

YA FANTASY: ROWENNA BY ERICA VERRILLO  
SUBMISSION FROM MASSACHUSETTS

*Summary: With the Usurper's hordes at the gates, Rowenna finds herself at the center of a conflict that will change the face of the world. Determined to save her kingdom, Rowenna prepares for war, and it is Fire, who has taken mortal form, who comes to her aid.*

On the far western edge of a straw-colored plain is a mountain that people call Fire. The mountain is greatly feared, for the people who farm the plain below have suffered from Fire, having lost crops, livestock, dwellings, and whole families to its tantrums. Yet, they do not move elsewhere, for in good times the plain is productive. So, when the mountain trembles, the plains people bar their doors and console themselves with religion.

Much like children cowed by the unpredictable temper of a violent father, the plains people believe that the power to cause such death and destruction must be Divine, and that at the heart of the great mountain lives a deity who hears all, sees all, judges all, and needs constant appeasement to cool his burning wrath.

In every one of those convictions the plains people are wrong. Fire could care less about them. In fact, Fire would much rather argue points of philosophy with a snake than have terrified virgins and whatnot flung at him by a bunch of misguided, paranoid villagers. Today was no exception. The subject was Time.

“Time is like a river,” pronounced the snake.

The snake – called Avazi by those who know the true names of all things – lay curled in casual red loops, his head resting comfortably upon the warm sand. He was trying to explain the nature of Time to Fire. It was a futile endeavor, about as productive as trying to teach a turnip

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to play the violin. Nonetheless, the discussion served, as it had many times before, to keep Avazi entertained, boredom being one of the drawbacks of immortality.

Then Time, according to you, is composed of water. That is irritating. I don't get along with Water.

"Not precisely," replied Avazi. "I was merely pointing out its similarity to something which is in constant movement and flows smoothly from one point to the next."

As Fire transformed himself into a stream of molten lava, Avazi lifted his blunt snout away from the sticky mess and slid onto higher ground.

"You take everything so literally," he complained. Normally Avazi enjoyed talking to Fire. Of all the Elements, Fire was the most responsive. Air, though easily accessible, rarely engaged in conversation. She found it difficult to focus and, in those odd moments when she spoke, was given to sighing, which was annoying. Water's ideas flowed well, but she was a little too self-absorbed for a good debate. That left Earth and Fire. But while Earth welcomed a chat, she was not keen on debate. She avoided all types of conflict, even those of a friendly Socratic nature, which made it impossible to conduct an argument with her. Also, she disliked philosophy of any type, which meant that when a snake of intellect felt a craving for stimulation, he usually found himself at the bottom of a volcano. Today, however, Fire was proving to be stubborn.

"Time," explained Avazi, warming to his topic, "causes change. Those caught in its flow cannot stay the same. They begin small, then grow, expand, and eventually cease to be. Change is something which mortals do throughout their stay on earth. Change is what defines them as mortals, and it is something which you, as an Element, cannot do.

Fire rose into a roaring wall of flame, and just as quickly died down to a single glowing spark.

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“Are you trying to make a point?” Avazi poked his snout at the ember. “Or are you just being difficult?”

My point is obvious. Can I not grow, alter myself, shrink to nothing?

“True,” observed the snake. “In many respects you fill the requirements of a living thing. You breathe, you eat, you grow – but you cannot die, because you are not alive.” The snake licked his fangs thoughtfully. “You are a form of energy. As long as the Universe exists you will be an essential part of it, unlike individual living things, who are expendable. Anything that is alive can travel the river of Time for only a short distance.”

Are you alive?

Avazi pondered for a moment. In all of their conversations Fire had never posed that simple question. Avazi was not sure how to answer it. Even more troubling, he was not sure he could prove that he was alive.

“As an immortal,” he said, “I cannot die. Therefore, technically speaking, I am not alive. However ...” Avazi narrowed his eyes, attempting to look as if he were wrestling with some profound revelation. In reality he was just stalling. The discussion had become uncomfortably personal, which left him feeling less superior than usual. “I began, therefore I am!” he exclaimed.

And what is that supposed to mean?

“Unlike you,” said Avazi, “I had a beginning. There was once a time in which Avazi, as you know and love him, did not exist.” Avazi paused. “Horrible thought.”

Horrible, indeed. I don’t know what the Universe did without you.

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Avazi flicked his tongue in Fire's direction. Fire had a sardonic wit that sometimes rubbed Avazi's ego the wrong way. But, in the end, making a winning philosophical point was much more satisfying than sinking his fangs into somebody.

"I," he said pointedly, "have a corporal form. All beings which are alive have been endowed with bodies, though not necessarily as elegant as mine." He surveyed himself with satisfaction. "Therefore, although I cannot die – or at least have not yet done so – I am alive. Because I am alive, I exist in Time. And, because I exist in Time, I have an intuitive knowledge of the nature of Time. Time, therefore, is like a river, because I say it is. Subjective experience, my dear Fire, is what gives me the authority to make that claim."

Fire was silent for a long interval. Several days, or weeks, passed. Avazi did not keep track. Silences lasting days, weeks, months, even years were not at all uncommon during these discussions. Avazi felt his head droop. He loved the heat that Fire produced. It made him sleepy and relaxed, and after winning an argument there is nothing quite like a nap.

Is having a corporal form necessary for life?

"It is," mumbled Avazi. "It's a requirement."

Well, then. I will have to acquire one.

Avazi came awake with a jerk. "One what?"

A body. How can I verify that your knowledge of time is correct unless I experience it directly?

"Perhaps," said Avazi. "But requiring objective proof is really more appropriate for a scientific argument, not a philosophical debate."

Fire blazed. You're the one who claimed "authority."

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“True. But omnipotent beings don’t need to go through the process of subjective discovery.” Even as Avazi spoke he realized he had slipped into a trap.

Whose authority are you claiming now? Mine or yours?

Avazi coiled himself into a knot of frustration. He had to admit that Fire had effectively undermined his argument. Unless, that is, Fire could indeed acquire subjective experience. As he considered the idea, Avazi realized he rather liked Fire’s proposal. Something interesting might result from it, something different. Avazi began to uncoil.

Fire adopted a friendly, conspiratorial glow. Where do I find a body?

It was not unusual in the realm of supernatural beings – immortals, gods, minor deities, and so forth – for some of them to take animal or even human form from time to time. Gods were particularly inclined to adopt human form, though Avazi could never understand the allure. All that meddling in human affairs, begetting of infants (who always developed strange psychological complexes), and instigating of wars seemed childish. Avazi suspected that the so-called gods liked to muddle things solely in order to boost their self-esteem. The gods were an insecure lot.

Elements, on the other hand, could be trusted to be discreet. After all, they were already everywhere.

“Earth might lend you a body,” said Avazi finally. “I have heard she grows them. Might I suggest ...” Avazi gazed down humbly.

If I looked like you, you’d just end up talking to yourself.

“There is absolutely nothing wrong with that!” said Avazi. “But you are probably right.” He stretched out to his full length. “This volcano wouldn’t be big enough for the both of me.”

All nine inches of you.

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“Nine and a half,” spat the snake. “Now do you want a body or not?”

Fire dimmed, contrite.

Avazi flicked his tongue as he worked on the problem. “Let’s see now, you’ll need a species that is social, intelligent, philosophical – and one that can speak, of course, to allow you to gain access to its views of this question. That leaves you with two options, whale or human.”

Water ... Fire nearly flickered out. I’ll take human.

“I’ll be back before you know it!” Avazi slithered away. In this case the expression was apt, for Fire had no awareness of the passage of Time.

But soon, thought the Serpent, that will be remedied.