

New Fiction from Brian Barry Turner: “Death Takes a Temporary Duty Assignment”

Death had narrowed his search of potential candidates down to two soldiers, both with high kill counts. Qualified applicants were always military men assigned to the line. Death had been a knight under Robert the Pious. His predecessor had been a Centurion under Augustus. Snipers, artillerymen, and pilots were ineligible, too much separation from the butchery. Intimacy and closeness were necessary for a harvester of souls.

Blackburn and Rojas. Each man had seen the whites of enemy eyes before pulling the trigger. Death had brushed shoulders with each of them, literally and figuratively.

Death sat beside his laptop computer, his bony finger pressing SEND on the last of his 555,000 emails: intercessions, near death experiences, and miracles forwarded to him by God. “Finally,” he said as he rose and grabbed his scythe, “I’m all caught up.”

Death had been granted a two-hour Temporary Duty Assignment to pick a successor. Having completed his thousand-year tour of duty, he had extended for three more years to clear up a client backlog. The twentieth century had been a busy time for the Grim Reaper, perhaps the busiest in history. With the invention of the cell phone and internet, the incumbent Death received a constant barrage of text messages and emails which—considering his birth 400 years before the printing press—he managed adroitly.



As a spirit operating outside the bounds of space and time,

Death's job granted him near omnipresence: only a fraction of a second later he was standing within a concertina-lined forward operated base in Northern Iraq. He checked his watch—1300 hours.

Invisible to the Living, Death strode through Task Force Warrior's Tactical Operating Center, spotting Sergeant Major Muerte haranguing a long-haired private. "Sergeant Major," he said to himself as he stepped into Muerte's body, "I hope you don't mind me possessing your soul for a tick."

The private reeled as Muerte's Aztec hue shifted to a bloodless pallor and his face, previously the picture of health, deflated. Staring through opaque eyes, Muerte—now Death—snapped his fingers, and his scythe instantly appeared in his pale hand.

The private straightened up, eyes trained on the razor-sharp scythe. "No need for that," he said, backing out of the TOC, "I'll cut my hair, Sergeant Major."

Scythe in hand, Death, now Muerte, walked around Warrior Base, finally locating Charlie Company's first sergeant. He had little time to dawdle.

"I need to speak with Sergeants Blackburn and Rojas, First Sergeant."

Staring at the large Scythe, the square-jawed first sergeant hesitated. "What about, Sergeant Major?"

"A promotion."

"A promotion? To what?"

"The Angel of Death."

"Oh..." he said, exhaling in relief. "I thought I was getting transferred."

Located in a derelict guard house, Muerte's office was the epitome of military austerity—desk, two chairs and a laptop computer, the antithesis of Death's Victorian-era quarters. Muerte set his Scythe against a bullet-riddled wall and took a seat behind his computer. He logged onto his email and sighed at the 300,000 unread messages in his inbox. He downloaded Blackburn's file.

Just as Muerte was about to call in his first candidate, the report of a mortar round rocked his office. With less than ninety minutes to conduct his interviews, he couldn't afford any distractions. Within an instant he was outside Warrior Base's perimeter standing beside a truck occupied by three insurgents and a mortar.

Upon seeing the now manifested scythe-wielding, eight-foot tall skeleton draped in a black robe, the insurgents' faces froze in silent screams. "Do you mind?" he said in perfect Arabic. "I'm conducting interviews."

"Malak al-Maut![\[1\]](#) Malak al-Maut!" yelled the driver as he stomped on the gas, covering Death's robe in a brume of powdered dust.

Transposing himself back into Muerte's body, he checked his watch. 77 minutes. Barely over an hour left to select a candidate for a thousand-year tenure of abject grief and hopelessness. He'd kill for more time.

Sergeant First Class Blackburn stood in his doorway as Muerte reviewed his file, "You asked for me, Sergeant Major?"

"Take a seat, Blackburn."

Standing a portly 5' 2", Blackburn's stature was exacerbated by his unusually long arms which necessitated his wearing gloves to protect his dragging knuckles. Blackburn took a seat across from Muerte and reached for a pack of cigarettes.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Be my guest," said Muerte, "Can I bum a square off you?"

Blackburn offered Muerte a cigarette from his sausage-shaped fingers. Muerte took a deep drag, relishing the tobacco, tar, and carbon monoxide as it entered his lungs. Cigarettes and Death. Death and cigarettes—like ham and cheese to the Living.

Muerte gazed at his laptop. "It says here you killed 22 insurgents."

"23, Sergeant Major."

"No, Sergeant, 22. One was shot by friendly fire."

"Oh..."

Muerte leaned back in his seat and took a deep drag, sizing up Blackburn's homuncular appearance. "What does that mean to you, to kill 22 men?"

"Are you with JAG?"

"No, I'm not with JAG."

Blackburn's eyes darted around the room. "I don't know if I should answer that."

"Anything you say here stays in this room."

Blackburn leaned across the desk. "I'm the Angel of Death," he whispered.

"Say again?"

"I'm the Angel of Death."

"You're the Angel of Death?"

"Yes, Sergeant Major."

Muerte was taken aback by Blackburn's hubris. Boasting was bad form even among the Living.

"That's awfully presumptuous, isn't it?"

"Presumptuous?"

"Can you answer two million emails in a single day?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

"Can you answer three million phone calls a day?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

"How about travel? Can you be in a million places at once?"

"No, Sergeant Major."

Muerte stood. "Thank you, Sergeant. I've heard enough."

Blackburn offered a handshake, but Death politely refused. He hadn't come to collect Blackburn, only to interview him.

Muerte returned to his chair and checked his in-box. 700,000 unread emails. Never a moment's rest. Death gave the Rojas file a quick look. Just as he was about to call him in he heard a truck turn sharply into Warrior Base's entrance. He rolled his eyes, "Here we go again."

Materializing beside a pick-up packed with explosives, Death killed the engine. He had dominion over the Living *and* all forms of technological devices, including internal combustion engines. Few were aware of this.

The suicide bomber sat motionless in the driver's seat, horrified by the cloaked figure towering over the hood of his truck. Death walked to the driver's side and tapped his bony finger on the glass. The suicide bomber rolled down his window.

“Kinda busy right now,” Death said in Arabic. “You mind coming back later?”

The suicide bomber nodded and put the truck in reverse.

Death returned to Muerte’s body. 1,200,000 unread emails in his inbox. He’d give his soul for a personal assistant. He checked his watch—30 minutes. He was out of time.

“Next!”

Sergeant First Class Rojas entered Muerte’s office. Five-foot ten with a rail thin physique, Rojas looked like he’d be ground to powder by a sandstorm. His freckled face was capped by a thatch of red hair. Death smiled at his surname. *Rojas*.

“You summoned me, Sergeant Major?”

Muerte motioned for Rojas to take a seat. He stared at his laptop, then turned to Rojas. “25 insurgents. It says here you killed 25 insurgents.”

Rojas sat silently, running his hand over his ginger brush cut.

“How does that make you feel, to kill 25 men? “

“Are you with JAG?”

“I’m not with JAG,” Muerte said. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“It’s a loaded question. If I said I felt nothing I’d be a sociopath. If I said I enjoyed it, I’d be psychotic.”

Muerte chuckled. “You Living, always putting labels on your own agency.”

“Living?”

“I’m not here to diagnose you.”

“Honestly?” said Rojas as he straightened up. “Part of me felt good to kill those men.”

“Good?’

“Yes. They were trying to kill me, but I killed them first. I suppose it’s primal.”

Muerte leaned back in his seat, “Please elaborate.”

“It felt good, but I don’t get any joy out of taking another man’s life. I simply did what had to be done.”

“And that is?”

“Bring my men home. Those men I killed, they have families, but so do the soldiers in my platoon.”

“So, in a way,” Muerte said, closing his laptop, “you view death as simply a consequence of your chosen profession.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major. And I take that profession very seriously.”

Muerte ruminated on his words, sizing up the freckly-faced, red haired non-commissioned officer. There was no doubt about it. He’d found his replacement.

“Congratulations,” Death said as he rose and offered a handshake. “You’ve got the job.”

Rojas stared at Muerte’s pale fingers. “Job?” Rojas asked as he rose and offered his hand in return.

“Yes, a job,” supplemented Muerte. “But I must warn you, the workload will kill you.”

New Fiction from Brian Barry Turner

“So, you feel the earth rotating under your feet?”

As Specialist Torres grasped tightly to the doorframe of the CO's office, a litany of questions flashed before Captain Savalas' mind, least of which involved the earth's gravitational pull.

“Yes, sir.”

“That's why you're holding onto my doorframe?”

Torres struggled to keep his feet from slipping out from under him, “It's gravity, sir. I think I'm losing touch with it.”



“Levitating Man,” Andrew Spencer, <https://unsplash.com/photos/eY7ioRbk2sY>. Image at the Wayback Machine (archived on 24 April 2017)

Torres's gravitational issues manifested shortly after the Fiasco at Bunker Hill. Squad Leader Vogel opted to destroy the pillars holding up the roof of a bunker filled from floor to ceiling with artillery shells and propellant, effectively walling up the munitions in a concrete sarcophagus.

“Losing touch with gravity?”

“It's causing me balance issues, sir.”

“Try adding weight to your IBA,” Savalas said as he pointed at Torres's ballistic vest. “Increase your mass and you increase the force of gravity.”

As fate would have it, Torres had been selected to pop the five-minute time fuse on the bunker. Perhaps because of a faulty initiator, static electricity, even operator error, the charges detonated early, hurling Torres twenty feet into the air. Within seconds dozens of 122 mm rockets—initiated by the heat of the artillery propellant—soared through the sky, garnering the Fiasco title. His ears still ringing from the blast wave, Torres lay prone as the Grad's high explosive warheads pulverized the earth around him. Blaming himself, Vogel threw Torres over his back and ran half a Klick through hell, carrying him to safety.

Once back at Charlie Base the medics checked out Torres, confused about his inability to stand upright. With no visible injuries present, they recommended he inform the Company CO of his bizarre ailment.

After Savalas informed Sergeant Vogel of Torres's strained relationship with gravity, he radioed the combat stress team, requesting that an Army psychiatrist be sent out to Charlie Base. In the meantime, Vogel took preventative measures, adding as much weight as possible to increase his mass.

Vogel double checked Torres's IBA as he held fast to the bumper of a Humvee, "Two drums of 7.62 ammunition?"

"Check."

"Two drums of 5.56 ammunition?"

"Check."

"Eight M-16 magazines of twenty rounds?"

"Check."

With over one hundred pounds of weight added to his vest, Torres was little more than anthropomorphic armory. After taking a deep breath, Torres let go of the bumper and cautiously stepped toward Vogel. Unencumbered by a vest that

would cause even an airborne ranger to stoop, Torres's steps slowly turned into leaps. Then the leaps turned into jumps. Within moments Torres was bounding around the motor pool, mimicking the movements of a lunar spacewalk. Vogel's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe his eyes.

*

The psychiatrist arrived the next day. He took a seat across from Torres who clung tightly to the chair's arm rests. The psychiatrist stared at his laptop computer screen and ruled out every known ailment: post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, schizo-affective, obsessive compulsive disorder, even gender dysphoria. Torres was perfectly sane.

"Perfectly sane?" said a perplexed Savalas.

"That's right, Captain, but I'll need a second opinion."

"You declared him perfectly sane. Why do you need a second opinion?"

"Good question," the psychiatrist said, zipping up his laptop. "In the meantime, I'm requesting a physiatrist check for brain or spinal injuries."

The physiatrist was stationed miles away in the Green Zone. He informed Savalas that he'd arrive in two days. In the interim, Torres's gravitational condition took a turn for the worse. His bounds became increasingly difficult to control, and he was often seen jumping over the TOC and the derelict two-story building they slept in. Vogel added even more weight to his vest: two 50 Cal barrels, a pouch of satchel charges, and several bandoliers of 7.62 ammunition.

*

The physiatrist arrived as scheduled. He checked for everything: traumatic brain injury, herniated disks, stroke,

muscle and joint pain, even Skier's thumb. After a lengthy examination, the physiatrist informed Savalas that Torres's body was completely normal.

"Completely normal?" Savalas said, his brow furrowed into a perfect v.

"That's correct, Captain. However, I'll need a second opinion.

"You said his body is normal. Why do you need a second opinion?"

"Good question," said the physiatrist as he flipped through Torres's file. "In the meantime, I've requested that a physicist investigate his gravitational issues."

The Air Force physicist was stationed miles away in Doha. He stressed that the earliest he could fly out to Charlie Base was the following week. This minor detail troubled Savalas; he'd noticed a decline not only in Torres's gravitational issues, but in his mental health as well. After tying sandbags to his feet to keep him grounded—Torres became increasingly manic. He spent hours on the internet studying gravitational lensing, observational reference frames, and inertia. His mania became singularly focused on a planet named Gliese 876 d, a mere fifteen light years away.

Torres turned to Vogel as he escorted him out of the internet café. "Do you know that there are no wars on Gliese 876 d?"

The day before the physicist was due to arrive, Vogel burst into the CO's office. "Sir, it's Torres!" he said, struggling to catch his breath. "His gravitational condition is getting worse!"

Savalas followed Vogel to the motor pool where he was rendered speechless. Torres – with his four drums of ammunition, eight magazines, two 50 Cal barrels, satchel charges, four bandoliers, and several sand bags attached to his feet – was

bounding across Charlie Base at a height of 200 meters.

“Get a rope,” Savalas said pointing to a nearby post. “We’ll tie his feet to the ground to keep him from floating away!”

*

With Torres’s feet firmly secured to a post, the physicist arrived a day later. Standing beside a white board in Savalas’s office, he derived all of Newton’s Laws, including Lorentz transformations. With a board full of subscripts, superscripts, letters, brackets, parenthesis, and commas he concluded that Torres’s condition was mathematically unworkable, and therefore, impossible.

“Impossible?” Savalas said as he stared at the board full of equations. “Lemme guess, you need a second opinion?”

“Not at all,” said the physicist as he erased the white board. “Newton’s Laws are infallible.”

“So how you do explain him bounding 200 feet in the air?”

“Parlor tricks. But I must admit, his skills as an illusionist are superlative.”

Prior to leaving, the physicist agreed to ask an astronomer about Torres’s obsession with Gliese 876 d, a planet that – as far as the astrophysics were concerned–didn’t exist.

Vogel escorted Torres out of the TOC, his eyes focused on a large question mark Torres had shaved onto the top of his head.

“Why’d you shave a question mark onto your head?”

“Because I’ve found the answer to the greatest question of them all.”

“And that is?”

"Are we alone in the universe," Torres said with a placid smile.

*

The following morning Savalas received a radio call from the psychiatrist informing him he had overlooked Torres's flat affect—unusual given his gravitation condition. His conclusion was that Torres was suffering from schizophrenia.

"Schizophrenia?" Savalas said into the phone. "You said he was sane!"

"That's why I asked for a second opinion Captain."

Immediately after hanging up with the psychiatrist the psychiatrist called him on the radio. Struggling to form a coherent sentence, the psychiatrist briefed Savalas that he had misread his brain injury examination

"Traumatic brain injury!" said a frustrated Savalas. "You said his body was normal!"

"That's why I asked for a second opinion, Captain."

After hanging up on the psychiatrist, Savalas received a call from the physicist. Unlike the previous two conversations, the physicist reiterated that Torres's gravitation condition was mathematically impossible. But his obsession with Gliese 876 d was most confounding.

"There is in fact a planet that goes by that name in the Aquarius constellation, but..."

"But what?"

"It was discovered less than ten hours ago."

Savalas dropped the hand mic as the color drained from his face. He ran out of the TOC and noticed that Torres's rope, previously taut, was lying slack.

Standing motionless at the end of the rope, Savalas stopped beside Vogel. Both men stared at the four drums of ammunition, eight magazines, two 50 Cal barrels, satchel charges, bandoliers, and four sand bags lying on the ground. Torres had cut the rope fasted around his ankle.

Vogel stared upward, straining his eyes. "Torres... he's gone, sir."

"Gone? Where?"

"Space, I guess. Gliese 876 d."

Savalas sighed as he ran his hand over his closely cropped hair, "You think he's coming back?"

"Coming back?" said a bewildered Vogel. "Why?"

"If he's coming back I can write him up AWOL. Otherwise, it's desertion."

Brian Barry Turner's short story, "Gravity of War" originally appeared in [So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library](#) (Issue No. 7) and appears here with the writer's permission.