"

"Great," I answer sarcastically. "Category is Old-time Movies. Obi-Wan Kenobi, right? So, I am the fool?"

"Now's the perfect time," she replies, smiling. "We're here—a rogue, spaceship pilot; a mad-inventor-savant—in orbit, doing cutting-edge, space exploration. We're both fools, and I'm flying us to the stars."

"*Ad Astra* has been tested thoroughly. You've been with me since the beginning. If you're nervous, we can abort."

"No. I admit our atmospheric ascent was rough, but the AI is still showing all green."

"Good." I sigh in relief. "Folding space to ignore that stupid speed of light restriction is established physics. Yes, we're folding only to Proxima Centauri, the nearest star. Yes, the big space companies have already sent probes there, some with microbial or animal life, but no humans 'til my breakthroughs. Our dozen in-system tests were total perfection, but if my calculations to Proxima are off even by an attosecond—"

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step."

"Lao Tzu," I say, smiling. "*Touché*."

I stare at the images of Earth and our distant Sun filling the cabin main monitor. Is this the last time I'll see them?

"Initiating folding sequence," Marya says. "In three. Two. One. To Proxima!"

The monitor blanks.

The ship cabin starts spinning.

I enter my navel.

I unfold.

The ship cabin stops spinning.

A white dwarf star looms before us.

"Wow!" shouts Marya.

"That's not Proxima," I groan, gripping my seat armrests, staring intently at Marya's face. "Where are we?"

"Stellar charts are still updating. The AI indicates we're about eight-point-six-one-one light years from Earth."

"That's impossible," I say. "We're at Sirius B?"

"And it took eight-point-five seconds, ship time. That's twice the expected...crap! The AI also shows the flight matrix can't fold for at least ten minutes. And the thrusters aren't responding."

"Look, someone, something's altered the physics. Don't you dare say, 'The Force.'"

"I don't think we did anything wrong," Marya's voice quivers, her finger pointing at the monitor. "Maybe them?"

Between our ship and the white dwarf star floats a gargantuan, cylindrical something.

"Holy—" I say.

"I'm thinking this adventure on our own wasn't a great idea."

"That's not ours. God, what's next? And it better not be 'To Serve Man.'"

"Guess we'll know soon enough. That thing is getting closer!"



## The Final Line

by Corina Morera



She soared through castles, fiery mountains, forbidden valleys, and invented gods. Helen didn't need to lace up her boots to explore new worlds. The blank page was her canvas — and her life.

Until it wasn't anymore.

Until she found herself praying to the muses, begging them to reopen the door to that exquisite delirium, to the universes lost in an ink that dried with each passing day.

And at long last, someone answered.

First, there were whispers in the night, stars scattering between her fingers as she wrote in the pre-dawn hours, possessed by inspiration. Then came the insatiable impulse that crept into her waking life. She barely slept, but how she dreamed!

She gave herself so much to her muse that she didn't see it coming. Her quill danced, composing her masterpiece. And that was all that mattered. Teetering on the brink of madness to achieve it was an acceptable price; Surrendering her consciousness to that being of immaculate white, word for word, was... *What was it?*

*Late, far too late*, she realized before disappearing.

It was the final line, the last adventure before succumbing to the void of forgotten protagonists. The name, delicately written at the bottom of the manuscript, wasn't hers...

After ages waiting for the right moment, the muse finally signed her work.



# Short Story

## From the Fire

by Peter J Carter

I think about my best friend's death often. That is until he came back.

Gary was a firefighter, the same as me. He was lighthearted, empathetic, and focused. I want to think that he gave a shit about the risks, that they frightened him, but he never seemed that way. I want to say that he had a twinkle in his eye, but that would be a cliché. Gary had more of a sparkle that grew brighter when telling a joke. And he told them often.

That's not to say he never got serious. Shit, he used to tell the story about the Knights of St. John to the rookies with such conviction it even made the good old Jakes around the house tear up.

But that was a different side to him. Usually, he was telling shitty dad jokes. With his red hair, freckled face, and Cheshire cat grin, the way he delivered them made them funny. Sometimes, he used them to help the situation. Other times you just wished he'd shut the fuck up.

This one time, we got a call to go to Highland Street because someone reported a drugged-up naked woman walking down the street. When the cops were busy in Somerville, we got the call. We show up at Highland, and there's this lady, about five-foot-eight, blonde hair, walking up and down the street talking a blue streak, staring at the ground naked as a jaybird.

Gary touched me on the shoulder.

"Let me get this, Chief." He approached the lady and took off his jacket.

I wasn't the Chief. Gary called me Chief because I tried to steer him clear of trouble occasionally, and that was his thank you. Asshole. The lady was walking at a pretty good clip, and he had to accelerate to get near her.

Gary finally grabs her attention. "A bear walks into a bar, and the bartender says, 'What will you have? The bear says, 'I'll have a gin, and' He stops, eats a couple of peanuts, checks his watch, and then says, 'Tonic.' The bartender says, 'O.K., but why

the big pause?' 'Because I'm a bear, you idiot.' Then Gary showed that wide gap tooth smile.

The woman had stopped walking about halfway through the joke.

He held out his coat and asked, "Is this your jacket?"

She contemplated it. "I don't think so."

"Why don't you try it on? I think it's your size."

And Gary slipped the jacket over her shoulders and led her to the van. Later, we found out she had a lump of cancer the size of a golf ball in her brain. I think she even made it. Those doctors pull off some miracles occasionally.

As good as he was with people, there was something different about Gary when fighting fires. I've been in many burning buildings, and they all have a sort of chaos to them. The fire raves through the wood like some hungry beast, and sometimes the popping and cracking are loud enough to make you deaf. So, when you're in a building, you're cautious, maybe sometimes overly so, because you know that the fire can take you just like that any minute. You don't remain a firefighter long without knowing your surroundings and the danger.

Gary had respect for fire. He had communion with it; no, more of an agreement. Now, don't get all fucking righteous and say, 'Well, that's why he died.' If you think like that, you don't know shit.

Yeah, I know fire isn't alive any more than a cinder block or the fucking stump in your front yard you keep running over with the lawnmower, but it exists as a thing. It consumes, grows, and adapts to its surroundings. Damn, it does more than my asshole brother-in-law. And on some level, Gary could talk to it or sense it or something; it sounds unbelievable, I guess.

As the crew would arrive at a fire, collecting pike poles and Halligan bars to vent the roof, some would gather around him, waiting for his nod like a blessing. Even the Captain would indiscreetly nudge his way close to see Gary's reaction.

We got called into this fire over in Medford on Winter Hill. One of those big, old triple-deckers, off Pearl Street, with houses cuddled next to each other the way they are down there. These neighborhoods are tough to control; you could lose the entire block if you allow it to get going.

The roof construction on these houses dates to the 1800s. They use trusses in new construction. Whereas they are structurally more robust, they use less wood overall. They made these homes with roof framing from rafter and beam construction with ship-lapped seating.

But it also means that the wood in these houses is old and more combustible than modern-day building materials with less fire blocking. Add a tar coating on the roof with two or three layers of roofing shingles, and that old place can become a tinderbox. After cutting the electricity and gas, the first thing we do is to ventilate the

roof. It's kind of like opening the top of your wood stove. It releases heat and smoke and doesn't allow the fire to burn as hot or deep.

We don't walk out on the roofs, not knowing the structure's endurance or how the fire may have compromised it; instead, we send up the boom ladder.

One guy was up top and getting ready to open the roof when Gary, rolling out the hoses, stopped the firefighter from working the controls.

"Don't move him any closer," said Gary.

"He's still ten feet away from the building. His arms ain't that fucking long," said the fireman.

"Move him to the other side," said Gary.

The guy in the bucket didn't like it much, but they swung him around, and he vented the roof on the other side. We found out later that the owner had gutted that side and had new construction studs without fire blocking. If we had vented the other side, the fire would have moved to the wide-open and consumed the house, then maybe the neighborhood. Gary had a knack for knowing things like that.

Or the time he told Maroni not to turn off the gas, and the main ruptured a minute after. Or the time he told everyone to get back from the house on Mystic before it crumpled into flames that jumped hundreds of feet into the clear October night. Sometimes, we could only stand back, wash it down, and pray.

There are dozens of stories like that. Little things may seem inconsequential to you, but to people who make this living made him something other than just a good firefighter.

And not just a good firefighter, but a good person. The more I worked with Gary, the more I came to realize that he loved people. He always had a minute to help someone and never expected anything from it.

It was a night in January when we lost him.

When winter hits New England, it's the worst time for a firefighter. The frigid Atlantic storms blow across the region, making it as cold as Blue Flujin; people huddle in their old, poorly insulated apartments and crank up their electric heaters and blankets plugged into wiring laid down when Melville was scribbling books out in his Fall River home.

It was a night like that when we responded to a call at a dilapidated warehouse on Church Street. When we got there, the place was a mess. Someone had taken the old building and had tried to convert it to condos, and when the money or investors ran dry, the workers picked up their tools and left half-done. This type of place was perfect for people without homes. The cops tried to keep them out of places like this, but homeless shelters don't allow drunken people to stay for the night, and when it was this cold, they either found a place to shelter or ended up dead.



We piled out of the truck and started deploying equipment. A shabby old guy was already being treated for smoke inhalation by the paramedics and said someone was still inside.

The first rule of firefighting is never risking your life for property. Shit, I've watched many buildings burn to the ground that we might have saved if we ran a few hoses inside, but one man's life is not worth any building. But if anyone is inside, we go.

Four of us entered the building; Maroni and Roland stayed in sight of the door, and Gary and I went deeper to search based on the guy's vague directions. Wearing respirators and watching the fire gently billow around us, we went to the back of the building and found the guy face down on an old mattress dragged undoubtedly from some dumpster.

When we roused the old guy, he pointed to a doorway some twenty-five feet away. I put the extra respirator over the man's head and tried to pick him up. He struggled against me, pointing again to the door in the back.

"Must be someone else in here, Chief," said Gary through his radio.

"Would you shut the fuck up with the 'Chief' shit? Let's get this guy out first."

"I only call you 'Chief' because I love you. I'm just going to stick my head in the doorway." He patted the old man on the shoulder with a reassuring nod.

And as Gary moved to the rear, I hoisted the guy onto my back in a classic carry. As he moved to the back, the fire suddenly increased in intensity. It seemed to grow in anticipation, and I could hear the rafters of the building crying. The fire had reached the critical stage when the supports would no longer hold the old girl up.

When Gary stuck his head through the old steel casement, something clicked, and that was it.

Deflagration is a combustion or reactive wave that happens at the speed of sound. Whatever accelerant was in that room must have ignited the minute he stuck his head in because it sucked him right off his feet.

People will say things slow down when the shit gets ugly, but the brain sees in pictures, and each moment burns itself into the back of your head like little flash comics written on the edge of a book. I saw it all happen. The vacuum caused by the instant ignition of superheated fuel drew all the available air into the room, pulled him in, and sucked the steel door closed right after him. Just after the door slammed shut, I saw a bluish glow burning through the bottom of the sill.

I stood for a few seconds there with this old, fucking, drunk leaking bodily fluid onto my suit, staring at the door hoping, waiting for Gary to open the door and tell some moronic kid's joke when the door blew off the hinges.

A ten-foot ball of fire spewed from the blasted doorway like a cannon shot. It threw me and the old guy across the room twenty feet, and we skittered across the

floor. The next thing I knew, the guys we had stationed at the front door were dragging me and the bum out as the whole place came down with me screaming, "Gary!" at the top of my lungs. The building fell apart like a thousand burning leaves, folding in upon itself and sending sparks drifting into the sky. They had to tie me to a gurney to keep me from going back in.

The next day, they searched through the ashes when a miracle happened. They found Gary's remains in the room's corner. The fire investigator found twenty cans of spray paint, a graffiti artist's stash, that must have super-heated and atomized to a mist before igniting and turning the room into a furnace.

After they moved the girder off Gary's remains, they found a baby boy, protected by the remnants of the suit, cradled in his arms.

A firefighter's suit can withstand heat to 800 degrees for a short period, and somehow, it had protected the little guy. A little soot-covered, but otherwise, fine.

The newspaper called it a miracle, and when they asked the homeless guy why there was a baby in there, he said he had "no idea." He was trying to get Gary to go to the back room to get his cat. It turns out the cat, Mister Biggles, had the good sense to leave and was waiting outside for his owner.

We buried Gary on a dreary Thursday. He had no family except for the department, and we did our best to honor and remember him. Squads from five counties rolled out to send him off, and they awarded him the Medal for Conspicuous Bravery as we laid him to rest.

Afterward, I talked to my wife, and although the idea of raising another baby at forty-six didn't thrill her, she loved Gary too and said it would be fine.

I talked to the Chief, and he pulled a few strings, a shitload actually, right up to the mayor's office, and the baby became part of our family.

We named him Gary.

Time passes the way it always does when you get past fifty, too quickly.

The new Gary was wise beyond his years. Contemplative and deliberate with his actions, my wife and I often referred to him as the little older man.

Gary was ten and had his first sleepover. The boys were noisy that night, and although we only allowed three kids to a sleepover, it might as well have been twenty with the racket they were making.

I got out of my chair and walked up the stairs to issue the first of many "last warnings" when one kid said, "Tell a story, Gary. Your stories are so cool."

I stopped halfway up the stairs.

"Alright, this story is about a bunch of guys known as the Knights of St. John. They were crusaders and fought against the evil Saracens for possession of the Holy Land."

"What Holy Land, Gary?" Kyle, one of the sleepover friends, asked.

"Shut up, Kyle," said Jeff, Gary's closest friend.

"I was just wondering what...,"

"S-h-u-t u-p."

"Okay, jeez," said Kyle.

"The Crusaders, led by Richard the First, moved from the port city of Jaffa, fighting against the Saracens, led by a great warrior named Saladin.

"They moved inland until we came to the city of Arsuf. As they approached Arsuf, the Saracens released a weapon that, until then, had been unknown to the Crusaders. The Saracens filled these glass bottles with wax and a flammable liquid named Naphtha. The glass jars, launched from catapults, would arc high in the air and smash down on the warriors, spreading the liquid everywhere. They exploded with this tremendous whooshing sound and sprayed flames in every direction. They burned hundreds of the knights alive. The screams and the smell caused many to cringe in fear.

"When these knights traveled, they had young men as helpers. They were called squires. Rather than cower in fear, these squires braved the flames and the swords to save the knights. These young men used wet horse blankets or whatever they had available to put the fires out, sometimes losing their own lives. Many died, but many knights lived because of them. And because of that, the knights rallied and beat Saladin.

"Those squires became the first modern-day firefighters. For their efforts, the Crusaders awarded the few that survived the badge of courage from the Knights of St. John's and their home island of Malta.

"And that's why firefighters wear the Maltese cross today as a badge of honor. It's telling people they can be one rung away from death but still willing to lie down their lives to protect you."

"Man, you tell the best stories," said Kyle.

"Yeah, kill the lights. I'm tired." And the boys settled down to sleep.

I stood on the edge of the stairway, thinking I heard it in error. He said, 'We'. The original Gary told that story a hundred times. I slipped back downstairs and watched something on TV. I remember sitting there thinking it had to be bullshit, that I was just being fucking deranged and wouldn't say anything about it to my wife.

And as time passed, no matter what stupid joke he told, or every time he put four sugars in his coffee, chased after every redhead in sight, or ate gummy bears for breakfast, I knew it was him. I never questioned him, though. But I think he knew.

Somehow, he was the same guy who was born again and has done it over and over. Shit, I don't know; maybe like a phoenix rising from the flames to be reborn. I imagine something happened to him on the crusade, something twisted the Saracens did. But I don't know; truth be told, I don't want to know.

When he graduated high school and entered the firefighter academy, I told him I was proud of him.

"Thanks, Chief," was what he said.



## A Fairy Tale

by S.J.C. Schreiber



Melody Silvervale had never much liked New York; too much traffic, too many buildings, too much stone, iron, and fire. Too many people. It was nothing like the delicate glass and ivory towers at home, and Central Park didn't even come close to the hanging gardens that stretched over rivers and lakes.

Despite her trying to time her travels outside of peak hours, the sidewalks were always crowded, humans of all shapes and sizes rushing towards and ahead of her. Melody kept her head down, noise canceling headphones over her ears, and avoided eye contact or any sort of interaction. A man in a business suit bumped into her, and a sharp pain like a flaming hot poker shot down her arm.

"Ah!"

The yelp escaped before she could help it, and several people stared at her with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. The man neither turned around nor mumbled an apology. He must have worn a wristwatch with traces of iron...

She noticed her headphones had shifted when she heard an agitated discussion a woman was having on the phone. Melody scrambled to put her protection back in place, but it was too late.

"—yes, mhm, bye." The woman hung up and stared at her phone wistfully. "I wish she would call me more often to ask how *my* day has been..."

A familiar shiver ran through Melody, starting in her toes all the way up to the tips of her hair.

"No, no, no," she begged, but the magic was more powerful than her protest.

The woman with the phone had barely put it back into her pocket when it rang.

"Hello? Hi, but... we just spoke... how my day was? It was okay, I guess. Listen, I have to go. Talk to you later."

She hung up again, a confused look on her face. Before she could drop her hand, the phone rang again.

"Hello? Wha— you literally just asked me that! Are you okay? If you're drunk again, I can't deal with this."

She scowled as she hung up once more, but not two seconds later, the phone rang again. And again. And again.

Melody readjusted her headphones firmly over her ears. Would this wretched curse ever end?

...

It had started long ago. As a teenager, merely two hundred and twelve years old, she went through a rebellious phase: cut the tips of her wings to look battle torn, covered her naked feet with shoes that left heavy prints in the pristine grass, dyed her glitter a very dark shade of gray.

Some of her friends went through a similar period, but all of them snapped out of it eventually, performing their responsibilities with pride.

Except for Melody.

She didn't know who or what she wanted to be, but one thing she knew for certain: she did not want to grant wishes. Why simply give humans what they wanted? How was it fair that fairies worked hard in fairy land to create and maintain the magic, so that creatures with no sense for the beauty in the world could wish for things they didn't need?

The High Court was, of course, not pleased with her strong suggestion to give up her duties.

"But I don't want to be a fairy!" Melody crossed her arms and pouted in front of the elderly fairy godmothers.

The eldest one, an impressive two thousand years old, with blue shimmering skin and waist-long white hair, scoffed. The first traces of wrinkles had appeared on her face, and her wings had started to curl and become translucent, but she wore her age with pride.

"How can you not be what you are, child?" she said.

The second worst thing, after having to grant wishes, was to be called a child when Melody was clearly an adult who knew exactly what she wanted and how life worked.

"I'll find my own path," she replied, sticking her chin out in defiance. "I might be a fairy, but I don't want to grant wishes to humans. It's, not fair."

There was a shocked outcry, followed by agitated murmurs.

"We are fairies. Granting wishes is what we do, what we've always done."

Another fairy spoke up, her skin the pastel colors of freshly fallen petals, a stark contrast to the ice in her voice. "It is our purpose."

The others nodded their agreement.

"If fairies grant wishes," Melody said, "then I wish to not have to grant wishes!"

"You fool!" the eldest cried out, but it was too late.

Melody could feel the magic of the circle crash against her like a tidal wave. Her skin sparkled in all the colors of the rainbow, the sheer force of the wish throwing her off her feet. She laughed, a melodic tinkling sound that went up and down several octaves. She had found a loophole. Now *she* was in charge of her destiny!

...

A few turnings of the seasons later, Melody came of age. No one knew what magical consequences her outburst had, but tradition demanded that she went to the human world to grant the wish of a person specifically assigned to her. Every fairy had to undergo this rite of passage, after which they could choose to return to fairy land. Most worked hard after that to become fairy godmothers with their very own human charges to look after; some granted a predetermined quota of wishes to humans all over the world, and others stayed, often for a mortal being, giving up their near immortality for limited years of love in a faraway place.

Melody's first assignment was an eight-year-old girl, who had wished for a puppy for the last two years. A simple enough wish to grant, and a perfect test to see how — and if — Melody's magic worked.

Despite her attitude, Melody was nervous about going to the human world. She spent hours that day getting dressed in front of a giant dewdrop, twirling her wings and hair until they were just right, and using glow bugs to apply a faint glimmer to her cheeks and lips. When she arrived at the clearing at sunset, everyone else had already gathered, including the two-dozen other young fairies who would travel to the human world with her. Since the portal opened only every third full moon, exactly at midnight, they always held a lavish party for the new fairies, bundling them up and sending them off in flocks.

Melody barely noticed the rainbow-colored hummingbird cocktails and snack trays with crunchy flower petals and edible starlight. The task before her and the wish she made so thoughtlessly filled her mind. What would happen when she tried to grant a wish? Would it even work? Or had she truly lost that power, like she wanted?

"Melody!" The voice of one of her mothers ripped her out of her gloomy thoughts. "It's time!"



There were last hugs, tears and jingles of wings as the fairies lined up in front of the big pond, surrounded by their friends and family. Melody's mothers kissed her on both cheeks and hugged her tightly, and then it was her turn. The full moon hung directly above the middle of the clear waters, its reflection even brighter than the original. And thus, the pond transformed into a portal to another world.

One by one, the fairies waded into the waters, crossing their arms over their chests before surrendering themselves to the shimmering white ripples. One by one, they disappeared, swallowed by the magic waters like dewdrops falling from leaves. Melody hung back, her wings trembling. She felt her hands being squeezed one final time, followed by a gentle push when her feet remained rooted to the shore. The water caressed her ankles with an impossible sensation: warm as summer rain yet sharp as midwinter frost.

She waded deeper, took a breath, crossed her arms, and let herself fall forward into the night...

...and emerged upright from the petals of an orange lily in blinding sunlight.

Within moments, the flower shrank to a fraction of her size, until Melody realized that her own body was growing until it reached the dimensions of a human. Rough and artificial fabrics replaced her fine clothes made of blossoms and moonlight, and while she could still feel her wings, when she looked over her shoulder, they were invisible on her back. She sprinted to the nearest puddle to inspect her reflection, brow furrowed in contempt.

"Great," she mumbled to the image of herself in the shallow water. "Not only am I stuck with humans, I also look like one."

Her hair, once vibrant in the color of butterfly wings, was now a dull mouse brown, cropped short in an uneven cut that looked like it had been done with garden shears. Her skin, no longer glowing like a freshwater pearl, was a plain, unremarkable shade that would blend into any crowd. Even her eyes, once a kaleidoscope of shifting colors, had settled into a mundane hazel. Her clothes felt restraining, like a cocoon of thorny spider silk.

Her entire appearance was designed to be forgotten, to slip from memory as soon as one looked away from her. When Melody turned away from the puddle, even she had a difficult time recalling her own unfamiliar face. She sighed deeply.

"I better get it over with," she muttered to herself and scanned her surroundings.

She was in the middle of what humans would class as a park. The grass was a dull, uniform green, the trees felt static, their bark too rough and their leaves too dry, the flowers a pale imitation of even the most subdued colors at home. Everything stood too straight, too planned, too confined.

The only extraordinary thing was a thin strip of twinkling lights just above the ground, like a faint, blue-tinted milky way. It wound its way away from Melody's feet, up along the dirt path to an unseen destination further ahead — Melody's target.

"Let's meet this little brat who thinks everything will just fall into her lap if she wishes for it hard enough," Melody grumbled and set off.

She made her way past groups of humans, some riding on strange metal contraptions, others holding even stranger devices close to their faces, or pointing them at the surrounding landscape. Most had iron on their clothes, some even pierced through their skin. Melody took a wide berth around them, the metal almost palpable in this strange air. She couldn't wait to be back home, away from all these... humans.

A shriek pierced through the crunching of feet and the murmurs of the crowds, and it took Melody a moment to realize that it was the shrill laughter of a child. The twinkling path of light connecting to Melody wound its way in the same direction. She rounded a cluster of bushes and found the source of the disturbance: a child half her own size, with thick dark locks that curled around a puffy dark face, eyes sparkling with joy. The girl ran around in what seemed to be a sandpit, climbing on wooden obstacles and nets that were placed around the pit with chaotic intent. Sure enough, the starry path stopped right at the feet of the girl.

Melody huffed out an annoyed breath. This is what's wrong with humans, she thought. This girl was as happy as anyone could be, playing in the open air, laughing at the top of her lungs, and yet even at her tender age, it wasn't enough. She wanted more. Things of fancy that wouldn't make her any happier than she could be herself. Humans. Such contrarian creatures.

When the girl stopped running to take a breather, Melody stomped up to her. The girl looked up with furrowed brows.

"Hey, kid, what's your name?"

The girl blinked.

"My dad says I shouldn't talk to strangers."

Melody sighed again. Why must this be harder than it has to?

"But I'm not a stranger," she said, trying to make her voice extra sweet. "I'm a fairy from a faraway land, and I can make your deepest wishes come true. So, what shall it be?"

Melody couldn't hide her smirk when the girl's eyes lit up. She would be utterly disappointed in a few seconds, but hopefully she would have learned a valuable lesson.

"I can wish for anything?" the girl asked.

"Yes, anything."

"Anything, anything?"

Melody rolled her eyes.

"Yes! Now get on with it."

The girl inhaled deeply and puffed her chest out. Then she yelled, much louder than necessary, since Melody was standing right next to her: "Then I wish that all my dreams come true!"

Silence stretched as Melody and the child stared at each other. Melody was about to tell the brat about the futility of grandiose "wishes upon a star", when she noticed an almost painful tingling at the back of her head. Her wrists burned as if shackled in heavy iron cuffs, and her feet lifted a tiny bit off the ground. Her eyes went briefly dark, then there was an explosion of stars and she could see again.

The silence stretched longer. Then it was pierced by a strange hissing sound, almost like a very upset, enormous cat. And growls. And the type of horrendous slurping noises that meant nothing good. The girl's eyes widened in shock as she looked past Melody's hip.

"Oh no," the girl breathed in pure terror.

Melody whirled around. From everywhere, the trees, the bushes, the very earth, crawled flickering dark creatures with too many teeth, too many eyes, and too many claws. They all had their fiery gazes set on the girl, drawing ever closer.

"Jennyyyyyyyyy..." they chorused, a low and guttural sound. "You can't hide from us, Jennyyyyy..."

"Nooooo!"

The girl screamed and ran as fast as her little legs would carry her — and after a few moments, so did everyone else in the park. The growling from the terrors mixed with the screams of horrified people running from the monsters that lived in a little girl's head.

Melody stared after them for a while, then shrugged.

"I guess that takes care of that," she said to herself. "All her dreams came true, including her nightmares."

...

It took Melody a while to locate a fairy circle, but she eventually found a ring of mushrooms too orderly to be coincidence. She sat down cross-legged in the middle and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she expected to be back in fairyland, or at least to see a door to her home. Instead, everything looked exactly the same, only the air outside the circle was blurry, as if too much heat was rising from the ground. Then the area inside the circle went suddenly dark, as if tinted in the depths of a starless night.

"Hello?" she asked into the darkness.

Her voice echoed from unseen corners.

"I'd like to come home now."

A sharp voice cut through her own echo.

"You can't come home, Melody."

She recognized one of the elders from the High Court, even though she couldn't see anything on the other end of the circle. The words hit her like a slap.

"What? Why?! I granted that girl's wish!" Melody shouted.

"You granted no wish," the voice scoffed, disappointment stinging with every word. "You granted a curse."

Melody's hands curled into fists. She was a fairy who gives out curses? She didn't want to give humans anything at all!

"But, when can I come home?"

Her question was met with silence.

"Hello? I want to go home!" Melody was no longer able to conceal the pleading tone in her voice. "Why doesn't this stupid fairy circle work?!"

When the elder answered, it was barely a whisper.

"You can only come home when you've granted a wish, Melody."

"And how am I supposed to do that when all I can hand out are curses?" Tears were streaming down her face, her mouth a grimace of fear and anger. "I never wanted to be here in the first place!"

"You broke your magic when you wished to not grant wishes," the elder said from far away. "No one has ever done this before. But in order to come back home, the magic demands that you grant a true wish."

Another pause.

"I'm sorry, Melody. There's nothing we can do for you. The magic will let you come back when you've fulfilled your bargain."

The last words were barely audible, and Melody felt the connection fade.

"No! Wait!"

Like a flash of lightning, the darkness vanished, and she was sitting in bright sunshine amidst dozens of mushrooms.



Two decades later, Melody sat in a crowded subway on Halloween. She wasn't heading anywhere, she simply rode the train back and forth, enjoying the scary and silly costumes all around her. It was as close as humans got to the lavish masquerade balls back at home, and like every year, Melody was in costume as well. As a fairy.

The cheap dress ended just above her knees and vaguely resembled a large green leaf made of plastic. Two strap-on wings in translucent pink moved in time with her own, but subtle enough that no one paid much attention. A fake tiara adorned her plain hair, and she held a wooden staff with a white star at the top in her hand.

The only item that was not part of her costume were the bulky, noise-canceling headphones over her ears.

As station after station swooped past outside the windows, people got on and off, most of them parents with their children either high on the sugar they already consumed, or twitchy because they couldn't wait to consume their weight in candy.

One of these kids, a girl around eight years old, sat opposite Melody in the swaying cart, eyes fixed on her since she and her mother got on two stations ago. She wore a dark, fake superhero suit with a cape in the shape of bat wings and a crooked top hat that was clearly too big for her. Melody tried her best to ignore her, but glanced at the kid every now and then, using her best scowl to dissuade her from staring further. During one of those glances, the girl's mouth moved, then a pause, and then again. Melody sighed and held one ear piece away from her ear.

"What?" she asked in the unfriendliest tone she could muster.

"Are you a fairy?" the girl repeated her question.

"Do I look like one?" Melody shot back.

The girl bent her head to one side.

"A little bit, but you don't look like a happy fairy. Do you make people's wishes come true? Can I get a wish?"

Melody barked a sad laugh.

"No, kid, you wouldn't want the type of wishes I grant," she replied. "I'm a fairy who gives out curses."

Something about the girl's pitiful expression made Melody carry on.

"I made a mistake a long time ago," she said. "I thought I was being smart, that it was the best thing I ever did, but it turns out it was the opposite. So no, I can't make anyone's wishes come true and I can't make anyone happy. Not even myself."

The girl looked thoughtful for a moment, then she said, "I wish—"

Melody gasped in horror, but the girl spoke too fast. "I wish you were a real fairy who can make wishes come true and make people happy!"

A wave of magic swept through the subway cart like a tsunami, unnoticed by any humans around her, but ruffling Melody's hair, dress, wings, and almost knocking her out of her seat. A tiny lock of the girl's hair seemed to blow in a hidden breeze. Looking down at her human form, Melody noticed she glowed, her fingers and toes tingling like after a long day spent in the sun. Her real wings unfurled, causing the fake ones to split at the seams and fall away. Everything about and around her suddenly seemed warmer, more colorful, as if a dark veil had lifted.

Melody smiled as she felt the magic course through her veins again, *good* magic. She looked at the girl, who smiled back at her with bright eyes, as if she really saw her. And maybe she did.

"Thank you," Melody said.

She could finally go home. But first...

"Now it's your turn to wish for something for yourself," she said to the girl. "What should it be?"

Without a second's hesitation, the girl blurted out: "A puppy!"

Melody's smile turned into a grin. "As you wish..."

S.J.C. Schreiber (she/they) writes magical stories where fantasy collides with reality. She lives with her cats, horses, and a menagerie of mythical creatures in Denmark. Her work appears in various magazines and anthologies, self-published ebooks, and was shortlisted and longlisted in the Furious Fiction Contest by the Australian Writers' Centre.



# Our “Adventure of a Lifetime”

by Alan Vincent Michaels



“Dave, I hope we can make our flight,” Alie subvocalized over our private comm, as she, I, and our twins entered the departure terminal at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. It was at the stroke of seven A.M. and the massive lines at the PSA Security Checkpoints made it feel like we were on the streets during Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

“We’re two hours early,” I subbed back, smiling. “We’ll be fine. I submitted the check-in documents for us. We’re using Horizon-PreCheck this time, and all our biometric tags are on everything in our carry-ons, even Eileen and Dylan’s protein bars. It’ll be a breeze. Don’t worry.”

“Famous last words, love,” subbed Alie.

I thought I saw a twinkling light in her left eye as she smiled. I wondered if she had splurged on an augment. That thought faded as we entered the security area, and then the line abruptly stopped moving.

“Great,” Alie subbed. “Let’s hope it’s not like our trip to Italy. I can’t imagine how long the screening would have taken if Dylan and Eileen had been with us.”

“Yeah, Italy and Rome were a cluster.”

I looked at my kids staring down at their pad screens intently, as if it is their entire world. Maybe it is.

“We’re going tropical this time,” Alie subbed. “Cancun, baby. An all-inclusive for week, with a complete activities package for the twins. Vacations for all of us. And Dylan’s taking a shuttle on Wednesday to see Chichén Itzá. I wonder how much the all-inclusive has changed since our honeymoon.”

Alie grabbed my hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

“We’re going to make this our ‘adventure of a lifetime,’” Alie subbed. “I also hope it will be for the twins, too. My bio-implant still says with a 99.95% certainty that’s where they were conceived. You haven’t told them that, right?”

“No! Of course not. We agreed.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way until the right moment to tell them.”

The line started moving again, and I couldn’t shake the image in my mind’s eye of standing in those “cattle lines” to get on a Disney World ride. At least, we had air conditioning in this airport. We didn’t in Rome.

"Okay, gang," I subbed over our open channel with the twins. "Let's move left into the Horizon-PreCheck line."

They never looked up, but they complied as if each was an autonomous AI-bot.

I shook my head slowly, then complimented myself for getting PreCheck, as we entered a much shorter "cattle line." Then we stopped, again.

"What the—"

After what seemed like an interminable wait, which was only about seven minutes according to my comm, we were motioned by a bored-looking PSA agent to enter an open checkpoint.

We each raised our left forearms and the checkpoint agent scanned our embedded Citizen Passport Chips.

After each read, he said, "Cleared," and motioned us to enter the carry-on screening lines.

The Fates must have been favoring us, as all four of us lined up, side by side, in front of four empty bins. We looked at each other, then walked forward in lock-step, each removing our liquids pouch and our tech in a clear plastic sleeve, access codes clearly visible, and placing them in our respective bins. We were well-versed in "The PSA Procedure."

With PreCheck, we were allowed to keep our belts and shoes on, and Dylan could wear his hoodie. I thought his cotton pullover looked a bit outdated, but I got to see his face full on for the first time in quite a while. That was at least, something.

The bins rolled automatically along the conveyor tracks towards several, old-looking milli-wave scanners.

I waited for the green light, then stepped into the body scanner, did the awkward "moose antlers" stance, and exited when directed by another bored-looking agent.

Alie and I were cleared to approach the conveyor track to retrieve our bins. We collected our bags, then we watched as Eileen and Dylan exited the body scanner. In turn, they were each motioned to approach a not-bored-looking agent supervisor.

Alie and I joined our kids, and my mind began to race as the supervisor interrogated them.

*What was going on?* I wondered.

I drew a sharp, deep breath, which calmed me slightly. I knew better than to object or interfere. It would only worsen the situation.

"Miss Eileen Miller," the supervisor said aloud. It was not an inquiry. "You have two books on your pad that don't have proper school clearance. They are subjects that a student your age cannot possess or transport."

The supervisor paused, waiting for an update streaming to his comm.

"You can either let us delete them, or you can exit the security area and the airport."



"No way!" Eileen said sternly, her hands waving emphatically. "I'm on the way to Cancun with my family, and I need to study the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement for my Full US History exam right after I get back. We had to pay extra. My brother and I are in our school's advanced placement programs."

"I'm sorry, miss," replied the supervisor. "The issue is more serious, because your brother has a pad book about Ancient Mesopotamia, which became the country of Iraq, whose status remains in direct conflict with the Patriot Security Administration's American Exceptionalism Policy. It's all described clearly in your flight voucher rules."

The supervisor turned his head as he addressed my son.

"Mister Dylan Miller, you can either let us delete the book, or you can exit the security area and the airport."

"You sound like a robot," Dylan said through gritted teeth.

"Enough," I said softly, resting my hand on Dylan's shoulder.

"Sir, we weren't aware that clearance wasn't given for those books. It seems their school library may have been extorting us. I will definitely take this up with the school." I pointed to Dylan and Eileen's carry-ons. "We'll collect our stuff, our kids, and we'll leave the airport."

"Thank you, Mister David Miller, for complying with air travel policy. Your checked bags have been sent to the Patriot Airlines curbside security check-in. Your Cancun hotel has been notified of your cancelation, and all flight vouchers have been refunded. Lucky you had travel insurance. Good day."

I looked at Alie and I saw tears brewing in her eyes. I reached out for her hand, she took it, and we left the security area as a family. I sighed in relief.

"Goddamn it," said Alie, as we re-entered the departure terminal.

"My precious ears," I laugh. "The twins' swear filters are on. Not ours."

"Sorry, love. I'm just so frustrated at all this 'Security is for the Benefit and Safety of American Citizens' stuff on these signs. Our kids weren't terrorists. It was just a couple of history books! Jeez." Her tone sounded like an old-fashioned, snarky cartoon character's voice, and I visualized the character doing air quotes.

"Be careful, dear," I said wisely, instead of laughing. "We never know who's listening."

"Okay, gang!" I said, changing the subject. "Since we're already packed, let's go with 'Plan B.' What do you say? Shall we get a RoboUber and visit gramma in Florida? I sent her a comm flash, and she told me she just had the pool cleaned. What say y'all?"

"Yay," Dylan replied, a bit less sarcastically than usual. "It's not the same as going to see Kukulkan's Pyramid, but the pool sounds good. Can we order pizza?"

"Of course," Alie said. "Dear. Private."

I nodded as her expression soured.

"What's happening?" I subbed.

"This may be the last time we can all visit my mom. Damn our comms. You're right. They're always listening. I just received a flash the Florida PSA passed a new state law. They're starting to build road checkpoints all along the border from Alabama to Georgia. If you thought the lines here were long..."

"Son of a—" I muttered loudly.

Dylan and Eileen turned their heads and looked at me quizzically.

"All right," Alie said aloud. "Who wants pizza?"

"Me!" the twins replied in perfect unison.

"Well then, let's go have pizza and a new adventure without flying," I open-subbed.

I smiled as the twins turned around and started walking quickly to the blue RoboUber van waiting for us, and my comm confirmed our gear had been loaded.

I touched Alie's hand, and we both knew, without sharing words or subs, that this would be our last trip. Anywhere.



## The Man on the Dark Side of the Moon

by D Bedell

### One

Pere Charone, a Watchkeeper of the Nullist Order, switched off his helmet lamp and stared at two points above the Luna horizon with a curiosity he had not felt for a long time. An unfamiliar light had appeared in a sector of space known to be empty for parsecs, forgotten in Creation, untouched by the Terran diaspora. There were no satellites or shuttles scheduled to pass in that quadrant and a Watchkeeper always knew the quotidian sky traffic of his post, especially on the Darkside of Luna where travel was infrequent. Usually only supply shuttles to the outposts scattered over the lunascape. He mused that it might be an uncharted comet coming into the System and scoffed at the idea of an eponymous legacy.

*Charone's Comet!*

He switched on his suit recorder and noted the time. Distance could be only a guess, but he judged that it was not interstellar, perhaps even in the System. He took multiple azimuths, altitude angles, and bearings to see if he could determine a track. The light's position remained steady in all his sights and he wondered what course it was keeping. Curiosity waned, however, as weariness waxed: He had been on the surface for several centarcs maintaining the post's aging Watch Sensor Array as he had for the last 15 megarcs that were woefully bereft of adventure and intrigue. As he turned to go back to his station pod, the light flared brighter and went out. Startled, Pere strained to see the absurd distance, convinced that it was not a natural object adrift: There was design and purpose in the unknown. He logged the event, riveted his eyes on the sky, and waited to see if the light reappeared, certain it was unique.

*In Nomine Nullus.*

Five arcs later the light flared and went out again, repeating every five arcs until Charone had witnessed nine flashes in the void. After the ninth, there was only darkness. After 15 arcs passed, he turned on his helmet lamp and walked back to his pod, turning every few steps to check for the light. He knew in his core that it was getting closer and quickened his pace to the airlock. Once inside the pod, he took off his gloves and helmet and considered what he had seen.

*Surely everyone saw it.*

Still in his exo-suit, he went to his console and aligned the WSA to the object bearing. He needed data to confirm his observation before reporting to the Senior Watch Officer. The SWO always demanded more data. Charone took a notebook from the console drawer and began to make notes of his discovery.

*Total time observation: Forty-five arcs. Four plus five is nine. Nine Flashes. Nine is three squared. Three plus exponent is five. The interval was five arcs. Five is Prime. Ø. Is that it?*

## Two

Charone was a native Lunan; he had been born to homesteaders in the Luna settlement during the colonial expansion era. His parents were indentured agri-techs who, like all Luna settlers, had traded a fixed period of servitude to the Luna Enterprise Administration for profit sharing, stock options, semi-private quarters, and communal meals. Long centarcs with his parents tending crop chambers under artificial sunlight convinced him life on Luna was a zero sum proposition. It was not the great adventure Terrans imagined.

Childhood and youth passed before Charone could make the required pilgrimage to Terra to claim the birthright extended to colonials born of Terran parents. Terran citizenship was mandatory for any chance to escape the agri-

chambers on Luna as Charone well knew. On arriving, he found Terra difficult, especially the gravity that no exercise regimen could mitigate for someone raised on Luna. Like most Lunans, he was tallish and slender with childlike muscles.

Terrans derisively called Lunans *Luna-tics*. It was the least offensive of the jibes he heard; Terrans universally believed that they were supporting Luna vacations for the lazy in the Leisure Enterprise Administration. Nostalgia for the family quarters in the agri-complex dismayed him and he floundered in petty Terran distractions whose glimmer dimmed with experience. He pined for a purpose he did not know.

He found relief in The Watch, an unexpected calm in the chaos of Terra. In retrospect, he wondered if it was destiny or just coincidence and a good sales pitch from the recruiter. It was an inadvertent discovery as he was trudging in the unaccustomed gravity to a small food shop near the pilgrim hostel where he was staying. A voice interrupted his commiseration just as he reached the door.

"You're Lunan, my young friend," a slender older man in gray coveralls said.

Pere stopped.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Your walk. Same one I had ten megarcys ago."

"You're Lunan?"

"Yep. Just like you. Been here long enough to still hate it."

Pere snorted.

"See anything here you like?" the man asked.

"Not really."

"Here for the birthright?"

"Yes."

"Want to do something with it?"

Pere was wary. He had heard of birthright scams and more.

"Like what."

"See the System and get good pay for the adventure."

Pere gauged his interest against his skepticism.

"C'mon in," the man said as he opened the food shop door and motioned him inside. "I'm buyin'."

The Watch needed novitiates and Charone cautiously embraced the man's sense of commitment to his Brotherhood. Watchkeepers were in demand throughout the System as Terra strained to support fledgling colonies that included orbital enclaves. The profession was old, and its frontier tradition was valued in the exo-sphere as the human lebensraum flexed beyond Terra and Luna. It seemed ideal to Pere — a life of adventure and reward beyond Terra and its captive. He agreed to the apprenticeship with his handshake.

## Three

Two centarcs after checking out of the hostel, Charone was on a train to New Mexico headed for a Watch desert compound to begin his craft instruction. The process was three megarcs, two as a Novice under-instruction followed by an in-service megarc as a Brother before ordination as a Watchkeeper. The regimen was strict and Pere fervently immersed himself in its order. Physical training taxed him until he developed his Terran muscles and became lean and strong with conscious precision in his movements. He became competent in skills ranging from making friction fires with a bow drill to engineering systems likely to be encountered in Watch postings. Flight and exo-suit drills were exhilarating while principles of conflict and armory training sobered him to a skeptical view of the System. He particularly enjoyed the mathematical aspects of the trade and discovered a modest talent for seeing patterns that revealed truths beyond the digits that eluded others. Long vigils and watches in the desert taught him that Nature was indifferent even to itself.

At the end of his third year, Charone was approached by an unfamiliar Brother who proffered a card to him. He took the card quizzically and saw it was imprinted only with a symbol: Ø.

"We have watched you, Brother," the Watchkeeper said.

"Why."

"You have the Null in you."

## Four

The data from the WSA did not reveal the secret of the now steady light plummeting into the System. He did not know yet when the light reignited, but he would check the video archive for a time-stamp to add to his notes. Charone was frustrated, but hesitated to expose his position. Watch protocol required every unknown to be considered hostile until otherwise proven. The SWO disapproved of broadcasts into space in all but extreme necessity, but Charone knew he would still be chided for a sparse report. He decided to wait for more definitive data. In the interim, he watched the light and took bearings he noted in his field book. He would cipher the numbers to see what would be revealed by the machinations.

Charone was stunned. The light's bearing changed in a regular pattern implying intelligence and maneuverability. The object track was predictable. Charone's bearings confirmed it. It implied multiple possibilities: Remote device; evasion; search; programmed maneuver; mayday course. The mayday option intrigued Charone. He wondered if the object was running from something.

*Who from what? To where from where?*

Spectrum analysis indicated the object was approaching. He debated on whether to notify the SWO with three days of visual bearings and the spectrum data. The answer was Yes and No.

*Should be. Maybe. Risky.*

Charone decided to consult the numbers in the data for direction. The bearings spanned an arc of 45 degrees, half a right angle.

*Four plus five equals nine. Nine is three squared. Three plus exponent is five. Prime.*  
Ø.

*Destiny!*

The SWO noted he was the last Watchkeeper to report and wondered effusively why Charone waited so long, waxing eloquent on the difference between duty and delusion.

## **Five**

Charone's first assignment after Ordination was the Luna Destiny Mission, a massive project in cislunar space to construct a multi-generational habitat with exo-System colonist capability. The only drawback to the billet was that it was based on Luna with semi-private quarters and communal meals. Despite the location, it was a good posting for a new Watchkeeper and Null novitiate. He was determined to fulfill his Watch duties with alacrity and pursue his Null with diligence.

The complexity of the support operation was a revelation to Charone whose only experience with the LEA was confined to the agri-chambers. He was assigned to inventory and shipping security for the staging area on Luna, hectares of equipment and materials waiting to be shuttled to the craft for fitting. The tasks were challenging and unique in how they had to be accomplished: Watchkeepers were not allowed on the craft during construction and would not join it as crew members at commissioning. It was an unprecedented occurrence stemming from a boisterous faction within the LEA objecting to the Watch Protocol that presumed hostility in exo-encounters. The alternative varied in narrative from neutrality to beneficence. It was not a protocol Watchkeepers would abandon while considering it perilous to System security. The LEA took no note of the Watchkeeper objections. The Nullists thought it a grave mistake to assume anything benign; the Universe was indifferent in its order.

The craft design intrigued Charone: Three concentric rings christened Alpha, Beta, and Omega, outboard to inboard, were connected by three equidistant spokes around a central hub at a 120-degree angle. Alpha, the outermost ring with a 400-meter diameter, contained environmental support systems and agri-chambers in addition to communal quarters for Alpha personnel. Beta, the middle ring at 300 meters diameter, housed technicians and supplies for maintaining support and

propulsion systems. Beta quarters were semi-private, but otherwise mirrored the Alpha ring. The innermost ring, Omega, 100 meters across, was the command and control domain and the exclusive province of Destiny personnel designated for any exo-System encounter. The space between Beta and Omega rings provided for docking and staging operations of the craft. Each ring was divided into three self-contained sections with distributed quarters and systems to mitigate casualties and damage in case of a catastrophic event. The sections also could be jettisoned in emergency or detached to provide a free standing habitat.

The hub housed the quantum systems that coordinated activity across the rings and between sections. It also contained an embryo repository should conventional procreation fail to produce enough progeny to replace the tiered crew. Maintaining an adequate population was crucial to the exo-System mission; even with constant nuclear acceleration the original crew and first generations would get only closer to the stars of their descendants. The embryos would be programmed and birthed in their assigned station to meet mission needs.

Pere looked at the numbers and wrote them in his Null Log:

*One hundred twenty degrees. One plus two plus zero is three, Prime. Three hundred sixty degrees. Three plus six plus zero is nine. Nine is three squared. Three plus exponent is five. Prime. Ø.*

In addition to his Watch duties, Charone immersed himself in the pursuit of the Null Hypothesis, the fundamental precept of the indifferent universe of the Nullist Brotherhood. The Null precision of the answer to every question being Yes and No simultaneously reduced to transcendental equations obsessed him. He practiced the mantra in every duty believing ritual had its own meaning in the Null: Null is Function, Null is Emptiness, Emptiness is Perfection, I will fill my Null with Perfection. He reduced the invocation to a logic set:

*Null = {F<sub>x</sub>}.*

*{F<sub>x</sub>} = Emptiness.*

*Emptiness = Perfection.*

*I will fill my {F<sub>x</sub>} with Perfection.*

It was enough to believe in the absence of revelation.

## Six

Every Watchkeeper turned eyes to the silent prodigal, wary of mute things coming from the void unannounced and unexpected. Destiny had left the System and gone dark as planned to demonstrate that exo-System enclaves were independently viable without support from Terra or Luna. Its departure was as permanent as death for those aboard; they would not see Luna or Terra again and their progeny would never see them. Charone had watched the craft glimmer until it

passed out of the System with only a radiation trail to mark its passage. Its return was unexpected and put the LEA into a frenzy of accusation and worry. Speculation and conspiracy theories started on Terra adding to the tension with Luna.

Terran governments demanded answers from the LEA notwithstanding that no one even knew the question. Charone watched the horizon and knew the answer was Yes and No to whatever had happened. It was in the Null, a vindication for the Watch exo-contact protocol and a confirmation of the Null Hypothesis to the Nullists. Murmurs that it would not have happened if the Watch had been aboard began to circulate on Luna and the LEA began to notice. The Watch quietly began to ready its Armory and waited. The belief that Terra had made a mistake so long ago in sending a map to the System into the Universe was still strong among the Brothers.

After the Destiny left cislunar space and work crews dispersed to other projects or back to the Luna complexes to resume their indentured duties, Charone, weary of communal living, requested and received permission to take the Vow of Isolation. He imagined being posted to a coveted System Watch Station to monitor asteroids, derelict satellites, and other System debris for potential hazard and possible salvage or mining. The SWS could be a lucrative posting; Watchkeepers received a share of salvage proceeds and mining royalties. Some Watchkeepers became wealthy enough to support their own conclaves for novices. It was a great disappointment that the posting was to Luna Darkside maintaining an obsolete array.

The malaise did not last. Charone embraced the isolation and developed his routine around his duties and the study of Null. His centarcs were filled with meditation and watches to fill his emptiness with perfection on the unchanging lunascape. He wondered why he was never so empty as when he was filled.

## **Seven**

Optical images of Destiny seared across Luna and Terra like a solar flare. Every telescope in the System was turned to it: The pride of the LEA was hurtling toward Terra as a battered hulk of unknown salvageability, possibly with few, if any, survivors. One section of each ring was completely gone with only twisted, blackened shards remaining as testament to the shearing. The missing sections were adjacent to each other indicating a force applied on the Alpha ring had penetrated to the Omega ring while obliterating the Beta section between. The hub did not appear to be damaged and the consensus of the Watch was that the vessel was still under command and control but to an unknown level. Its silence and refusal or inability to answer a hail was worrisome; the LEA desperately made plans for a rescue expedition. The restrictions on Watch personnel vanished in the turmoil despite the protests of the LEA faction wanting the prohibition to remain in effect.



Charone bent over his console and looked for a pattern in the images. He surmised that a third of the crew had likely perished in the event. The force required was substantial and yet, curiously, precise. There was no collateral damage to the remaining sections.

*Jettison?*

He began to see the pattern: It was not an accidental or natural event; precision meant purpose. Pere took out his Nullist Log.

*One hundred twenty degrees gone. One plus two plus zero is three. Prime. Ø. Two hundred forty degrees left. Two plus four plus zero is six. Six is two times three. Prime. Prime. Ø. Ø.*

## **Eight**

He volunteered for the rescue mission, eager for the comradeship and the adventure so lacking on Darkside: It never left Luna. A three-word signal from Destiny was received making the expedition irrelevant: SEND THE WATCH. It was a resounding rebuke to the LEA and one that silenced any opposition to a Watch sortie in lieu of a rescue.

The number of Watchkeepers volunteering for the foray overwhelmed the SWO. The mission was urgent and it was decided that a lottery would be used to allocate berths instead of lengthy screening for skills applicable to theoretical situations. Watchkeeper ordination was deemed the necessary qualification and the SWO was confident any would at least suffice as an expendable scout to Destiny. Charone volunteered again and was selected in the drawing to the SWO's chagrin.

Elated, Pere began to prepare himself for what he was certain would be a life-changing event. He checked and rechecked his armory between duties and observations on the surface, immersed in Null meditations increasingly parsed to their essence.

*Three words. Three. Prime. Ø. Destiny.*

The mission mounted up in less than 24 centarcs and Charone found it surprisingly uncomfortable to be with a relatively small number of Brothers after his years keeping the Vow of Isolation. Camaraderie proved nettlesome. He found it peculiarly difficult to engage in anything but necessary communication related to the mission; the frustrations of communal living came back to him. In their turn, the other Watchkeepers found it difficult to understand his whispered musings and wondered if the lottery had been a good idea or a liability. Genuine fervor for the mission, however, persuaded the Brothers and the SWO that Charone would fulfill his duty and hold fast to it.

There was no fanfare when the sortie was launched. Destiny was inside Jupiter's orbit and appeared to be slowing, extending the calculated rendezvous time to a

window of two to three megarcs for the closest point of approach. The modified cargo shuttle carrying the Watch was incapable of a faster flight time no matter the closing speed of Destiny. The time was not lost on Charone and he made a note in his Null Log: *Two. Prime. Null. Ø. Three. Same. Two plus three is five. Prime. Ø. Destiny.*

## Nine

One megarc into the sortie, Charone took the lookout watch in his regular rotation. He did not mind the lookout watch: It was a chance for some measure of the solitude he sorely missed. It was also a chance for Null observations in the stars.

Destiny had gone into orbit around Jupiter among the moons in its capture. It was a maneuver that puzzled the Brothers; it had been assumed that the Destiny was coming to rendezvous, but it now appeared that it had little, if any, interest in returning to Luna. Speculation among the Brothers was that either it had come back to the System for refitting, but still intended to fulfill its exo-system charter, or it was hiding. There had not been any contact since the three-word missive despite near constant hails from the LEA against Watch advice. The Brothers matched Destiny's silence and eschewed any attempts at contact, becoming grimmer and more resolute in the interim as the LEA floundered.

Charone had been on watch for only five arcs when a light suddenly appeared two points above Jupiter in Destiny's trajectory and flashed brighter before becoming steady.

*Charone's comet! In Nomine Nullus!*



# Robots are a Girl'S Best Friend

by Kayleigh Kitt



"Madam." Albert glides almost efficiently behind the counter, serving a child's portion of raspberry ripple gelato in a vintage teacup, baby-pink roses ringing the rim — an unchipped one.

"Thanks, Albert."

I swipe my wrist over the faded e-reader screen in his tarnished grip before my eyes drift to diamond pin-pricks nestling in the black velvet behind concave windows.

A metallic whine allows his elbow to drop, so he can hook the device onto his belt.

"Why does Madam put herself through this every day?"

It's meant to be a muttered rhetorical question, framed for himself.

"I'll stop eating my feelings when they don't taste like ice cream." I say, waving the spoon. "Maybe."

If he were human, he'd sniff.

He swivels, rolling to serve other customers, his casters skimming the floor plate joints. I grin because even now he looks as if he hiccupped.

There's a sugary tartness to the ice cream, which even I know is contradictory in itself. And sucking my rimed teeth, I search for the delicate floral taste of the red berry with its woody notes. Reality is red food colouring and synthetic additives. A girl can dream.

"Sir," he says at the farthest end of the enamel-chipped counter.

The guy shifts his weight on the apple-green stool, the wonky one. My age group rarely visits Ice in the Sky twice. Waves of raven hair hide his face and his faded denim cuff is rolled back, revealing a slash of silver.

Observing the shade of gelato he's ordered, it's key-lime delight. A flavour I wouldn't bother repeating. And judging by his expression a mouthful later, neither will he. There's reluctant chewing.

After licking my spoon, followed by the teacup when no one is looking, I retrieve a miniature oilcan and a precious poly-bag of golden springs from my toolbox. One of Albert's chrome eyelids is now half-closed as he serves two children.

On his return, I apply oil to the eyelid, adjust a screw and replace a spring in his shoulder. That should do it. For now, at least.

"Thank you, Madam." Both his eyelids shutter and open smoothly.

"I still remember the day you and your sister first came to Ice in the Sky," Albert reminisces, retrieving and tapping the e-reader screen before rotating it.

And there we are. My sister's long braid swishes as she turns and laughs at me. I never tire of the replay, or watching us eat raspberry ripple.

"Wait, no," I cry as Albert stops the recording early, stowing it on his belt, and there's a scraping noise. The guy with the dark hair from the other end of the bar slides an intricately hammered silver bracelet across the tarnished surface.

"This is my sister's. Where did you get it?" I exclaim, snatching up the last gift I ever gave her.

"Sevyn sent me to collect you, Cali," he says neutrally and introduces himself as Rhett.

Before I can back away, one of Albert's skeletal hands wraps tightly around my wrist. "You must go Cali. Be safe. He's telling the truth."

I look between them, stranger and robot, and my heart cinches.

"Absolutely not," I splutter mutinously, hours later.

My gaze latches onto two jet-coloured bands warming on Rhett's palm, while I fiddle with the unravelling hem of my washed-out mandarin hoodie.

I bite my lip. He's offering me a way off the space hub that's been my home for the last fifteen years and a reunion with my sister.

*BRRR-BRRRR.*

Dashing to the pod's intercom, I have another visitor.

"Sir." Albert rolls into the room, a dress carrier looped over one arm.

"Albert," I squawk. "Shouldn't you be at Ice in the Sky?" I refer to the ice cream parlour.

"Sir has engaged me," Albert tries mollifying, as his arm sweeps out.

"Him?" I squeak, pointing at Rett, whose tattered denim cuffs and rip in his vest colour my opinion.

"Appearances can be deceptive, Madam." Albert makes a clicking noise. One of his phalange joints has stuck, leaving him displaying a universal rude gesture towards Rhett.

"Useless," Albert mutters.

I snigger, snagging a screwdriver from a countertop to make a small adjustment. There's a grinding sound.

"Thank you, Madam." He waggles his metallic digits.

Hours later, my pod door swishes back.

I gasp.

Rhett's oiled his hair. He's wearing a royal-blue close-fitting tailored jumpsuit tucked into the rim of shiny boots. Paired with a three-quarter length belted jacket with silver piping, the high collar skims the nape of his neck.

His eyes drift up and down.

My cheeks heat.

The silver body-con dress with its thigh-length split would never have been my choice. My only comfort is the warm leggings underneath and flat boots, which I fought Albert for.

"Best not to fidget, Madam," Albert admonishes.

Pockets can never be too large. A girl needs to be able to stow at least two sizes of screwdrivers and pliers, along with cake and nice rocks to trade.

"These pockets are too small," I grumble, my heart sinking to my knees as Albert confiscates the contents.

Rhett slides a sheet of paper across the compact moulded table. Hesitating, I sign a name returning the pen before he adds his signature. Dipping into his pocket, he takes out two rings, slipping the more delicate onyx circle with several pin-headed faded pink diamonds onto my finger. With trembling fingers, I return the gesture with the larger band.

"Stand taller," he instructs. "We have social standing and a servant."

"Albert. You're coming with us?" I moisten my lips.

"Yes, Madam."

My shoulders drop, and my lips threaten to curl up.

"We'll take the shuttle at the end of the evening with the other guests," Rhett explains. He scans my face. "Our papers are in order. However, we need to be convincing."

"As what?" I demand.

He leans forward, tilting my chin up. Fearing he's going to kiss me, I rear back, hitting a cabinet, spilling the contents with a clatter to the floor panels. As I bend to retrieve a spanner, hex key, a pipe cutter and the last poly-bag of golden springs, Rhett's hand fastens around my arm.

"Albert," he says.

"Allow me, Madam." Albert has already rolled to the scattered items on the floor.

A few minutes later, we walk down the hallway, Albert gliding almost smoothly ahead of us.

The atrium doors hiss open. Ribbons of lamps hang from overhead gantries and trundling waiters in signature black and white circle with trays of bite-size canapés or crystal flutes.

"Try not to look bored," Rhett hisses through his snowy teeth and I turn my head to smile vacuously at him, letting my tamed ashy-blond curls cascade forward over my shoulder.

"Lord and Lady Quintana from the Rontar sector of Tasses Gamma," the steward announces, standing sentry in his gun-metal grey vest and three discrete epaulette buttons.

All heads turn towards us.

"You're Lord and Lady Quintana, from Rontar. A sector of Tasses Gamma," says a man with dangerously shaped eyebrows approaching us. "Thought you'd be older."

Rhett's still trapping my hand in his elbow, while my traitorous heart's thundering in my mouth, tongue adhering to my palette.

Taking two flutes of double distilled water from a silver platter, I pass one to Rhett. Accepting with a smile, he takes a sip.

The man and Rhett exchange pleasantries about mining nitinol in Tasses Gamma. Vast quantities, it appears.

Rhett selects a mini-pancake loaded with wafer-thin cherry-red slices topped with an unsullied pearl and primary green leaf. Copying, I pop the tiny meal into my mouth. Vibrant flavours explode on my tongue, sweet and tangy, with the smooth texture of the pearl adding a buttery quality, finally hitting the menthol, bitter notes of the green. I've never tasted anything so — fresh.

As our companion snatches another hors d'oeuvre from a server-bot, inhaling it, Rhett mutters over the scribed rim of his glass, before breaking into a smile.

"Slow down." He brushes his sleeve lightly.

"I'm nervous," I whisper, then start, resting the empty flute on a tray. Unlike Albert, the server bot's mechanisms are suspiciously silent.

The shuttle leaves in thirty minutes. Then I'm on my way to a reunion with my sister.

Reality catches up and I fidget, needing to pee for the third time in an hour, regretting the choice of thick leggings and flat boots under the form-fitting dress. It'll be a struggle in the facilities.

On my way back from the facilities and spy Albert in the corridor.

"There you are, Albert. Are you?" I sputter, my lips twitching into a smile, as he rocks on his wheels, two inches to the left then to the right, while his mechanical arms pendulum in the opposite direction.

"No Madam. I am not flossing, my wheel is stuck," he says suddenly scissoring his lips several times.

Giving him a gentle hip butt, he glides two feet away before rolling back on the same trajectory.

"Thank you, Madam."

Behind us, a uniformed man with a magnificent handlebar moustache strides by from the men's room, chuckling softly.

My cheeks heat as I study my boots, my ashy-blond fringe hiding my face. He thankfully doesn't linger.

Back in the atrium, Rhett turns by the bar, his hand wrapped around a glass with a splash of amber in the bottom. The overwhelming signature aroma is sour notes of cherry, apples and even coffee. Or at least how I'd imagine natural coffee to smell.

*TING-TING.*

All faces turn to the entrance doors as the steward taps a giant luminescent scapolite staff on the floor plates, his three discrete gun-metal epaulette buttons wobbling.

"The High Admiral Lord Quintana from the Rontar sector of Tasses Gamma," he announces.

Glancing at Rhett, his eyes widen, his mouth uttering a litany of swear words as he takes my elbow trying to melt away in the crowd.

The uniformed man with the chestnut tache from earlier strides into the room.

The High Admiral's eyes collide with mine.

My throat bobs wildly.

We try to run.

Moments later, we're in the shuttle with the High Admiral Lord Quintana, flanked by several high-ranking guards, our hands bound; mine in front of my body, Rhett's behind.

I glance at Rhett. They look alike, the High Admiral and his son, with similar high foreheads and identical noses.

This was not part of the plan. And we're being escorted to a holding cell. Impersonating a High Admiral has consequences.

Turns out rock bottom has a cellar.

Marching onto the High Admiral's ship, Rhett, who's a couple of steps ahead stumbles and I suddenly find a blade in my fingers. In a flash, and of their own volition my fingers cut Rhett's bonds. And with the element of surprise, he overpowers a guard, stealing a weapon.

*PAH-PAH-PAH-PAH.*

Three stunned guards plus the High Admiral in the time it took to get my hands free. My heart thunders loudly in my ears.

And then we run. At least I follow Rhett, blindly, the ribbed panel plates prominent under my soles.

We're suddenly in a sky pod. Rhett stabs at the control panel with his fingertips with seeming precision.

The safety doors glide shut and the release mechanism mechanically whines to the howl of the alarm.

Skating forward from the landing platform, the pod launches into the velvety sky.

Rhett punches at the console, then leans back in his seat. "You can come out now."

"Thank you, sir." There's a whirring noise and a click before his chrome body enters the compact flight deck.

"Albert!" I can't help but squeeze his arm.

"Now Madam, let's not get too excited," he replies. "Keep that for when you're reunited with Sevyn."

He points through the front shield at a starship that's appeared from nowhere.





# SciFanSat News

## The Bartleby B. Boar



## Nomination

goes to

**Corina Morera**

for their work

**A Coin for Freedom**



## 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

