

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.

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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.

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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!"

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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.

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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.”

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