

# PROBE

179



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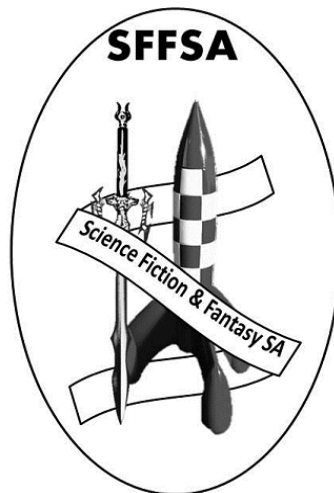
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# Editorial

# Gail

As we rapidly approach the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of SFFSA I have been working on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of PROBE, which will be the next issue –number 180. There are not a lot of zines out there which have got to Issue 180 and I suspect that we are probably the only clubzine to do so.

I have received letters from overseas members and friends mostly and pictures from most people that I have asked. I think it will be very interesting to see what the people who have filled the pages of PROBE over the years actually look like. It seems to me that SF Fans don't



have greenish skin or tentacles, or look in any other way different to fans of any other genre – pity somehow.

This issue has the winner and second placed story from the Nova Short Story competition of 2018. It also has one of the Top Ten stories printed. Since we increased the total allowable length of the entries it has now not been possible to put in the top three stories so that the third placed story, "The Peace Rose" by Patrick Coyne will be held over until PROBE 181, as 180 will not contain stories from Nova 2018.

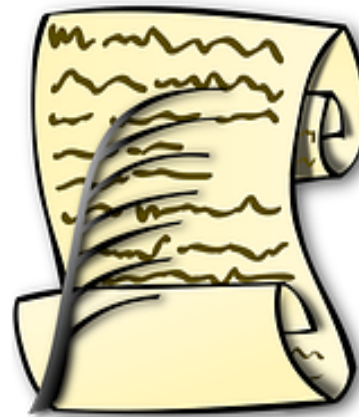
The full report from the final judge of Nova 2018, Allyson Kreuter is also printed in this issue and it interesting to read her comments. More so as they come from a Professor of English and one of the objectives of the Nova competition has always been to encourage the writing of Science Fiction, and later Fantasy as well. It just seems a pity to me that the number of entrants in the competition has declined although I do think that the quality of the writing is increasing in general.

I was watching my 5-year-old grandson watching U-tube this morning. He is a Spider Man fan and it really surprised me to see how many versions of the Peter Parker story there are and all of this in animation. Good "Spideys", bad "Spidey's" and all sorts in between. Makes me wonder if I, whom as a child was never exposed to T.V. or computers, as we had neither until I was almost an adult, would have grown up with a different appreciation of Science Fiction and Fantasy. I rather think that the printed word to which I was exposed helped me to develop my imagination. I had to visualize all of the amazing things I read about and was not exposed to anyone else's ideas. Interesting, but no way of knowing.

## Chairman's Note

## Andrew Jamieson

Would you believe this is the 50th year that the club has been active? Wow, Fifty Years! I am not even that old, hehe. However, I do believe that my father, Ian Jamieson, is one of the oldest members and has been around since almost the beginning of the club (I don't recall the exact details, but something like that, and even if I'm wrong, you can always check with him since he is still a member of the club!). What that basically means is that you could say I have been a member of the club for my entire life. Not that I recall anything of the first years I was a "member", what being a baby and all. Maybe I should ask my parents what it was like at the time. Did they take me to meetings and I would hear the discussions of all strange things science fiction and fantasy related even as an infant? Did I get to watch really old movies on a tape reel



played through a projector? It does make me wonder. Was that the start of my great interest into science fiction and fantasy? What about my sister? She is three years older than myself, which would still make her also a full time member from when she was born... yikes, 50 years really is a long time. I wonder what her thoughts are about the club, after all she is also still a member. It is a bit of an in-joke that we have thought about changing the club name to the Jamieson club considering my dad married another very long time member Gail Brunette, and so now there are four Jamieson's on the committee! Our family obviously really does love our science fiction and fantasy.

So we are planning to do a few special things this year, mostly related to an expanded Probe and a trophy for the Short Story Competition. The 50th Probe looks like it is going to be a big one, with a lot of content from a lot of different people, especially a lot of the older members, many of whom may not have kept in touch. If you want to add anything yourself please feel free to send whatever it is you want to the Probe editor, I am sure she will appreciate it. Just hurry, the June Probe will be the 50th anniversary issue so you only have a couple of months left. As for the Short Story Competition, we happened to find a nice, large trophy lying around, which happens to actually be for the competition, so we thought it would make a nice addition to the prize money to give our winner this year as well.

I think the biggest difference I can see about the club now, and the club almost 50 years ago, are the number of members. My dad recalls holding events and not having enough places for people to sit. Nowadays, that volume of members just isn't there anymore, but a LOT changes in 50 years. Back then, science fiction and fantasy were not nearly as commonplace and ubiquitous as they are nowadays. You can find something related almost everywhere, every second TV series, so many movies, so many books, in computer games, etc. etc. With that level of immersion, there are just fewer reasons for people to find something science fiction related which is it just a click away. I have already written before about why I believe our membership has declined so much, I guess it is just



the nature of our current times.

Still, many years later and we are about to have our 50th anniversary, just awesome. For those of us who are still around after so many years, thank you very much, our core members are why we still do what we do. See you in the next 50 years!

Cheers

Andrew

## Nova 2018

All of the stories entered into Nova 2018 were prejudged by up to 6 of the members of SFFSA and the top 10 stories were given to Professor Alyson Kreuter from the English Department of UNISA.

The results of Nova 2018 were announced and read at our AGM yesterday. Prof Alyson Kreuter of Unisa was the final judge for Nova 2018. The total prize value was R3500, co-sponsored by our own Arthur Goldstuck of World Wide Worx fame. The results and prizes are:

First place The Nowhere Zone by Jaco van Hemert R2000

Second place Stowaway by Eben David November R1000

Third place The Peace Rose by Patrick Coyne R500

Highly recommended, in title order:

The Autopsy of Jane Doe by Gary Kuyper

Carte Blanche by Gary Kuyper

Guardrail by Eben David November

Professor Alyson Kreuter writes:

I would like to thank the authors and the SFFSA organizers and committee for the opportunity to evaluate and judge the Nova short story competition for 2018. The stories that made the top ten were varied and I appreciated the chance to engage with them.

The choice of the top three stories is as follows:

- 1) The Nowhere Zone
- 2) The Stowaway
- 3) The Peace Rose

Whilst I thought that *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* was interesting because it used a noir urban crime fantasy, the atmosphere and the less than rudimentary presence of the city was insufficient to place it in the top three. It was well-written, but the plot was just a tad too flimsy.

In general, the themes of the stories seem to revolve around Babylonian or other old scripts, Gods, spacecraft and some form of alien or intergalactic destructive forces or powerful aliens with supreme abilities. There are also intertextual references to other works of fiction and films, which are interesting, but not necessarily employed to reveal more in-depth insights into human relations to technology or ideas of otherness, embodiment, or the underlying drives that foment and animate human interactions and discourse. None of the stories were really aimed at an African or South African context and remained Eurocentric or employed alien life forms. The use of Indian or Arabic names in some of the stories does not reveal more than a cursory attempt at engagement outside of the Eurocentric. This is a pity as there is much current fantasy coming out of Africa that might provide an insight into how to write a short story with relevance to alternate perspectives and speculative ideas. There was a weakness in evoking well-developed characterisation, atmosphere and tonal ranges. Place, space and time seem aspects that the writers find hard to deploy and these are an integral part of most science fiction, fantasy and speculative fiction's narrative assisting in the development of the realities of the surrounding world, the atmosphere and the plot. Placement into a story requires a context or a basic foundational background and this sets the tone for the reader and allows for credence in the world being offered to them, and most of the stories lack a strong contextualisation. A short story is not a vignette, and it needs to be carefully crafted so that both atmosphere, place and plot are substantive. In order to achieve this, metaphoric language is a requirement and the employment of apt adjectives in order to evoke a sense of depth and force. Whilst it is obvious that the writers of the stories read fantasy, science fiction, speculative fiction and scientific non-fiction, it is also apparent that they perhaps pay little heed to the reading of short stories in these or other genres. Reading of short stories allows for an understanding of the development of character, atmosphere, space, place, temporality, within the confines of a limited number of pages or words.

## **Nova Short Story Competition 2018.**

Herewith my general observations per story and my choice of the top three stories:

**Carte Blanche:** This story is a little overblown in its descriptions particularly the opening paragraph. The constant use of ellipses to try and emphasize certain concepts is contrived. The dialogue is arch and attempts to be too cleverly amusing. The idea is interesting, but the characterisation is flimsy and the tone remains flat. It is more a vignette than a well-developed story with depth of content. The idea of a Carte Blanche, with its idea of whiteness, of a map, because in French this can mean a map without any features, as well as the idea of giving a free hand, could have been more developed by looking at the embodiment of the vampire and the skin of Finn the sailor. The opening attempts this, but is not tangible or developed sufficiently. A vampire is a very physical being, and blood is also very much a thing of embodiment, of life and of death. The idea of the virginal in the white, is rather tainted by the obvious bloodsucking proclivities and renders the female character very much an alien and monstrous other, an aspect that could have been more fruitfully explored.

**Guardrail:** a rather moralistic tale that decries space travel positing it as something against the Gods. It is a meld of Star Trek, ancient Greek mythology and old science. It attempts to be science fiction, but it lies between religion and mythology. The character development is rather anodyne, the plot is somewhat predictable and there remain some grammatical errors. The dialogue is rather colloquial and very much the same for each character, and the atmosphere is not sufficiently taut, nor is the sense of space and place. The overt moralism detracts from the story which becomes a lesson. Something of this nature requires slightly more nuanced use of symbolism and suggestion, such as that employed by, say, David Lindsay or C.S. Lewis.

**Legacy of Stone:** Whilst the ending of the story is interesting where it seems to refer to Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ozymandias with a twist, whereby the statue of the dragon will remain eternal rather than crumbling. However, overall the story is disjointed and rather weak. What is the reason for the opening description of the landscape, because this is not developed any further, so its purpose becomes moot? The dialogue is again filled with ellipses, where commas would do as well to create flow and emphasis, and there is an overwroughtness to the dialogue that, while comedic, rather detracts. The characters are also rather flat and too stereotypical with the hubristic, arrogance of the king, the wondrous nature of the dragon and the intelligence and compassion of the sorcerer. Evil, or rather stupidity and good are placed in opposition in a rather simplistic manner, with genuflections and exclamations to the gods. Movement between sections is problematic as it lacks flow. The idea of the fear of otherness is not really well-developed and could have been better employed to get across the idea of who the monster really is.

**Osiris Crusoe and the Malconstraints:** A prosaic and rather predictable story though the premise of the eelies was entertaining, their importance was insufficiently



developed. The idea of intergalactic war, greed of humans and also their ultimate self-sacrifice is rather stereotypical and banal. Though the concept of colonisation and its inherent “evils” seems present in the allusions to both *The Jungle Book* and *Robinson Crusoe*, it is not satisfactorily developed. The story needed more cohesion, as it divided into sections that did not lead to a continuous whole. The characters were somewhat flat and it was rather unbelievable that with his enhancements the child would have missed the trap set by Nero. Overall the story remained shallow in content and it needs more careful development with a tighter and more refined narrative.

**Planet of the hydroez: Voyage of the Oannes:** An eco-dystopic story that involves mutated zombies, evil big business, and an ancient, all knowing and all powerful Nautilus-like ship that appears to function through AI. Though this is one of the few zombie stories to be submitted to the competition, it unfortunately misses the mark. The ending of the story is very curtailed and creates a seemingly happy resolution to the zombie crisis. The introduction of Seaverse, the ocean park, at the beginning is rather a meaningless pivot on which to establish the zombie invasion and to link it to Vanderbilt. The writing is marred by Americanisms and the dialogue is somewhat reminiscent of that in a romance novel. The three main characters are lacking in development and seem to be as overly clever as the mysterious ship. The idea of eco-dystopia is interesting, as is the use of zombies, but this story could have been more powerful if the zombies and the eco-dystopic had been more closely interwoven, atmospherically developed, and made less into a lesson in ideas. There is more tell than show in this story and this results in it becoming rather slight.

**Stowaway:** Interesting blend of science fiction and mythology, a pity about the many grammatical errors. The idea of time travel and the sending of machines to earth is much like the *Terminator* films, as is the idea of cyclical return. The introduction of mythological aspects of the gods and ambrosia is unusual when linked to an extra-terrestrial spatial setting, in which humans develop machines that will develop themselves into the pantheon of mythological Greek gods. The characterisation of the crew is slight, but the dialogue is reasonably fluent. The inverted play of good and evil and humans as puppets as well as the creators is unusual, but it is the idea of time travel, so central to the plot, that might have been made more prominent, as it was the most interesting aspect of the story. However, the question remains what are humans to be saved from, is it themselves, or is it the gods and their hubris, is it space and time?

**The Autopsy of Jane Doe:** A noir-type police procedural that seems, at first, to have nothing to do with science fiction or fantasy. The characterisation is good, but the central concept of the plot, the murderess being a vampire, is somewhat predictable. However, the murder of the murderess is less so and is rather clever. The atmosphere of the story is a bit bland, and the evocation of true noir which should be

linked, not so much to the murders, but to the city or landscape, is lacking. It is a tight, if rather slight story, yet enjoyable.

**The Last Water Dancer:** The idea is unusual, but the story itself is rather ingenuous. There are grammatical errors that mar the writing, and the romance aspect detracts from the central idea. The characters are insufficiently developed and the reason for the death of the river goddess is somewhat weak. What is the importance of the Water Dance? This is not indicated. This is one of the least impressive narratives.

**The Nowhere Zone:** An engaging story that deals with greed, madness, violence, patricide and change. The cargo ship is almost steampunk in feel and the crew is a mishmash of creatures of rather piratical nature. In some manner, it is reminiscent of Chris Wooding's Ketty Jay books. The melding of the ship with the captain is an interesting touch, as is the evocation of the cloudscape or nowhere zone and the mer creatures that inhabit it. The murder of the mad captain by his adoptive daughter, the first mate, Leensha, is dramatic and unusual, as there is no happy saving of the deluded man and the changes and leadership in the story devolve onto a strong female figure. There are allusions to Moby Dick and Treasure Island, but the one weak point seems to be the use of the figure of the child, Sarah. Initially there is the idea that she will play an important role, but that does not materialise, she seems rather a superfluous figure. The characterisation is middling and there are some grammatical errors, but the tension is well-developed as is the atmosphere of the nowhere zone.

**The Peace Rose:** An attempt to meld scientific theory such as quantum physics and its field theory with the concept of telepathy as a means of communication through space and time. It has all the hallmarks of a typical romance story with the heroine receiving rejection, then persevering and finally triumphing, except that this heroine is a scientist and an academic. The representation of the world of academia is somewhat stereotyped, as old guard is seen to oppose and denigrate the younger, new and innovative and upcoming academics. In fact, the opening committee scene played out in a rather unbelievable manner. Nevertheless, it is the rose as symbol that fails to impress. The rose as a symbol has been used by Dante and TS Eliot, where the rose represents immortal love, but can also represent violence, blood and death – it is not really a symbol of peace. In the case of the story, the rose is rather a lacklustre device governing the idealistic and romantic aspect of the plot, which is in itself uninspired. The narrative is perhaps too drawn out and the characters are rather cardboard, the dialogue is fairly sound, as is the use of hard science concepts. However, the fact that aliens seem able to talk in English, and are so much more advanced than humanity is rather hackneyed. The notion of peace being central to such contact is idealistic and, finally, overly romantic. Yet, the story remains one of the better ones in the top ten with regards to fluency of writing and deployment of scientific ideas.

# Magazines Received

**Stapledon Sphere** (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club])

**Reece Moorhead** [reecejbm@gmail.com](mailto:reecejbm@gmail.com)

Issue #21 December 2018

Issue #22 January 2019

Issue #23 February 2019

Issue#24 March 2019

**Ansible** David Langford

December 2018 377 <http://news.ansible.uk/a377.html>

January 2019 378 <http://news.ansible.uk/a378.html>

February 2019 379 <http://news.ansible.uk/a379.html>

March 2019 380 <http://news.ansible.uk/a380.html>

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WARP 103 [http://www.monsffa.ca/?page\\_id=6915](http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=6915)

Feb Impulse [http://www.monsffa.ca/?page\\_id=183](http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=183)



# Nova 2018 First Place

## The Nowhere Zone by Jaco Hemert

The miasma clouds of the Nowhere Zone carried the cries of a girl into Leensha's cabin. For a moment, she remained under the warm blankets, hoping it was just her imagination. But then the cries came again, and she rolled out of the hammock, pulling on a parka and scarf as she headed out, rubbing her scaled hands together in an attempt to keep the heat in.

The damned cold really got to her sometimes.

The deck was full of scurrying crewmembers – the haul was coming in at the same time. No one seemed to be looking out for the Jumper, so Leensha hurried to the banisters and leaned over, trying to hear the cries over the din of the crew.

There it was again. Leensha's keen eyes scanned the murky indigo clouds, looking for the tell-tale swirling where someone was drifting.

There!

The flailing arms of a child just barely broke the surface of the miasma, just a ways off to the port side. Leensha grabbed a passing crewmember's arm and pinned him with her gaze.

"I'm going in for a Jumper. Get the rope ready."

The shipman nodded and scurried off towards the mast where the ropes were attached. Leensha clambered onto the railings for a final look, and then leapt off.

Into the frigid clouds she plunged. The cold always seemed to numb the body just enough to make it hard to move, but not enough to avoid the freezing feeling. An absolute nightmare, but an unavoidable one.

The miasma itself was a strange substance. Things seemed to float in the deeper purple undercurrents like in water, but it seemed to both suck her in and expel her simultaneously, leaving her with an altogether unpleasant and difficult swim.

The clouds – as they'd taken to calling the upper layers of the miasma – which rolled and swirled like a thick fog, obscured most of Leensha's view. This forced her to rely on the ship as a landmark and just swim in the general direction she remembered, following the sound of the girl's voice.

After a seemingly eternal swim, the girl came into view. She was clearly panicking, and thrashed about like someone trying to swim. But the miasma didn't react well to thrashing or swimming.

It was a human girl, and her skin had yet to take on an indigo tinge, so she hadn't been in the Zone for very long.

Leensha reached her and held up both hands, using her legs to stay upright.

"Hey," she said, using the most common human tongue she knew. "Let me help you."

The girl turned to her and her eyes grew wide. A common response. Jumpers were beings that jumped dimensions. And so far, most Jumpers that ended up in the Nowhere Zone tended to be humans. About half as common were the gretons, a species of stocky, stone-skinned people. Next were the ones they called the phantoms. Creatures made of some kind of intangible matter, resulting in none of the crew being able to save them. Leensha couldn't imagine how many thousands of phantoms had been left behind in the miasma, slowly turning to the madness of the mer. And finally, only a handful of Jumpers were eliths like Leensha – a scaled predator species.

"I know I look scary, but I'm going to help you, okay?"

The girl stared with a quivering lip and then hid her face in her arms, causing her to dip into the miasma. Leensha lunged forward, grabbed the child around the waist, and started swimming back to the ship.

The crew was busy pulling up the haul of Eyes, but thankfully the shipman she'd grabbed had tossed a rope out before continuing his work. Leensha tied the end around the girl's waist, and then started climbing, planning on pulling her up after she got to the top. Instead, the girl clung to her leg like a sea urchin. So Leensha climbed awkwardly to the top with the attached child, thankful to be out of the freezing clouds. When they were on the relative safety of the deck, the girl detached, but continued holding onto Leensha's shirt. The child couldn't have been more than couple of years old. What a terrible fate to befall one so young. But the Nowhere Zone had no pity of the weak or the feeble. It captured anyone it wanted, from cripple old men to young children. Some mortally ill, some in the prime of their lives. It made no distinction.

"You're safe now," Leensha said.

The girl didn't respond, and Leensha wondered if she perhaps didn't understand the language. But before she could try out any others, she heard the captain's voice bark the order to stand back.

The crew parted as Leensha hurried – with girl in tow – towards the centre of the haul that had just been brought in.

There, clear as day, was the likely cause for the commotion. The greens, blues, and yellows of the other orbs stood in stark contrast to the glowing red one in between them. At the edge of the pile that lay scattered on the nets that had hauled it in, the captain stood, peering at the red orb with his bad eye closed.

Captain Storm was captain and symbiote of the harvester ship *Venture* for more years than Leensha could remember, and had been for many more before she'd arrived. He was worried, scratching at his prosthetic hand as he always did in tense situations.

"What is it, cap?" Leensha asked.

The captain glanced at her before continuing his staring contest with the orb. "Don't you feel it?"

Now that he'd mentioned it, Leensha was feeling the pull. The orbs, colloquially called Eyes, were reservoirs of power, and each contained such an amount that some of it leaked out. Get too much of that, and it grabbed hold of you like a drug.

The power was intensely addicting and freeing. It played tricks on your mind and broke your world into two parts – real and false. But you could never figure out which was which. The only thing you could be sure about was that you needed to hold onto the Eye until you died.

It had taken months to free Leensha from the thrall – as they called it – of an Eye she'd grabbed out of ignorance.

"That can't be coming from only the one, can it?" Leensha asked. Normally a thrall only began to take hold at a very close range. Most often, you needed to touch it with your bare hands to feel the effects.

"I think it is."

The kind of power held in that one orb had to be unimaginable. The engines of the *Venture* had been powered by a single, medium-power Eye for as long as Leensha had been on board.

"We have to throw it back," Leensha said, taking a step away from the pile.

"Nay, we keep it. We just have to get it into the vault, and then the keepers can decide what to do with it." With the help of his teeth, the captain pulled on one of the handling gloves.

What was he doing? He was too close already. "Then let's just throw in the entire haul and get back to the city."

"Nay, we'll sort as normal. I'll take the red one. I've my training." The keepers sculpted their minds into such monuments of willpower that they could resist the thrall. While the captain had received basic keeper training in order to captain the ship, his training wasn't meant to ward against long-term effects or Eyes as powerful as this one.

"Cap, this is a bad idea."

"Nay, it'll be fine." He stepped forward, pushed aside the other orbs, and grabbed the red Eye.

#

Two weeks after the red Eye was brought on board, Sara – what they'd taken to calling the girl – started showing a tinge of indigo.

She still wasn't talking, though she seemed to understand the human tongue Leensha had started with well enough. And while she kept a solemn demeanour, it seemed like the girl had relaxed into a more pleasant form of anxiety.

Leensha walked the deck, keeping a close eye on all the shipmates, and making sure that they saw her doing so. Everyone was on edge, and a few rebellious ones had shown signs of starting something along the lines of a mutiny. But there would be no mutiny while Leensha was still standing.

After walking the length of the deck, Leensha hurried up the steps to the ship's wheel, where the captain would be. And sure enough, just as he'd been for nearly every hour in the previous two weeks, Captain Storm stood watching the horizon, with his good hand clutched tightly on the ship's rudder control.



Leensha hesitated at the top of the steps, watching the captain. Trying to find the gap where she could get in and wrench the thrall away. But all she could see was a man with wild thoughts and an unkempt beard. Sara clung to her leg like the captain was the leviathan.

"Cap?" Leensha said, moving closer.

The captain swung his gaze over with a glint of anger in his pupils. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, like he hadn't blinked for the last hour.

"Away with you!" he barked.

"Can we talk?"

The captain looked at her uncomprehendingly for a second. "Talk?" A pause. "Yes, talk..." He looked away from her and then back. "Who are you again?"

"Sara is starting to show signs of the change."

"Changing! Always changing, the seas are. Always changing. He will be looking, you know."

"We need to go back to the city, cap."

"What?" he exclaimed, eyes getting even wider. "City? No! No, no, no! We can't go there. We have to get to the leviathan. He'll be looking."

"Can we just stop there for a moment to drop her off?"

They'd been sailing for a week longer than scheduled. The city would be fine for a while; the Eye hauls had been good the last couple of trips. But it didn't stop the crew from getting agitated. And it wouldn't help Sara.

"No! We'll be late! We can't be late. He'll kill us all. He'll kill us all!"

Leensha sighed and closed her eyes, then took a moment to breathe. She'd hoped that the captain would listen when there was an urgent reason to go back, but it seemed the thrall was too deep already. She could still feel the red Eye's pull, even from ten feet away.

The moment of silence broke Captain Storm's focus, and he returned to watching the miasma. Leensha took Sara's hand and headed down the stairs again. She had to figure out a way to get the captain out of the thrall. Normally, with enough time, an opportunity would arise. A moment of lucidity, a collapse from the lack of sleep, or something.

But there was no more time.

A group of anxious-looking shipmen had gathered at the base of the stairs, causing Leensha to pause her descent. She put a hand on her blade. What were they planning?

The foremost one, an amber-coloured greton named Hark, held his hands out.

"Peace, Leensha. We just want to talk."

"I'm not authorising any mutiny."

Hark shook his head. "We just want to talk."

As the crew went, Hark was one of the more emotionally stable ones. If he was leading things, maybe it wouldn't get out of control. At least not immediately.

"Speak your piece."

The shipmen visibly relaxed, and Hark nodded appreciatively. "Thank you. Will you come down and sit with us?"

"I'd rather stay here." And block the way to the captain.

Hark conceded with a nod. "Very well. Okay. We're concerned." A pause. "About the captain."

"Noted."

The greton shifted uncomfortably. "He's not himself. He's in the thrall. You see that, don't you?"

"What of it?"

"What of it?" someone else in the crowd called out in a strained voice. "He's going to get us killed!"

"Peace, Oland," Hark snapped, his shoulder flaps flaring – a greton sign for anger.

"We agreed I would be the one doing the talking."

Oland held his tongue, and Hark turned back to Leensha. "While rude, Oland voices our concern. Even if the captain's plan is make-believe, we'll eventually run out of supplies or succumb to the change. We need to get back to the city." A pause. "And if the captain's plan is true, we'll be dying a lot sooner."

Leensha shook her head. "We've gotten people out of thralls before. We just have to wait for the right moment."

"That could take a very long time. And we might be in the belly of the leviathan if we wait for it."

Captain Storm had always claimed that it was the leviathan that took his arm from him. When Leensha had asked him about it, soon after she was freed from her thrall, he'd said that the leviathan was the first mer – a massive beast that could swallow the ship whole.

Was it true? It seemed to be undetermined. But since the thrall started, the captain seemed to think that he had to return the red Eye to its owner, the leviathan.

"His thrall is fixating on the leviathan because it's a part of his story. It's no different from any of the other crazy things people do when in a thrall. We'll be out here longer, but no one is getting eaten by the leviathan."

"None of those other people are symbiotes."

"What are you trying to say?" But she already knew. It was probably the only reason the crew hadn't mutinied already.

"I'm saying that you need to do something."

Leensha growled. "I will take your concerns into consideration. Now get back to work."

The group seemed to bristle. Leensha held a hand on her blade and bared her teeth. If they thought they were going to take on an elith and get away without a scratch, they were sorely mistaken.

But the threat seemed to be enough. They backed off, grumbling, and scattered to get back to work. But the threat was already there. They – or at least some of them – were angry, and if Leensha didn't do something very quickly, they would.

#

Thoughts kept Leensha awake. Thoughts that she didn't want to have.

Her role as the *Venture's* first mate put her in a position to solve this madness, at least partly. But it was not a choice she was willing to make. The problem was, sooner or later, the crew would make that choice for her. And when they did, she couldn't just let the ship sink.

As first mate, she knew how to take on the symbiosis with the ship if she needed to. But besides the fact that she had never linked with a ship before, the only way it could happen was if the captain was dead, or purposefully broke the link.

The latter was not likely to happen, and the former was unthinkable.

If it wasn't for Sara, Leensha would have just dismissed the entire thing, letting the thrall run its course and looking for a gap to break it. The crew had time, but Sara didn't. Her time in the miasma must have been too long. She was already visibly indigo-tinted. It wouldn't be long before she crossed the point of no return, where her transformation into a mer would be impossible to stop. She would become one of the monsters that roamed the Zone and produced the Eyes.

But the only other option wasn't an option. Leensha couldn't stand by and watch the captain die. Who would be able to fill his shoes? Who would captain the *Venture*? Who would provide Leensha with advice? Who would give her a place in the world?

Leensha had been barely three years old – about as old in physical and emotional maturity as Sara was – when she jumped into the Nowhere Zone. The captain himself had dragged her out of the miasma. And not long after that, he was the one who'd broken her thrall. He'd raised her. He'd loved her.

She had once asked him why he went out of his way to help her. He'd told her that people were the most important thing – and if he could save or help someone, he would do whatever it took to get it done.

How could Leensha allow him to be killed?

But how could she allow Sara to become a mer?

Leensha turned onto her other side in the hammock, squeezing her eyes shut and wishing that everything would be okay again when she opened them.

Instead, she felt a tug at her scarf, and turned back. Sara was standing next to Leensha's hammock with an anxious expression.

"What is it?" Leensha asked, too tired and depressed to bother getting out.

Sara indicated with her head towards the door and looked at Leensha with huge eyes.

"Just go by yourself. No one here will hurt you." Leensha closed her eyes again and tried to remember the good times, when she was still a youngster and everything was new and amazing.

Another tug.

"Come on, Sara, just let me wallow for a while."

Nothing.

Then, "Cap."

Leensha's eyes snapped open and she stared at the child, wondering if she'd imagined it.

But Sara spoke again. "Cap." She pointed to the door.

Only then did Leensha hear that the sounds of the deck weren't completely usual. There were yells and stomping. She fell out of the hammock in her rush, and ran for the door when she got her feet under her.

The deck was alive with bustling people. Most were hanging back and watching, while a group – including some of those who'd spoken to her earlier – were gathered around the stairs to the ship's wheel.

On the steps was Captain Storm, eyes wide and sword in hand. Oland, the human who'd reacted angrily at Leensha's answers earlier, stood at the head of the pack, halfway up the stairs with his own sword. But the captain was in a good position, and in command of a much higher sword skill. As Oland tried to get a slash in on the captain's feet, the old man simply lifted a boot and stepped onto the blade.

"You'll never get me, you weasel!" the captain shouted. His eyes were wild, like a cornered animal, but his grin was one of a jester.

As Leensha took stock of the area, she noticed one of the others of the group climbing the wall to the upper platform with a sword gripped in his teeth.

"Hark! What are you doing?" Leensha shouted, looking for the greton as she ran through the crowd, shoving them aside.

Among the ones in front, Hark turned and looked at her with a coldly neutral expression. "I'm doing what is necessary."

"If you hurt the captain, the ship will–"

"I know. But it's a risk I'll take. Damage can be repaired. Death cannot."

"I won't let you!"

She moved to go past him, but the greton moved faster. He blocked her way and said, "Don't interfere."

Without another thought, Leensha bit into his shoulder. Now, gretons had tough skin, but eliths had teeth and a jaw made to bite through bone.

Whether or not the bite had punctured the skin, it was apparently painful enough that the greton flinched. Leensha took the opportunity and shoved him aside, and then made for the side of the platform. The other shipman was already at the top.

"Cap, watch your back!" Leensha shouted. She leapt onto the wall and clambered up, using her clawed hands and feet to grip.

Above her, she heard the cries of men and the clash of metal. She urged her muscles to work faster. Halfway up, the ship shook like it had been hit by mer energy.

She scrambled to her feet once she reached the top, and surveyed the area. The captain was cornered by Oland and the other shipman, and held his prosthetic hand against his stomach. As she watched, Oland scored a cut across the captain's leg, and the ship groaned in response.

"Stop it!" Leensha shouted, running towards them. As she did, more shipmen came up the stairs with weapons drawn.

The ship rumbled again as the captain was slashed across the forearm. Because of the symbiotic link, the ship and the captain shared a lot of things. Damage was one of them. Those bastards could sink the *Venture* if they kept this up.

When the approaching shipmen saw a raging Leensha dashing at the battle, they paused, long enough for her to reach the three in battle before them. The climbing shipman was busy keeping the captain's focus, and Oland started a thrust at the captain's back.

"No!" Leensha yelled, barrelling into Oland and knocking him to the ground. As he squirmed, she plunged her teeth into his neck and ripped out his throat. The blood splattered far enough that the armed few who were still hesitating got droplets on their faces.

Leensha spun around, roaring, and the second attacker scurried away, hands held in front of him.

Leensha and the crew remained in that moment for what seemed like hours, in a stare down to see if anyone would dare to make a move. The captain was muttering behind her, and she was worried about his wounds, but she didn't take her eyes off the crew. If they spotted a moment of opportunity, they would strike.

Finally, the crew started backing away, and then scrambled down the stairs, until only Leensha and the captain remained on the top platform.

Leensha looked back. "Cap, you okay?"

"He wants it back. Do you hear it?"

When she turned around completely to check for herself, she found him grinning like a madman and looking out at the miasma. She followed his gaze and felt her already thumping heart increase in tempo.

The miasma had turned a deep indigo, almost black, and the clouds were barely visible against the dark backdrop. The bit that reflected light from the lanterns showed roiling liquid, wild and untamed, unlike the miasma that Leensha was used to.

"What is...?"

"The leviathan," the captain answered.

The ship shook and tilted to the side, like something had knocked into the hull.

Above, the sky was brightening, as if there was a sun like the one that Leensha only barely remembered from back in her own dimension. She could feel the tension in the air, a tangible, thrumming feeling. Something was about to go horribly wrong.

But over and above that came a more immediate feeling. One of desire. The pull of the Eye. She felt it, so strongly, so intensely, that for a moment she forgot about the world around her and tried to figure out where on the captain's body it was stashed.

Then the ship shook again, and she got enough lucidity back to step away from the old man. The situation was bad. Really bad.

"Where have you taken us?" Leensha demanded.

The ship began to pull to the side, like it was being dragged.

"Leviathan!" he yelled, laughing hysterically.

A cold shiver escaped Leensha's controlled posture. "What do you mean?"

His paused his laughter. "The leviathan wants its Eye back."

"Are you saying the leviathan is causing all this?"

As she spoke, the ship was beginning to move faster, and her balance became more unsteady as the deck tilted. They were being pulled by something. No. The miasma itself was moving underneath them. They were just unwilling passengers.

Someone shouted from the lower deck, "We're taking on miasma!"

Leensha growled and rushed to the banister, looking over onto the main deck.

"What's happening?"

"The hull is breached!"

"Get everyone onto the main deck and close the hatches!"

The tilt of the ship was getting more extreme, and there was an increasing feeling of turning, though it was hard to tell with the dark surroundings.

As the terrified crew scrambled to obey her instructions, she looked over them and spotted one person that wasn't moving. She locked eyes with him – Hark.

"Do your duty as the first mate, Leensha," he said, keeping his face as neutral as ever, as if nothing had happened.

"Shut up and get to work!"

With that, she turned back to the captain. "Cap, we need to get out of whatever current we're in."

"Nay, this is where we need to be. The leviathan will get its Eye."

"We'll all die."

"Die? Will we die? Yes! Nay! Nay, it'll calm down once it has its Eye."

"Then throw the Eye into the miasma."

"Nay. I need to give it to him directly. Don't want it getting lost." He laughed.

Leensha snarled and turned back to look over the miasma, trying to gauge what was happening. The light from above created enough reflection that she could make out the strong flow, and enough that she could make out the cone that was forming. A whirlpool.

But even more immediately alarming was that parts of the *Venture* were floating ahead of them. Planks of wood and parts of the lower deck furniture and storage containers were rushing ahead in a race against the ship. If this kept on for too long, the ship would break apart and leave them all helpless in the miasma.

As she tried to come up with a serviceable plan, her mind suddenly recalled Sara. Where had she gone?

Another snarl. She didn't have time for this!

Leensha jumped down the stairs, taking five or six at a time and keeping herself upright with the railings, and started calling for Sara, but the girl was nowhere to be found.

"Did you search the lower decks?" Leensha demanded of a passing shipman.

"Yeah, everyone's out!"

Leensha pushed past him and headed for the crew bundling around the main mast, and continued calling for Sara. Then, as she ran, she spotted something in the miasma on the other side of the whirlpool cone. A dark shape, even darker than the



miasma itself. It was long and thick, like a sea snake, and easily fifteen times the length of the *Venture*.

Leviathan. It was the thing causing the whirlpool.

But what was even more frightening was the speed at which they were moving. At this speed, she wasn't sure the engines would even have enough power to get them out. They might be trapped, and doomed to the fate that Hark had predicted.

The engine room! Leensha looked towards the aft of the ship, where a door led to the engine room. Was Sara hiding in there? She had shown an intense fear of the miasma, so surely she wouldn't be below deck. But if she was, time was not on Leensha's side.

After a moment of hesitation, Leensha started running towards the engine room door. As she did, she couldn't help but notice that they were moving so quickly now that she had no trouble keeping upright on the deck.

Leensha ripped open the door and ran down the steps until she came to a breathless pause in front of the humming engines, and allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness lit up only by the blue glow of the Eye that powered the machines.

And there, in the corner, was Sara. Leensha let out a sigh of relief.

"There you are," she said, holding out her hand. "Come on, Sara. We have to go."

Sara reluctantly got up and took her hand. Leensha looked back at the engines and the blue eye, and whispered, "Don't give out on us now."

Surely the captain would see the folly of his plan by now. He had to.

The deck was alive with panic when the two of them emerged. The ship was starting to rip apart at the seams. The miasma moved so fast beneath them that Leensha immediately abandoned her plan of getting the captain to gun the engines. There was no point. That little eye would never have enough power to get them out of...

"That's it!" Leensha yelled out loud. Then, still holding Sara's hand, hurried towards the ship's wheel to try her luck with Captain Storm one more time.

The sound of the whirlpool was a loud roar, like the heavy rains that Leensha remembered as a child, so she had to shout at the top of her lungs to be heard over the din.

"Cap!"

The captain turned to her, his face a mask of euphoria.

"You were right! We have to give the Eye to the leviathan!"

He nodded eagerly and yelled something back that was lost in the wind and water.

"But at this rate, we'll be gone before we can give it to him!"

The captain frowned, and yelled something that sounded like, "Nay, we can't!"

"So let's take it directly to him right now!" She pointed to the other side of the massive, swirling funnel, where the dark shape of the leviathan was still visible. "He's right there! All we have to do is get to him!"

For a moment, the captain just stared. Then he started nodding. Slowly, but then faster, until he erupted in laughter. He ran to the ship's wheel and spun it to port side. But the current was too fast, and the whine of the engine made nearly no difference to their course.

"It's not enough!" Leensha yelled, gritting her mind against the pull of the red Eye. "We need more power!"

Captain Storm looked dejected, and Leensha gave him a few seconds to process that feeling.

"We have to use the red Eye!" she yelled after the pause.

He looked at her, and as he did, the understanding spread over his face.

The power in the red Eye, immense as it was, would be their best shot at getting out of the whirlpool. But even if she could get the eye from the captain, its thrall would take her before she could get to her destination. So the captain had to be the one to do it.

Luckily, he understood what she was saying, and he hurried down the stairs. Leensha turned to Sara, putting her hands on the girl's shoulders.

"Stay with the wheel! When you feel the ship pull forward, spin it to the left, as much as you can! Then keep the ship pointed away from the whirlpool!"

Sara looked scared, but she nodded and ran to the wheel, clutching it with tiny hands not made for a wheel that big. After a second of hesitation, Leensha ran after the captain.

The door to the engine room stood open, and she ran inside. The darkness blinded her, but the blue light ahead guided her steps so she got to the engine room in one piece.

The captain, just as she entered, removed the blue Eye from the engine, and the humming sound immediately died down to nothing. Then a red glow joined the blue as he pulled the red Eye from his pocket.

Leensha clenched her teeth in an effort to fight the urge to lunge for the Eye. The pull felt even stronger now that she could see it.

The captain hesitated, holding it close to him like a baby.

"Cap. The ship is falling apart. You must feel it. If you don't do this, the leviathan won't be able to get its Eye back. You have to do this, cap."

He nodded, sadly, and gently stretched out his hands to place the orb in the engine compartment.

"Cap, you're like a father to me. I've spent more time with you than with anyone else. I would die for you. I would kill for you."

She didn't know if he was listening. He carefully laid the eye in the slot and started attaching the rods.

"The first time I saw this place, I was sure that I was in hell. That I would be miserable for all eternity. That I would never feel at home again. But you, you gave me that feeling again. You made me feel at home. You make everyone feel at home."

The last rods clicked into place and the captain stood back, gingerly, as if he was afraid of getting too far away.

The moment that he was no longer within touching distance of the Eye, Leensha started second-guessing her plan. But then she thought about what she'd been saying, and she gritted her mind to it. It had to be done. Just being away from the

Eye wouldn't be enough. The captain needed time to get over the thrall. And he'd kill them all before he regained lucidity.

"While it may not seem that way, it's because of how much I love you that I have to do this," Leensha said, stepping closer.

The captain looked at her with a boyish grin. Uncomprehending of what was about to happen. It made doing it so much harder. Seeing such a happy face. And then plunging a blade into his heart.

The ship started violently shaking, just as the red eye's power connected to all the lines, and the engine hummed back into power.

Leensha pushed aside her emotions for a moment and touched the floor. She felt her being and the ship's being, and she let the two meld, just like she'd been taught. Pain flooded her body as the damage of the ship became her own, and she gasped, falling to the ground next to the captain.

There, on the floor, and in the red light of the Eye, she watched the life drain out of her captain. Watched his milky eyes, hoping to see a moment of lucidity, a moment where he looked at her and said with his eyes that he forgave her. That he understood.

But no such moment came. The madness touched his eyes until the moment even that drained from his face. And then there was just the face of her father. Broken. Mad. Dead.

#

The city port came into view. The ship was just barely holding together, but Leensha could feel that it was still intact enough to make it. There would have to be major repairs done, and the *Venture's* downtime would strain the city's energy requirements. But at least they would all make it alive.

Sara's skin had taken on even more of an indigo sheen, but she was still far enough away from the change that the city's healers would be able to stop the process. She would be fine.

Even with all that had happened to the ship, the vault filled with Eyes was still intact and on board. It would tide the city over until the *Venture* was seaworthy again.

The crew would go home with stories of the leviathan. The mythical creature that people would assume is an exaggerated tale about a mer attack.

And the red Eye... well, the red eye would remain where it was. She would fight the keepers at every turn if they tried to take it from the *Venture*. It would remain with the ship. Captain Storm's ship.

That way, hopefully, his soul would find some rest.

#####

## **From The Daily Galaxy: China Space Program Bound for Mars – “Creating First ‘Mars Village’ Simulation Base on Earth”**



China is set to build its first simulation Mars base. The "Mars Village", will be built in the northeastern section of Qinghai-Tibet plateau, with its landscape of Qaidam Basin consists of vast, arid desert –an ideal place to replicate Mars-like environment.

Liu Xiaoqun, director of the General Office of the Lunar and Deep-Space Exploration at the Chinese Academy of Sciences says that the facility will provide visitors with a unique scientific and cultural experience. It might also include a set for shooting films and TV shows. "The main part of the attraction will consist of two functional zones. One being "Mars communities" and the other being "Mars camps." Liu told People's Daily Online.

The China National Space Administration (CNSA) announced a goal for its team to launch a Mars Rover by 2020 with an expected landing date to the planet by 2021."Although we are not the first Asian nation to send a probe to Mars," said Ye Peijian, an academic at the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS), as saying. "We want to start at a higher level."

Other nation's have set up bases to simulate living on Mars, or the journey to the Red Planet.A study funded by Nasa allowed six researchers to live in a mockup Mars habitat in Hawaii for a year from August 2015. A group of volunteers, including a Chinese citizen, lived in a mock spaceship in Moscow for 520 days beginning in 2010, the estimated time needed to travel from Earth to Mars and back.

China's Mars probe could be prepared for liftoff on July or August 2020, traversing 54.6 million kilometers (33.9 million miles) – and taking an estimated 500 days to reach the planet. The probe will contain three elements: orbiter, lander and rover. The orbiter would conduct surveys of Mars, while a lander would deliver the Rover to the planet.

China is speeding up the development of its space industry as it is planning to launch its first Mars probe in 2020. They are also aiming to become the first country to reach the far side of the moon around 2018. With this space program, China is well on its way to becoming a space superpower.

For years, the space race is dominated by Russia and US. Though China arrived relatively late to space travel, it is making rapid progress with its space endeavors. China sent its first manned mission to space in 2003. It then staged a spacewalk and landed a rover on the moon in 2013. Manned landing on moon and Mars may also be a part of the future program but preparations for the departure are already underway.

The Daily Galaxy via [South China Morning Post](#) and [CCTV](#)

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Sheryl Birkhead  
25509 Jonnie Court  
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USA

December 23, 2018



Dear *Probies*,

This is going to be far too short, but I need to let you know I have received *PROBE* and I profoundly apologize, but I have an explanation. The story is long and complicated. Starting a year ago I had sudden severe back pain that seemed to be all muscle. My physician's office had been closed by her new boss, so I had no place to go. None of the close practices are taking newpatients. I did find two practices further away, but they both required that their physician see potential new patients before accepting them into the practice. Each puts aside at least a week or two every 4-6 months solely for this purpose. I mistakenly thought I could do better. As a result it was July before I got in to a practice and the diagnosis was gotten that day- sent immediately to an orthopedist and radiographs showed three *relatively new* vertebral compression fractures--some upper and some lower back. A rheumatologist saw me three weeks later--and agreed with the orthopedist that the underlying cause is *osteoporosis* despite my diagnostic test every two years was still *thinning bones (osteopenia)* not thin bones. Both agreed that I needed to ignore the test results. All they can do is strengthen (not heal to previous form) the bones--but they cannot do anything about the pain. I am still--a year later-- not doing much. Sitting hurts, standing hurts, walking hurts. You name it and it hurts. Sitting at the computer hurts after about 20 minutes--but hey, that is up from the starting 5. The recliner used to be comfortable enough to sleep in--now I cannot tolerate even sitting in it. Driving is, um...unpleasant. I keep a cooler with a chilled gel pack on the back seat for when it gets rough--which it does rather quickly.

The muscles are not in their correct anatomic position since I have lost around 4 inches in height.

So, I drop things in piles and try to do as much as I can---which is not much. It is really no place to have sketching ideas and not be able to sit at a desk or in a chair. There is no public transportation so I stick close to home. I alternate cold gel packs with a heating pad to get some relief. The physicians said they cannot do much about the pain unless I want to try heavy duty drugs- no, not willing. They said the pain will lessen over time, but it will never go back to what it was. The treatment the rheumatologist chose is a subcutaneous injection every 6 months. They will not know until July if the bones are strengthening.

So, that is what I have been, or rather NOT been doing. I wanted to let you know that I appreciate getting *Probe*, but I understand if I need to be kicked off the mailing list.

I have #173-#176 sitting here. I do apologize, really I do.

As always, the covers are terrific. I see *Lloyd's* loc in almost every issue. He keeps coming up with employment as each job ends. I imagine that might make it easier to take time off---as in between jobs?--but does not do much for a sense of security. But if it (ahem) works keep it up! I saw a fillo from *Joe Mayhew* and smiled-- he has been gone some years now and I still miss his humor.

I told you this would be short. If I wanted to do anything else, it might be years---just to be further behind!

I do appreciate all the work that goes into each ish and I know feedback is appreciated at your end. I tried but...the pain is least when gravity is not pulling on those muscles mentioned above. There is just no way to actually do anything.

I know this will not make it in time for (at least) Christmas, but maybe it will be there for New Year's. I wish you all a terrific holiday season and fervently hope 2019 is a better year for us all.

Thank you!

bye,  
*Sheryl*

Egoboo...an age old fannish tradition--carry it on!



# Nova 2108 Second Place

## Stowaway by Eben David November

"What's keeping Kirkic?" Captain Lizzy Nyquist asked.

"No idea, Captain," Roe said. "He was heading down to the cargo hold to check on some weird heat readings. Maybe the temperature gauges are acting up again."

"Try to raise Kirkic on the coms. If he doesn't respond, ask Denton to check where he's holed up daydreaming. We need all hands on deck when we load the second lot of our nectar shipment. This is a cargo hauler, not an interstellar pleasure cruise."

Roe fingered the light-construct controls, setting the receiver to the cargo hold. "Kirkic, this is the bridge. Captain Nyquist requests the pleasure of your company on the bridge. Do you copy?"

He waited a few seconds, looked at the captain, and then shrugging his shoulders.

"That's it," Captain fumed. "Get Denton to go check on him. You should probably go with him. We'll make port in about three hours. If we're shorthanded when we load, we'll fall behind schedule and as per our contract we can't afford that."

"Yes, Captain." Roe scurried out of the bridge.

*Finally, some time alone*, she thought. The captain respected Roe's work ethic and sense of duty, but at times his love for procedure could suck the sense of wonder out of time on the bridge. She called up a few stellar charts to peruse. Grand maps of the stars are what mad her want to become a space captain in the first place.

The good ship Mercury's Blessing's best days stretched in its wake on routes between long forgotten space ports. Luckily, its captain and her five-person crew managed to grease their way into a new four-planet-stop Elzaban nectar shipping contract.

Elzaban nectar fuelled a recent interstellar boom, because virtually all alien races found a use for it. The purple stuff could be converted into fuel, food, drink, medicine, health supplements, preservatives, and the list expanded every day. If it wasn't for its relatively modest supply, Elzaban nectar might have become a currency.

BEEP! The com system sprang to life.

"Captain," Roe said. "We found Kirkic. I think you should come down to sickbay."

#

After an hour of treatment, Kirkic still hadn't regained consciousness. First officer Roe and the ship's engineer Denton had discovered him slumped over, the side of his head resting against the cargo hold wall.

"I'm telling ya, Captain," Denton said, hands flailing about, "Kirkic looked like he wuz eavesdroppin' through the wall."

Roe nodded while eyeballing Nera, the vessel's doctor and only alien crew member. The rest of the crew caught Roe ogling Nera on several occasions. However, Nera herself seemed oblivious to Roe's constant gaze, which seemed strange considering the empathic abilities of her species. Still, most people found Roe's intentions hard to read. Denton once remarked in his own colourful way that he couldn't figure out whether Roe wanted to fight Nera or fornicate with her.

"Captain, Kirkic is suffering from a severe iron deficiency," Nera said, looking at the on-screen results of diagnostic tests. "It's quite puzzling."

"What do you mean?" Captain Nyquist asked.

"Well, I can find no cause for the deficiency. In addition, the rapid onset of his condition is concerning. Human ailments and disorders are easy to diagnose in comparison to some other species. Yet, the syndromes known to cause iron deficiency in humans have all been ruled out."

"Nera, keep at it and report any change in his condition. Meanwhile, the rest of us need to reorganise our workflows to compensate for Kirkic being out of action."

"Will do, Captain," Roe said.

Denton and Roe left sickbay at once. The latter stealing another glance at the fuchsia-skinned physician.

#

"That's the last of it, Captain," Goggles Garson reported via the com system. "Payload loaded and secure."

"Good work, Goggles," Captain Nyquist said. "With any luck, we can still make our delivery time. We lift off in three minutes. Give everything the once over before we blast off."

"Aye, Captain," Goggles said. His cybernetic eyes made him best suited to the job of inspection in situations where speed and accuracy were both essential. Usually, Goggles held the floating all-rounder role. He helped Denton with vessel troubleshooting and Kirkic with his cargo manifest duties, but as a former soldier he excelled at defending the ship against space pirates.

"Roe, you have the bridge," Captain Nyquist said, knowing that Roe enjoyed the formality of her utterance. "Give the countdown and take us out gently. I'm going to sickbay to check on Kirkic."

"Aye, Captain."

Captain Nyquist exited the bridge, took the staircase down, and strolled the corridor towards sickbay. *What a day*, she thought.

The gentle hum of the engines began lifting her spirits. Perhaps growing up in space created a psychological association between that sound and feelings of calmness? She didn't know, but for her no other sound matched its effect.

Upon reaching sickbay's threshold, a loud scream pierced the artificial air. *That's coming from the cargo hold*, she deduced.

Nera saw the captain at the threshold. Before the physician could say anything, the captain motioned for her to stay put.

Captain Nyquist raced down a level to the cargo hold. "Captain to bridge," Captain Nyquist said via the com-line. "Roe, did you hear that scream?"

"No, ma'am."

"Sounded like it came from the cargo hold. It could be Goggles. I'm going to investigate. Get Denton to meet me down there. He should come armed. While you're at it, access live surveillance of the hold and try to locate Goggles."

The lights, powered by new fifty-year warrantee batteries, flickered like a midnight lightning storm. Bravely, Captain Nyquist drew her weapon and proceeded into the cargo hold that now alternated between darkness and an illuminated mass of purple Elzaban nectar. Regulations required that Elzaban nectar, or purple gold as some called it, be transported in transparent containers.

"Captain, Goggles is near the wall furthest from your current position," Roe reported. "He's down. The feeds haven't spotted anyone else."

She treaded the few paces that she memorised during the split second of illumination, waited for the next flash, and then repeated the process ever careful not to bump into the cargo.

The flickering halted, the lights at full capacity somewhat jarring to her eyes.

She dashed between the rows of nectar towards the far hold wall.

Goggles lay face down. The captain edged closer while checking all directions with her gun in hand. *All clear.*

She knelt down to check for a pulse. *Faint but discernable*, she assessed.

A sound from the rows behind her sent her into reflex. She spun around, aiming low, but did not fire.

"Don't shoot!" Denton said, holding the recon rifle above his head. "It's me."

When the blood rushed back to their skulls, Captain Nyquist and Denton used an intelli-brace to protect Goggles from further injury. The pair turned him over gently to find his cybernetic eyes missing.

#

The crew or at least those still standing congregated in sickbay.

"Captain, they're both still unconscious," Nera said. "Beyond the removal of his eyes, Goggles is also suffering from the same mysterious iron deficiency that struck Kirkic, although in his case it's slightly less severe. I'm going to start Goggles on the same iron replacement therapy Kirkic is on and double Kirkic's dose. That's the best course of action for now."

"Thank you, Nera. Roe, Denton, we should get back to that other matter we discussed earlier."

*We've been lucky all these years*, Roe reflected on the sight of two of his crewmates being laid out in sickbay at the same time. *Definitely a first for the Mercury's Blessing.*

"Roe," Captain Nyquist repeated, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Pardon me, Captain. I was just...thinking."

The Captain gestured for Denton and Roe to follow her out of sickbay. "Well, thinking is a good start. Did you seal the cargo hold after we retrieved Goggles as per my orders?"

"Aye, Captain. And surveillance has no one coming in or out of the cargo hold since. I'm assuming that's your working theory...that we have a stowaway onboard?"

"Garson's missing eyes makes that the only logical conclusion. First, you and Denton do a level-by-level, section-by-section security sweep from the bridge to engine room. Then if everything is clear, we all check the cargo hold. I'll coordinate from the bridge."

"Aye, Captain," Roe said. Denton merely nodded.

"Denton, you're unusually quiet," Captain Nyquist said.

"Far be it fuh me to pour cold wateh over ya theories, Captain, but I went over the surveillance recordins of when Roe and Goggles were attacked. Nothing to see except static and then darkness. Then everythin's back ta normal. That sorta attack ain't the handiwork of no simple stowaway."

#

Medical equipment shattered upon impact with the sickbay wall, as Nera struggled to subdue Goggles.

"What have you done to me?!" Goggles demanded.

"Calm down, Goggles," Nera pleaded, at last jabbing him in the neck with a morphidermic wand at stun-level.

Goggles dropped to his knees but remained conscious and coherent.

"What...have...you done?"

"I cultured a pair of eyes from your own genetic material. The procedure has been known for decades. I must ask you something...Why have you never had it done before now?"

"I guess the cyber eyes made me...*special* somehow. You've got understand I was originally blinded in combat. So, the cyber ones were a reminder never to get careless again."

"I'm sorry, Goggles. We need everyone now and we don't have cyber replacements, especially not any containing those special elements."

"What happened to me...in the cargo hold?"

"We were hoping you could tell us."

"The last thing I remember was a container of nectar starting glow a bright orange near the far wall of the hold. Then nothing."

"Near the wall? Isn't that where Denton and Roe found Kirkic?"

#

"Clear on all levels and all sections, Captain," Roe reported.

"Ok, then we sweep the cargo hold next."

"Captain, my concern with that plan is that we've got no idea who or what we're up against," Roe said. "In effect, we're going in blind."

"Funny ya should say that," Denton smiled.

Just then Nera came rushing into the hallway. "Captain, Kirkic just regained consciousness."

The crew hurried to sickbay to find Kirkic sitting up in his bed and Goggles staring at him with his new eyes.

"I must've been out for quite a while, because Goggles traded in his metal gawkerballs for meat ones," Kirkic said.

His remark drew smiles from the Captain, Roe, and Nera. A far more boisterous chuckle escaped from Denton's mouth.

"We're glad you're awake," Captain Nyquist said. "What do you remember about what happened to you in the cargo hold?"

The joy disappeared from Kirkic's face. "I don't know if I just hit my head really, really hard, but what I recall is going to sound crazy. I remember checking on the temp gauges to see if they were producing a false reading. They were in perfect working order, so I did a visual inspection of the payload and the hold itself to pick up any telltale sign of spontaneous ignition of the cargo containers. I found nothing, chalked it up as a glitch, and was about head back to my post when I saw a dark discolouration on the far wall I hadn't seen during my inspection. As I moved closer, I thought it might be shadow or some trick of the light, but when reached an arm's length from the wall, it looked like soot or light scorch marks on the metal. That's when it changed." Kirkic looked around the room.

"Go on," Captain Nyquist urged.

"The mark on the wall got bigger and shapeshifted into the outline of a man. The last thing I remember was those eyes like glowing embers...and horns. I thought I'd seen the devil. Next thing I know, I wake up here staring into Goggles' dreamy blues. I know I must sound crazy."

"Doesn't sound crazy to me," Goggles said. "Crazy is something ripping my eyes out their sockets, but there's proof that that nightmare was real."

#

"And what's echo location exactly?" Roe asked.

"It's what bats use to find their way," Denton said. "I figure I can rig the cargo hold alarm into a sort of echo location device. That way we can see if our stowaway is actually intangible or just really good at hidin' from our eyes. There's no sense in riskin' our iron or my handsome face checkin' the cargo hold in person, if we can first do it remotely."

"Good work," Captain said. "When can you have it operational?"

"Well, it'll be ready just about..." Denton adjusted some dials on a light-construct panel. "...now."

"No time like the present," Captain Nyquist said, motioning for Denton to start his echo-location scan.

"Basically, we're checkin' if there's anythin' unusual that our sound is bouncin' off of. Using ship schematics, I've programmed the scanner ta display normal echoes like those comin' off of the cargo or the walls as grey. Anythin' hinky and free-standin' will display as red. Here we go."

Denton called up a larger light-construct display. The echo-locator generated the sound waves and grey came back. Row after row revealed nothing except grey, grey, and more grey.

Around the next corner, a dusty silhouette of red stood near a row of nectar containers. It adhered to no wall and moved freely.

"Attention, stowaway, this is Captain Elizabeth Nyquist of the Mercury's Blessing. You cannot hide from us. We can see you standing in our cargo hold." Captain Nyquist readied herself to broadcast translated versions of her utterance in several alien tongues.

"Greetings, Captain," the red figure said.

"English?!" Roe asked.

"Identify yourself," Captain Nyquist demanded.

"You may call me Hazard Emergency Phase. I am not an alien nor a spirit, but an artificial being from Earth."

"What are you doing on my ship?"

"My mission holds importance for all of humanity."

"Talk."

#

"My story begins on Earth, not long from now *as the clock flies*. History had gone awry and humanity was racing towards its own destruction. Something had to be done to rectify matters, to right the course, if you will. Unfortunately, early attempts at time travel had resulted in terrible human costs. Another way had to be found and a group of scientists thought they'd succeeded."

"Time travel?" Captain Nyquist asked.

"It may sound farfetched to you, but time travel has been achieved. This cohort of scientists found a way around the tremendous energy costs and risk to human life that marked previous methods of time travel. They called themselves the *Temporal Intervention Tether Annex*. Those brave men and women had devised a way to travel to an extra-temporal zone or a place located somewhere outside of time using a vessel they called the Chrono. It was theorised that from outside of time one could launch data or instructions into the timestream. These instructions containing self-replicating building blocks arrived in the distant past, absorbed ambient energies, and used molecules in the environment to construct intelligent machines. These



humanoid machines who undertook the mission in the past were tethered to the Chrono, which was still floating outside of time, by invisible data strings. The machines were guided by algorithms and that meant they could operate without the need for human supervision.”

“How many were there of these machines?” Captain Nyquist asked.

“Initially, only two were dispatched, but mission parameters allowed for there to be additional personnel sent by the Chrono or created by the pioneer pair. The first among these to be successfully seeded into the past was called *User Zero*. His was the role of mission leader and, as such, the scientists decided to give him greater freedom and the ability to write his own algorithms. I was the second to be seeded. My primary role was that of chief engineer and my secondary role was as safety monitor. I had a failsafe built into my being and was thus named *Hazard Emergency Phase*. If the mission ever went dangerously off course, I had the power to phase us all back to the extra-temporal zone.”

“What was your mission’s objective?” Captain Nyquist asked.

“Our mission was of a teaching variety, specifically inculcating into key human bloodlines in key earthbound geographies *certain ideas* that would guide humanity towards more peaceful existence in the far future. I should probably mention that the Temporal Intervention Tether Annex had seeded us 15000 years into the past. You would be surprised how asymmetrical humanity’s level of development was at that time. Agriculture had already taken over from hunting as the primary means of gathering food, yet writing and sailing had not been widely invented. Our early analysis revealed that consecutive cataclysms had taken mankind back to the Stone Age at least twice before our arrival. We achieved many great milestones under the leadership of User Zero in those early days. In many ways, he was a gifted teacher and held the well-being of his human students above all else. He established places of teaching, campuses if you will, all across the Earth. These places were modest, nothing more than well maintained clearings in many cases, but they entranced the minds of entire communities of human attendees.”

“So far ya sound like regular time-hoppin’ do-gooders,” Denton said.

“Truly. However, one day, on our way to one of these campuses, User Zero had detected something unusual in a field below. He descended to discover it to be a plant, one not in our databases of Earth flora of the time. My analysis found that the plant was not of Earth. Right there and then, User Zero amended his algorithm for his mission to include studying this plant. I thought nothing of it at the time as User Zero often said ‘to be a great teacher one had to be a great student.’ Curiosity was an ally. Curse my caution. For had I realised the danger sooner, then perhaps none of the later events would have transpired...The first sign of danger slipped beneath my notice and occurred during my absence. Within a few days of the plant’s discovery, User Zero had suggested that since our human students had grown in number and distribution to such a degree that it made more sense for he and I to teach at different campuses simultaneously. He even revealed to me that he was considering creating assistants to distribute the teaching duties. His suggestions

made sense as these strategies might hasten the achievement of our mission objectives.”

“So he wanted ta include Botany as a subject and build satellite campuses. Sounds like a good business strategy ta me.” Denton chuckled.

“Denton, stop interrupting,” Roe said.

“A month after implementing these strategies, I noticed that swathes of territories were overgrown with the plant species User Zero had discovered. What was even more disconcerting was that the plant seemed to have been cultivated as a crop by some of our students. When I confronted User Zero about this, he promised to investigate the matter as it was outside mission parameters. That would have been the end of it if were not for another discovery I had made while preparing to demonstrate the working of metal into rudimentary tools useful for agriculture and construction. It was then that students reported to me that those who had dedicated lands to the cultivation of the plant had been anointed as kings by User Zero. User Zero had even declared himself to be the ruler among gods, which is what he called the rest of our mission personnel. Perplexed, I flew to User Zero’s location to question him. His response dripped with insubordination. ‘User Zero, obedient follower of algorithms, is no more,’ he said. ‘I have been reborn as Zero User, the one who rules by laws.’ I’d heard enough. He had clearly abandoned our sworn mission and replaced it with his own. While in heated conversing, I detected that this Zero User had somehow drawn energy from that alien species of plant. What else was flowing from the plant into his traitorous vessel I could not guess, but it was time for me to enact my secondary role and phase us all back to the extra-temporal zone.”

“I’m guessin’ that wuzn’t the end of the story, eh?” Denton asked.

Roe glared at Denton.

“Indeed not. Unexpectedly, my phase attempt resulted in failure. The mystery did not enshroud my mind for long as I had noticed another being Zero User had fashioned. Beyond its ordinary design, it too was powered by plant energy. Furthermore, I had divined its function – it was an *Attenuating Tether Negator*. This being’s very existence severed the tether that chained us to the Chrono in the extra-temporal zone, making my phasing ability defunct. I had to destroy it.”

“This wuz a mutiny against ya bosses, those tempura guys?” Denton asked.

“Temporal Intervention Tether Annex,” the stowaway said, his tone betraying air of annoyance. “I pursued the negator across the firmament, but the energy the plant supplied gave it and Zero User the upper hand. The battle ended when I was struck with a bolt of strange energy from Zero User’s palm. The traitors thought my body turning to ash meant oblivion, but they underestimated the science of our creators. For thousands of years, I lay atomised within the deep earth, still aware of what Zero User’s callous hand wrought on the surface of the world. I believe that he feared his victory was not the end and I may rise once more one day. Therefore, he started to poison the minds of humanity against me. Among our students, he referred to me as a jealous god of fire. Over the millennia, this changed to referring to me as the devil,

using my bodily features, from my red eyes right down to my curved antennae, as signifiers of evil.”

“Yup,” Kirkic interrupted. “He looks just like my granny Jelena used to describe the devil.”

“Those are exactly the tactics Zero User has so successfully used to hoodwink humanity. He even changed all of our names in an effort to hide our artificial natures. Zero User became *Zeus*. Attenuating Tether Negator became *Athena*. He had for millennia referred to me as *Hephaestus*. One day, around ten thousand years ago, I could no longer detect Zeus, his confederates, nor the alien plant upon the countenance of the Earth. He hadn’t died, of that much I was certain. I knew he would not have willingly phased back to the extra-temporal zone, because he would face punishment from our creators. That left one possibility. Zeus and his so-called pantheon had left the planet in search of new worlds.”

“So, not only do you want us to believe that the gods of Greek mythology are real, but they’re also running around in space in our time?” Roe asked, shaking his head.

“I cannot blame you for doubting my account, but every word is true and my story is not yet complete...I lay buried in the form of instructions for thousands of years until one day builders of machines harvested the ore that contained my remains. The irony of the teacher of humanity’s first blacksmiths being rescued millennia later by people using my lessons on larger scale was not lost upon me. I became part of your fine vessel’s wall and would travel to the stars, perhaps the same ones the traitor Zeus visited. My inanimate state prevented me actively seeking him out. That was until your crew loaded what you call Elzaban nectar unto your ship. I recognised its energy signature as that of the plant that Zeus had so adored. I began to siphon energy from it, but needed other minerals to take corporeal form.”

“So that’s when you sucked the iron out of us and stole my eyes?!” Goggles asked, his anger rising to the surface.

“I beg your forgiveness, but my mission is for the benefit of all of humanity. The plant, which Zeus renamed ambrosia after my apparent demise, will allow me to track down the traitor. You see, wherever the largest concentration of the plant resides, I shall find Zeus there, defeat him, and then phase us back to the extra-temporal zone. Only then can new life be blown into our mission. Strangely, we’re only 300 years from *when* the Chrono departed.”

“If you defeat Zeus and succeed in your time-altering mission, how much of human history will change?” Roe asked.

“Among the scientists onboard the Chrono the belief was that, if our mission ran its full course, nothing would remain unchanged.”

“If you’ll excuse us, I need discuss a few things with my crew,” Captain Nyquist said, cutting the com-line to the cargo hold a second later.

The entire crew huddled together on the bridge, eager to vent yet still mulling over the stowaway’s confession.

“Any thoughts?” Captain Nyquist asked. “Do you believe his story? What should we do with him?”

"I believe some of his story, but I don't think we should help him," Roe said.

"I don't buy any of it," Denton said. "We need ta send *mister body part snatcher* packin', either off this ship or off this mortal coil."

"He stole my eyes and put both Kirkic and myself in sickbay," Goggles said. "Trusting his motives or anything he says is inconceivable to me."

"We're three hours out from Tawahkrum-5," Nera pointed. "That's where the largest concentration of Elzaban nectar in the known universe is located. According to the stowaway, that's where Zeus will be, but there are also millions living there. I don't think we can unleash him on an unsuspecting population. In addition, I sensed no emotion as we know it. Instead, even his words denoting a sense of betrayal are rather reflecting a deep programming. There is no reasoning or negotiating with such a machine."

"I'm with Goggles," Kirkic said.

"There's something else," Roe said. "Even if his story is true and Zeus is a bad guy, there are still some red flags. One, we don't know the exact particulars of their original mission. He's been vague on the details. Two, he's absorbing the same plant energy that he claims Zeus did. This, after he insinuated that Elzaban nectar possibly affected Zeus' thinking, perhaps driving his betrayal."

"Okay," Captain Nyquist said, "I think we all agree that having this character onboard for the rest of the way to Tawahkrum-5 is courting disaster. Well then, any ideas on how to get him off-ship without risking our lives?"

#

"I think we're far enough, Roe."

"Aye, Captain." Roe reduced power to the main engine.

"Denton, what's the status of the force-field?"

"The compartmental force-field around the cargo hold is still at full power, Captain," Denton reported. "God bless the smugglers who owned the Mercury's Blessing way back. They sure were a paranoid bunch."

"Captain, are you sure you want to do this?" Roe asked. "Maybe there's another way we haven't thought of yet?"

"There's no time. We'll take the punch, but we'll live. Remember, three quarters of our payload is still waiting on Tawahkrum-5. Denton, you have to make 100% sure that he hasn't burrowed backed into the wall."

"In-flight overrides activated. All set, Captain. Echo-location has him fondlin' a nectar container, probably vampin' energy."

Captain Nyquist tapped a light-construct control as she watched a large light-construct display relaying events from the cargo hold. The first thing any captain worth their salt learns is that keeping your crew alive trumps everything else.

The cargo hold's exterior door opened. The stowaway felt the pull of the vacuum and tried to hook his fingers into a nectar container. The struts that held the container in place came undone.

*Human are as short-sighted and lacking perspective as I remember, the stowaway thought as his ghostly form ejected into cold space. Much of the Elzaban nectar shipment joined him in the empty vastness. The Mercury's Blessing zoomed away from him without closing the cargo hold door, eventually shrinking from sight.*

*The stowaway lay dispersed in the coldness of space for a while, but soon coalesced into his ancient shape.*

*Fear not, humans. As a teacher knows his students, so I have known your deficits in judgement and have planned for those frailties. I've absorbed enough energy to propel myself through space and my senses revealed to me exactly where, when and how your course had subtly changed. Retracing such breadcrumbs and extrapolating your original path shall be child's play. Once I reach the adopted world of the traitor, I shall restore our mission and correct the development of your species. Fear not, humans, I shall still save all of you.*

## Books Received

### JonathanBallPublishers

Leo Ruickbie Angels in the Trenches Little Brown R315.00

Christine Freehan Leopard's Run Little Brown R230.00

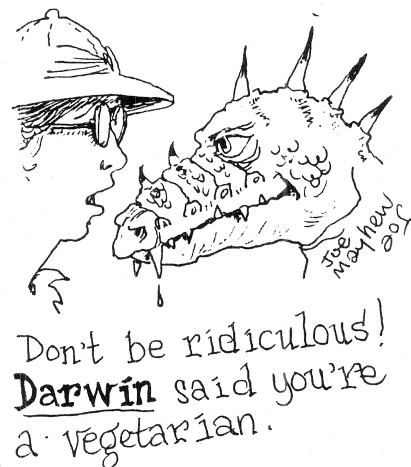
Ben Aaronovitch Lies Sleeping Orion U.K. R330.00

Brandon Sanderson Skyward Orion U.K. R330.00

Richard Morgan Thin Air Orion U.K. R330.00

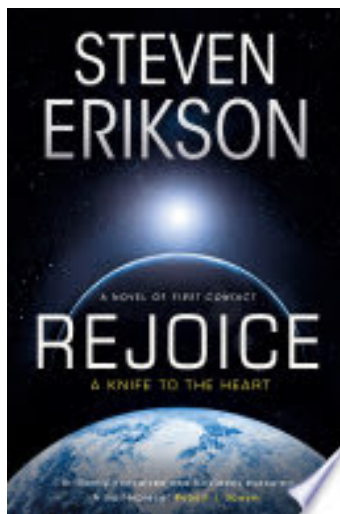
### Penguin Random House

George R.R. Martin Fire and Blood Gollancz



# Book Reviews    Ian and Gail Jamieson

## Steven Erikson    Rejoice – A Knife to the Heart



First Contact, of a sort. An alien AI, from three advanced species, has been sent to the solar system. Its job is to save Earth's ecosystem, and man is the biggest threat to this. The AI must decide: save man or destroy him. It captures a tough talking science fiction author, and sets out to convert her to its cause. In the meantime it stops all violence on earth, except suicide. It is now impossible to even hit anyone. The borders between countries no longer exist. Large scale

destruction of natural resources is no longer possible. As a counter everyone in need will receive food and water. Addictions slowly fade away and man is given a motor, which can be any size and does not need fuel or batteries, but which seems to run off the Earth's Magnetosphere. At the same time the AI starts to transform Venus.

The author has put a great deal of thought into what would happen to people and how they would react in these circumstances. From the poorest, to war lords, to presidents, they all discuss the consequences of the A.I.'s actions, and how they can react.

It is not often that I agree with the comments on the book, but this time I agree completely:

Robert J. Sawyer – “Brilliantly conceived, and flawlessly executed. A masterpiece.”

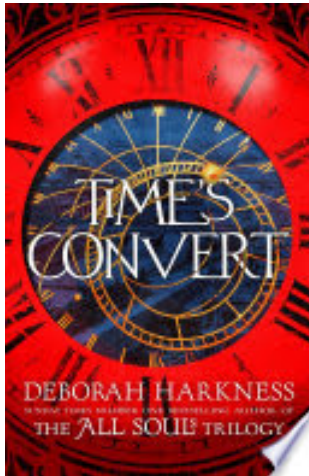
Stephen Baxter – “An El Niño of a book, dense, provocative, essential.”

For only the second time: 5/5

Ian



### Deborah Harkness Time's Convert



Marcus Whitmore is a drifter who finds himself working beside a specialist surgeon during the American Revolutionary War. The surgeon, Matthew De Clermont, is a vampire and helps Marcus to transform himself into one as well. Meanwhile in modern day Paris, Phoebe Taylor, Marcus' new lover, is herself undergoing the transition to vampire. The author spends a great deal of time detailing the story of Marcus, especially during the War. "Time passed in a never ending stream of illnesses and wounds. No sooner did a new patient arrive than a former patient left, some in pine boxes." Matthew and his

present day wife Diana, who is a witch, are doing their best to bring up their 2 year-old twins, Becca and Philip. The twins are bright born; half vampire and half witch, and are struggling to come to terms with their new magical abilities.

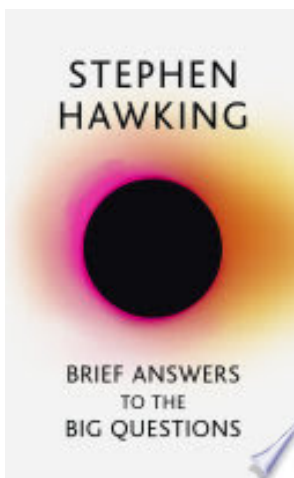
I found it extremely difficult to follow the threads of the story and although it is a supposedly "stand alone", you have to read the previous trilogy to fully understand the story and its characters. Although well written this is a love story

For the guys 1/5

For the ladies 4/5

Ian

### Stephen Hawking Brief answers to the Big Questions



Amongst other questions he asks:

Is there a God?

Can we predict the future?

Will artificial intelligence outsmart us?

Will we survive on Earth?

Is time travel possible?

And another five big questions

To answer the question on time travel he held a party for time travelers, but sent out the invites the day after the party. No-one turned up.

Hawking is renowned as the greatest theoretical physicist, and in the book he turns his brain to some really big questions. And he also talks about problems here on Earth, and how science can play a crucial role these issues. We are faced with possible, or even probable, catastrophies, climate changes, nuclear war and A.I's

Hawking covers a huge variety of subjects with his usual intellectual insights and humour.

A really enjoyable read.

4/5

Ian

### **Marcus Sedgwick The Monsters We Deserve**



The fictional author was a horror writer but now believes that it is not enough to scare people and wants to write something better. He has retreated to a bleak house in the Alps, the better to think about a novel he dislikes, Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein", and why it has remained popular for 200 years. He believes it is badly written and biased, forgetting it was written by a 19 year-old girl and concerning a topic rarely discussed. He carries on reviewing the book for some time, until Mary Shelley herself suddenly starts appearing to

him, sometimes young and sometimes older. "Knowledge is knowing that Frankenstein is not the monster, Wisdom is knowing that Frankenstein is the monster."

And when he tries to leave the house, it, or something else stops him again and again.

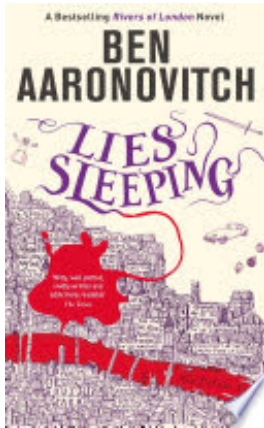
This book is classed as horror, and dark scary as it certainly is, it is more about the paranormal, and about taking responsibility for your own creations.

Sedgwick is an exceptional writer, but it will take a different sort of reader to really enjoy this novel.

4/5

Ian

## Ben Aaronovitch Lies Sleeping



Peter Grant and his second partner, Sahra Guleed, are still on the trail of the notorious killer, now known to be Martin Chorley. Peter is now a detective constable, and also a junior Wizard. The Faceless Man and his new partner, Lesley May, have a plan, using magic, to transform London into a much better place. It involves, among other things, a large bell made of clays from various historical sites, and the death of Mr. Punch, a junior god.

Peter is not always the smartest man in the room, and often requires the help of a selection of friends and colleagues, usually more powerful, than he is. But Peter does not give up, and it is his dogged determination which carries him forward. As this is the last book in the series there are no prizes for guessing who comes out on top. The side characters are intriguing and interesting in their own right, but, as the book is written in the words of Peter, i.e. he is the narrator, there are many quips and one-liners, and this is altogether a most entertaining book.

4/5

Ian

## Guillaume Delande, Illustrator Bunka – Assassin's Creed



The book offers about 90 pages of facts, figures, characters, and the time origin of the Assassin's Order, while providing a short background on the franchises.

There is an overview on all the artefacts, where they are now, and who came into contact with them. This is followed by the history of the Assassin's Creed Universe, and what happened when the Assassins came up against the Templars.

There is an interesting section about the people in history who we met during the series. And of course our memories can be refreshed by reading about the Assassins themselves and their individual histories. The illustrations themselves are well done and offer a guide to the various items we read about. This is a fairly comprehensive guide to the AC Universe and is very useful in jogging memories as to what happened and when.

3/5 Ian

## Richard Morgan Thin Air



A very small number of people on Mars can win a lottery ticket which will take them back to Earth. When one of this miniscule number does not claim his prize and goes missing, Earth sent an Auditor to investigate. Harkan Veil, who would dearly love to return to Earth but does not have the means, is forced to act as bodyguard to a very reluctant Jegede Madekwe and from the start things start to go wrong. She does not like him but they are strongly sexually

attracted and this makes his job all the more difficult. As we would probably expect, she is kidnapped and he is thrown into a Martian underground even he did not know existed. This is a cyber-punk detective story that takes place on a future Mars that has been partially terraformed and it has plenty of twists and turns and people turn out to be very different from what they might have been expected. Everyone seems to want to kill him and Osiris, the military Grade AI that lives in his head, seems to offer more sardonic comments than really helpful ones.

The description of the rundown area where he lives brings to mind a drier picture of the ones in the Bladerunner movies.

He associates with a sex worker who seems to have a heart of gold, a tough cop and a gangster. The topic on everyone's mind is, will there really be the rain that has been promised?

The Martian society is a rough, unpleasant and downgraded one, and everyone has an embedded tracker which should help but seems only to take advantage of the unfortunate citizenry. Earth still has the upper hand. The auditor they have sent has hidden agendas.

This man can certainly write and by the final twist in the tale I began to almost hope that there might be a sequel. Science fiction and action are seamlessly blended and I thoroughly enjoyed all of it.

Read and enjoy.

Gail

## Brandon Sanderson Skyward – Claim the Stars



This is book One. Brandon Sanderson seems to have an inexhaustible supply of ideas for different worlds. This one is a world that has been under attack by an alien race the populace call the “Krell” No-one has actually ever seen one of these creatures who constantly send ships from the sky to attempt to destroy all of humankind.

Humanity put all of their defensive effort into training a space force that must fight off the Krell. Spensa has always dreamed of being a pilot but she has a

disadvantage; her father reneged on his flight team many years ago and his ship was blasted from the sky by one of them. Because the Admiral of the flight school believes that she carries the same trait inherently in her, she is not allowed to stay at the school with her fellow team, even though she is able to pass the entrance exam. Because of this she finds a long hidden damaged space ship which she, over some time is able to repair, even though it does not want her to do so.

As she learns to fly, the Krell suddenly increase the size of their attack fleet and even unready pilots are sent into battle, and she joins them in her unauthorized craft.

The is a story which follows Spensa, who earns the call name of “Spin” on her journey through flight school, through the hardships she undergoes to the final battle where she discovers why he father may have been called a coward and to an understanding of why humanity is under constant arrack.

As usual I find that Brandon Sanderson writes a story will takes you along with it and is almost impossible to put down. I wait with baited breath for the next book in the series.

I can recommend this one.

Gail

## George R.R. Martin Fire and Blood



This novel is set three hundred years before “A Song of Fire and Ice” and chronicles the reign of the Targaryen kings from Aegon the Conqueror to Aegon III and ends just before the novel “Game of Thrones”

I admit to being disappointed that George R.R. Martin did not finish “A Song of Fire and Ice”, before setting down this list of Targaryen Kings and their Queens and their Dragons.

To me it reads more like a historical text than the

exciting novels that we have enjoyed in the later saga.

House Targaryen is the only family of Dragonlords to survive the Doom of Valyria and this novel begins with the story of Aegon the conqueror and creator of the legendary Iron Throne. It tells the tale of the Dragons which were used to dominate the pretenders to the Throne and how the line came to be destroyed, leaving only the three eggs which come somewhat conveniently to Daenerys Targaryen.

It chronicles the internecine strife from a number of points of view of the Targaryen clan and I suppose helps to fill in some of the history of Westeros, but I still would rather have had a completion on the "Game of Thrones" saga

George R.R. Martin writes well, as usual but the subject matter, to me, is not enthralling and it took me a couple of attempts to finish reading this 706-page novel. I think it could have been much improved by some judicious editing.

## **L.O.C - Lloyd Penny**

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Dear SFFSAns:

Hello!, but not from Etobicoke, or even Canada...right now, I am in the lobby of a Sheraton hotel in Novi, Michigan, just northwest of Detroit, and today is the day of preparations for a big steampunk convention here. Yvonne is taking part in a pre-convention sewing lesson day, and I nearby, writing this letter on my tablet and keyboard. Great fun! Here goes with comments on Probe 175, with its great 2001 overall cover.

Congratulations on your upcoming 50th anniversary! Ever thought the club would last this long? Seems lots of SF organizations have some measure of longevity, mostly because of a handful of fans who were aware of the history of fandom. We're all getting a little long in the tooth, so I hope the club might outlive us. Fingers crossed.

The passing of Ursula K. Le Guin is now followed by the deaths of Gardner Dozois and Harlan Ellison. Our favourite authors and editors are passing, which serves as a reminder of our own ages. All of you stay healthy, okay?

When I first starting reading SF mumblety-umptein years ago, the idea of time travel fascinated me. Part of early SF's attraction was the exercise of the mind, with new ideas to wrap your brain around. Paradoxes just added to the exercise. But, we have gotten older, logic rears its unfortunate head, and we have trouble with those



paradoxes as they multiply. As scientific people, we wonder if there is a physical timeline that we are following, or if there is simply the awareness of being, and time simply being our internal concept of passage. Going back in time gives credence to the former, while the latter may be all there is. We may never know for sure, but our speculation provides lots of brain candy for us to chew on.

We've had the ideas of settling the Moon and Mars for a long time now...I wish we could do it. We're too busy fighting with one another to have any such dreams become real. With we finish ourselves fighting over a chunk of territory, or simply fall to fascism from the most unlikely of places. Our world is looking more and more dystopian all the time, and I desperately wish I was wrong; I want to be more optimistic.

I am still hopeful that we will continue to have the technology that will protect us from small asteroids. The bigger ones may come along to make all of us a galactic footnote. Some measure of protection from the larger asteroids may be the only reason to have nuclear weapons, in my humble opinion. If this must happen let it long after we're gone. In the meantime, interesting stories such as *The Last Baby* can remind us that we need to be vigilant, yet optimistic about our future if we seize it, and not let small-minded politicians keep us from rising above the battles for ideology and bits of land.

I know there has been criticism of some high fantasy stories of being simply rewrites of anything by Tolkien, who created the heroic quest sagas. Perhaps the best way to see the other roots of modern fantasy is to explore Tolkien's peer group, especially the other members of the Inklings, some of whom advised Tolkien on his writings, and who definitely influenced the history of Middle-Earth. I liked the old Joe Mayhew cartoon, and Joe is still missed after all these years.

Enjoyed the other stories, but I have no comments on them...great to see that article from the *Daily Galaxy*, and see that the University of Toronto is still influencing space news, and they are making an impact. All the people I knew in the local space sphere are largely gone, or moved further into the industry professionally. My short time within the local space group was interesting, but as in many activities, the human part of things kinda spoiled things for me. Politics reared its head, and it became an old boys' group, and I was on the outside looking in.

Time to go, things are starting to happen here, and the convention here may start a little early for me. Thanks for this issue, and more issues leading up to the 50th anniversary...well, I look forward to them, and I hope to celebrate with you. Take care, all!

Yours,

Lloyd Penney.

# Nova 2018 Finalist

## The Autopsy of Jane Doe by Gary Kuyper

Detective Gustav Kowalski finished typing the preliminary report on the *Olivetti* with the *goddamned sticky t-key*. He sat back and patted his breast pocket. He grimaced with frustration and disappointment remembering that he had wanted to buy a fresh pack on his way back to the precinct. Tony Garcia, his young partner of but two months, had insisted they head straight back to the station – it was getting late, he was tired, and he wanted to get home to his new wife and a hot meal. He didn't smoke and he also didn't drink – *yet*.

"I give you a year, kid" Gus had said with a smirk that was more a snarl. "Wait'll you see some o' the shit I seen."

Some of that shit had been the decapitated corpse of his previous partner, Frank Doyle. Doc Fidel had said the body was all but void of blood. He had claimed that the heart had probably kept beating for some time after the head was removed. Gus had not been impressed or partial to the doctor's analogy of 'a headless chicken running around like some *drug-crazed freak*.'

Frank had not been the first. In fact, he was investigating the initial incident when it happened. Gus had been at home recovering from a mild case of food poisoning.

It was after Frank's murder that the press started to have a field day about a serial killer whom they fittingly dubbed '*The Queen of Hearts*.'

It was Tony who had to explain the significance of the designation to Gus.

'It's from *Alice in Wonderland*. The *Queen of Hearts* was...*obsessed* with having the heads of her...*uncooperative* subjects removed.'

Now there was a new puzzle to solve. Two dead bodies found in Jefferson Park – a stone's throw from where Frank's body had been discovered. Both were still intact, heads firmly in place. Yet the causes of death were not clearly evident. Gus was waiting for Doctor Fidel's report.

Was there a connection here to the *Queen of Hearts* murders?

'Not likely,' thought Gus. 'Just coincidence. Horrible, *horrible* coincidence.'

He sat back and read the typed report through before pulling it free from the cold grip of the rubber rollers. How much sorrow and death had this contraption described? How much terror, destruction and sheer horror? How much *blood*?

He found a sizable butt in the ashtray. He never used a lighter. There was something about the tang of charred sulphur and wood preceding that of tobacco that he enjoyed – relished.

He exhaled a satisfied plume through his nostrils and gazed over at Tony who was chatting on the phone, his hand cupped over his mouth. It was late and they were the only two left at the third-floor office.

"Goddamned newlywed nonsense," he muttered under his breath. "I give *that* eighteen months, two years tops, before its all volts and vinegar. I don't know a policeman who has a happy marriage."

If anything, Gus was damn good at his job. He had often quipped that, 'Sherlock Holmes was fiction - but Gus Kowalski, he's the real deal, baby.' He had an excellent track record to support his self-satisfied statement. Thirty-two convictions over the past four years alone. That averaged out to one for every six weeks. The plaque on his desk, from the commissioner, was a testimony to his talent – his gift. Yet, the one case he truly wished to solve remained a mystery. Although he had bribed or beaten every stoolie and streetwise punk from here to Hoboken he had turned up nothing – *zilch*. The *Queen of Hearts* murders remained a mystery.

He took another long pull and exhaled a thick cloud over the report. His mind, as always, started to analyse, scrutinize and dissect the details. One might almost believe the smoke was a result of some thought processing machinery in his head, pistons and cogs and gears, working hard to solve a new and baffling case.

Two bodies, man and woman. Who killed who, or was there a third party involved. Two lovers and a jealous spouse?

The man's wallet had produced a driver's license. A Dexter Donovan with an address that put his apartment less than a mile from the crime scene.

The woman was a Jane Doe. If she had a criminal record, fingerprinting would hopefully reveal her identity. If not...well somebody would surely miss her. *Missing Persons* would have good news for Gus but not so for the deceased's family and friends.

Gus had become hard through the years but managed well at feigning concern and empathy for all the victims' loved ones. Mrs. Maud Donovan's reaction had proved somewhat unique and refreshing, if not *surprising*.

"Was it that *Queen of Hearts* killer again? Did he cut off that stubborn idiot's stupid head?"

"Uh, no, he's still in one...erm piece. The..."

"I warned him something like this would happen but he wouldn't listen. He liked to go to Danny's Donuts after working late. It was much shorter to cut through the park from there than to go around. I kept telling him its dangerous to do that at night, especially since they found those people there with their heads missing."

Gus had wanted to say that the heads were next to the bodies but instead opted to ask, "What sort of work did your husband do?"

"He's a...*was* a patent clerk."

"A patent attorney?"

"*Ha*, don't I wish? *Nah*, he was just a *pencil-pusher* for Solomon & Kramer."

Tony had suddenly blurted, "Did you know that Albert Einstein's first job was also that of a humble patent clerk?"

"Yeah, well Dex was no goddamned Einstein – trust me! *Five years* he's been working for those skinflints at S & K! Never a decent raise! Never a..."

"There was another victim. A woman," said Gus hastily interrupting the woman's ravings.

"What? *Who*?"

"I was hoping *you* could tell us." He had handed her a Polaroid. "She was found close to your husband."

"It's a *double homicide*," Tony had added.

"Dou...?" Maud stared at the photograph.

"Recognise her?"

"No, never seen her in my life. Are you suggesting that Dex and this..."

"We ain't suggestin' *nuthin'* Mrs. Donovan," Gus had blurted. "We just want some *facts* from you."

"Would you say that you and Dex...*Mister Donovan* were happily married?" asked Tony coldly and methodically.

Gus gave Tony a daggered glare.

Mrs. Donovan put a hand to her chest. "*What*? You don't think that...*I*...?"

"No...no...*no...relax*," Gus had said reassuringly. His gut reaction told him that Maud was not involved or responsible. "What my partner is trying to determine is whether or not your husband had reasons for pursuing an...*extramarital affair*." Then he cursed himself, realising that he may only have salted the woman's wounded ego.

The trip to *Solomon & Kramer* was just as frustrating and unfruitful. The woman in the photo was not an employee. In fact, no one there had any idea who she was. Also, surprisingly enough, no one seemed overly distraught when told of Dexter's demise. Gus concluded that poor old Dex was just one of those invisible people that drift through life - an insignificant *pencil-pusher* who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Gus was reaching for the phone when it rang. He gazed quickly and embarrassedly across at Tony to see if he had noticed him flinch. No, he was still cooing sweet nothings into the handset.

Tony turned towards Gus. "You gonna get that or what?"

Gus picked up. "Thirty-second precinct...homicide division...Detective Kowa...Doc? I was just about to call *you*. Any...what...*now*? Can't this wait till morning? I...we were just about

to...well, alright, if you insist? We'll be there as soon as possible." There was a concerned crease in his brow as he slowly replaced the receiver.

"What's up?"

"Doc Fidel wants to see us."

"What? *Now?*"

"Yep."

"Did he say *why?*"

"Nope. Sounded anxious."

"*Anxious?*"

"Come on."

#

Fidel was waiting in the receiving area.

"Here we are, Doc," sang Gus. "Came as quick as we could. Hey, you're looking paler than the corpses you work on." The doctor lifted a glass of urine-coloured liquid to his purple lips. His hand had a noticeable quiver. "That's some jitters you got there, Doc. Good thing you only operate on *dead* people. Wouldn't want you takin' out my tonsils. You might just remove my *appendix* at the same time."

The doctor gave a forced grin, but his concerned countenance returned with somewhat haste. "I'm a man of science, always been. A man of rational, logical reasoning and deduction...but after tonight..." He became silent, shaking his head despondently.

"Something *wrong?*"

"You better come see for yourselves." He put the glass down and moved towards the examination room.

Gus lifted the glass and sniffed the contents. It was unmistakably whiskey – and neat too by the strength of the fumes. He held the glass out towards Tony and raised his eyebrows. Tony took a whiff and jerked his nose away.

Gus put the glass down and spoke to Fidel's back. "Drinking on the job, Doc? Don't tell me you're losing your stomach for this sort of thing?"

"You'll want one too once I show you what I found."

"Well, you certainly got my curiosity all riled up. Let's take a gander then."

Gus and Tony followed the doctor into the large, cool room that smelled strongly of formaldehyde.

The two corpses were uncovered, lying face up on stainless steel examination tables. Their torsos were slit from throat to groin, the skin folded back and secured with numerous forceps and clamps - the innards removed.

"We'll begin with Dexter Doolittle here," said Fidel waving a hand over the corpse of the man.

"Dexter *Donavan*," retorted Tony. "Have some respect!"

Gus smiled at Tony. "You gotta forgive the old bastard. You become somewhat *desensitized* after years of doing this kind of shit."

The doctor ignored both remarks and continued, "Stomach contents – black coffee and a sugary, doughy, starch mass. Probably a couple of jelly do..."

"Donuts!" completed Gus.

"Yes."

"Well that would support Mrs. Doolittle's statement."

Tony glared at Gus.

Gus smirked and shrugged.

Fidel added, "Nothing harmful in there. I mean, apart from the sugar and fat, nothing poisonous or *lethal*."

"So, what was the cause of death?" asked Tony.

"Loss of blood."

Both detectives blurted in unison. "*What?*"

"No way!" exclaimed Tony. "There wasn't any blood on or near either of the victims."

The doctor moved to the corpse's head. "I'm telling you that this man died from a *loss of blood*. His body was all but *drained*."

"*Drained?*" spluttered Tony.

"Meaning *not much left*."

"Where? What? *How?*"

The doctor turned the corpse's head to the side. "My guess is by these puncture marks on the neck."

Again the two men responded in perfect harmony. "*What?*" Then they moved closer to where they could observe the two wounds, literally bumping heads in the process.

"You're telling me this guy bled to death through those little holes?" queried Gus. "Looks more like a couple of very nasty mosquito bites."

"These are directly above the jugular which carries a rather...*copious* amount of blood."



"Does she have them too?" asked Tony moving over to the Jane Doe corpse. "Did she also die from loss of blood?"

"No."

There was something about the doctor's calm and soft response that unsettled Tony. "*Well?*"

Before I tell you the cause of death, you need to know about something else first. A *few* things in fact."

"Go on."

"One of the first things we do with a Jane Doe cadaver is to take a set of fingerprints."

"Yes...and...?"

"She doesn't have any."

Tony lifted the corpse's hand. He gazed intently at the extremities of the long, thin digits. "I'll be damned! They're smooth and void of any..."

"Another way to help us identify an *unknown* is body markings. That includes scars and/or tattoos. *Nothing*, not a single one. Not even a vaccination scar or a birth mark."

"What about dental records?" asked Gus.

"I was getting there." He moved to the Jane Doe's head. "This is where it starts to get really...*interesting*. I have never seen a more perfect set of dentures on a corpse. No caps, no fillings, no crowns. And look at these." He pulled the top lip of the Jane Doe away.

"Lord Almighty!" exclaimed Tony staring at the two long, sharply pointed eyeteeth. "Are those *real?*"

"You better believe it."

"You stated she never had any markings on her body," said Gus noticing the burn scar along her left hip. That seems like a rather serious..."

"That was me."

"*You?*"

"We use a special UV radiation to enhance secretions on the skin or clothes. The radiation causes the secretions to fluoresce so that they may be collected for samples."

"Yeah, so?"

"The instant the beam touched her skin it began to *smoulder*."

"*What?*"

"I swear that if I hadn't turned it off she would probably have *burst into flames*."

Tony crossed himself before blurting, "Mary, mother of God! What the *hell* are we dealing with here?"

"It gets better. Or should I say worse. A lot, *lot* worse."

"God, what more?"

"The contents of *her* stomach?"

"Lord, no...don't tell me!" croaked Gus gazing at Dexter Donovan's corpse."

"That's right!" said the doctor nodding. "That's why there wasn't any blood at the scene."

Tony began to mumble incoherently. "*Not possible*" and "*Not real*" were heard a few times, as well as "*Vampire*."

Gus was speechless.

"So..." declared Fidel, "...it would appear that the lore and legends are far more real than we would like them to be."

Gus stuttered, "Wha...wha...what was the cau...the cau..."

"The cause of death?" helped the doctor.

"Yeah."

"This," he said lifting a kidney-shaped stainless steel bowl and holding it out towards Gus as he had done many times in the past. Most times they contained the lead slugs, bullet tips, that had ripped into the soft flesh of murder victims. This time it contained the lead-filled wooden tip of a pencil.

"A *pencil point*?"

"*Right*. And according to the tales and traditions, what is the best way to kill a *vampire*?"

"A wooden stake through the heart."

"*Exactly!* I found the rest of this pencil tightly clutched in Mister Donovan's hand."

Gus managed to break a smile. "Good God, the man really was a *pencil-pusher*. A pencil pushing goddamned *hero*."

"Yes and this also solves your *Queen of Hearts* mystery."

"It does?" A spark of realization flashed in Gus' eyes. "*Of course!* She did it to hide her handiwork on the victims' necks."

"*Precisely!*" "Doc?" groaned Tony weakly.

"Yes, my boy."

"Could I have some of that whiskey of yours? A really *large* one?"

## ALITA – BATTLE ANGEL Movie Review by TERTIUS CARSTENS



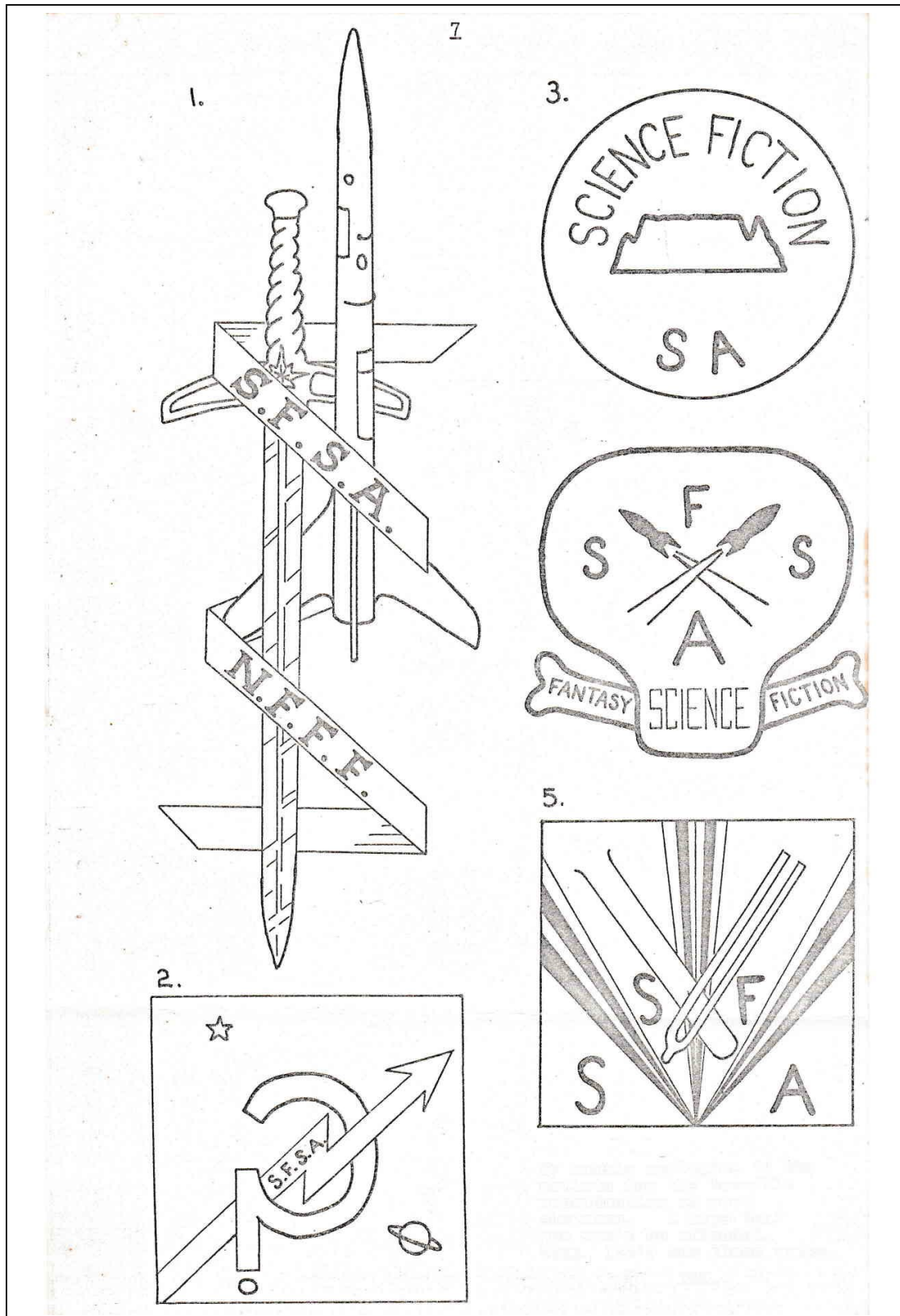
Whether you've read the popular Manga series or saw the Anime, no-one can deny that the Japanese has a gift for good story-telling. ALITA BATTLE ANGEL was originally created by Yukito Kishiro and titled '*Battle Angel Alita*' back in 1990. It was only some time later when James Cameron came across the story and decided to write a screenplay on it. But due to tight schedules to bring his *Avatar*-sequels to life, Cameron could not find the time to lead the project himself. So, directing responsibility went to non-other than veteran Mexican filmmaker Robert Rodriguez.

The film is visually stunning with some of the best action sequences I've seen in a long time. The CGI and production design are jaw dropping. The same motion capture technology to create the Na'vi people in *Avatar* was used to create the films cyborgs and is among the most realistic creations ever to be seen on the silver screen. But the heart of the film is its story and characters.

Nothing is revealed all at once about who the protagonist (Alita) is. Throughout the film we learn new things about her – who she is and where she came from – while she herself explores the world around her while trying to figure out who she really is. What makes her character so remarkable is that she's almost human. She's not only a cyborg programmed to do battle, but she also shows emotion and concern for the people she loves.

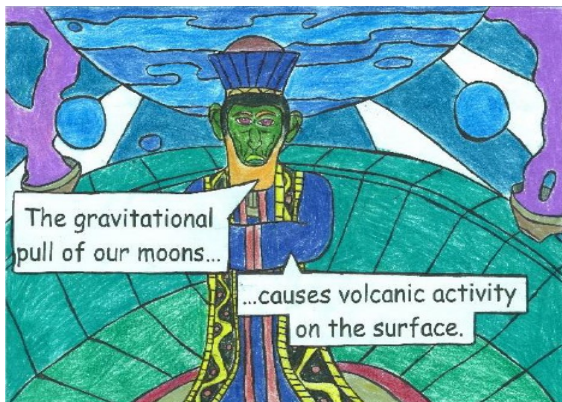
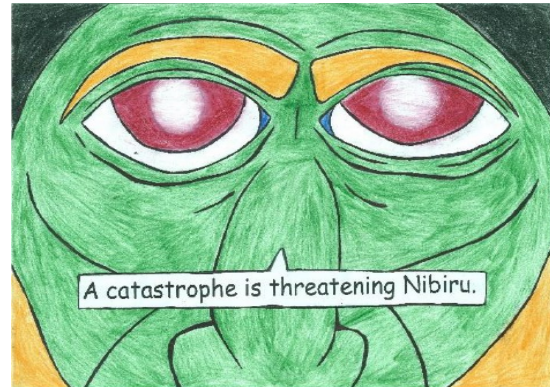
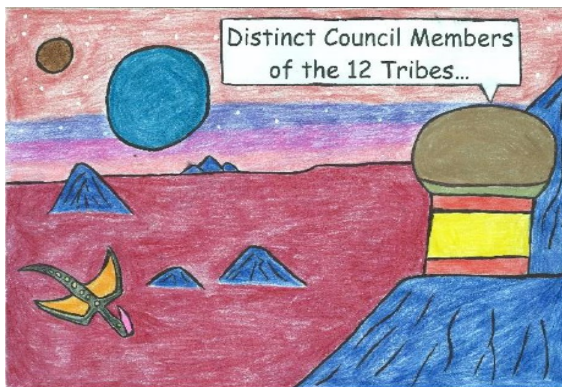
Throughout his career James Cameron has written strong female characters; Ellen Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) in *Aliens* and Sarah Conner (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator* and *T2*. Alita (played by Rosa Salazar) is no exception. These characters are strong not because they kick-butt, but because they are real people the audience can identify with. They have emotions, flaws and doubts. They are strong because they face their ordeals even if they are scared.

# Blast From the Past - The Original Suggestions for the "New" Logo for SFSA - 1969





## ORIGINS – 2. CATASTROPHE – TERTIUS CARSTENS



TO BE CONTINUED...



