

July 27th, 2024

Issue 12 | Relic

SciFansat

The Monthly E-Zine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

Micro Fiction & Poetry

nancyd_writes

M. H. Thaug

Voima Oy

Alan Vincent Michaels

A.A. Rubin

Flash Fiction

That Burnt Writer

Alan Vincent Michaels

Alastair Millar

Short Stories & Serials

Andrew L. Hodges - Unknown Faces (Short)

Peter J Gilbertson - Derelict Skyrings: Part VI

A Derelict Relic (Serial)

Jason H. Abbott - Shadow of the Black Tower (Serial)



Contents

1. Cover
2. Copyright
3. Editorial (pg. 4)
4. Poetry (pg. 5)
5. Micro Fiction (pg. 9)
6. Flash Fiction (pg. 11)
7. Short Fiction (pg. 21)
8. Serial (pg. 28)
9. News (pg. 42)

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Editorial

It's the last weekend of July, and that means it is time for the latest issue of SciFanSat... packed with science fiction, fantasy, and more!

This edition of the magazine features works in orbit around a theme of "Relic". We have poetry and microfiction by Alan Vincent Michaels, M. H. Thaug, Voima Oy, A. A. Rubin, and Nancy E. Dunne worth digging into. Alastair Millar, D. Bedell, Kayleigh Kitt, Morgan R. R. Haze, That Burnt Writer, and once again the prolific Alan Vincent Michaels, all bring us flash fiction treasures unearthed from their imaginations.

Three pieces within this issue mount expeditions into longer wordcount territory: The first is A. L. Hodges's excellent short story about an alien conservator and archivist who would always be up for penny-ante in, "Unknown Faces". It's among my favorite submissions this month. Then Peter J. Gilbertson thrills us with the continuing exploits of Mo Blackbear in the next chapter of his serialized novelette, "Derelict Skyrings". My contribution of horror, swords, and sorcery closes out the trio with the tenth serialized chapter of "Shadow of the Black Tower", wherein mounting tension and remnant architecture obscures a monstrous danger.

Next month will mark SciFanSat Magazine's first anniversary! A major accomplishment and benchmark that has come alongside much growth and learning this year. It's an experience I would not trade for anything, and helping to produce this publication each month brings fulfillment well worth the effort and sacrifice it requires in exchange. Evolution has been constant since we launched with issue one, and I know the periodical will continue to adapt and mature alongside the speculative fiction writers that comprise its lifeblood. Our gratitude goes out to the SciFanSat community supplying the magic that powers this endeavor!

Keep creating and doing amazing work. Take care and please join us again for our thirteenth issue in August, along with its dramatic theme of... *Gasp!* BETRAYAL!

~Jason H. Abbott

Poetry

A Memory and a Warning

by A. A. Rubin

A relic from the distant past,
An ancient tale told—
Repeated 'cross the galaxy,
On planets young and old:

A tale of hubris tragic,
That near led to our demise:
And of the noble remnant,
Who did like the Phoenix rise—

From the ashes of our home world,
The planet of our birth—
For we no longer can return,
To the desiccated earth

United by the memory,
Ever, we set forth—
For we no longer can return,
To the desiccated earth.

 [Flowcode](#) | [A. A. Rubin](#)

 [BackerKit](#) | [The Aweful Alphabet](#)



A Relic of Our Future

by Alan Vincent Michaels

(as channeled from a deceased poet)

I

Many years now, freed of my mortal coil,
I am compelled to visit the Earthly plane.
Should I be, no need to write and edit toil,
Likewise for those accepting AI's chain.

II

What of such monstrosities made by man,
Asking creativity from so-called *computers*?
AI can compose any poem, prose, or pan,
Using just the words of its myriad tutors.

III

And after the *daemon deus in machina* host
Pens its words without effort or strain,
AI performs the role a writer dreads most,
Yet editing such words without pain.

IV

When I pull aside the host's dark veil,
AI's true machinations I uncover.
Like a human writer, man's Mindless Grail,
Culling all humanity's words asunder.

V

Thus, how does an AI differ from a man,
Who crafts stories exploiting others' words?
AI creates faster than a human writer can,
Bringing us to reality's ford.

VI

Fear of the *computer* is not the stake,
For it is *man* relying upon AI's soulless sutures.
And thusly, we so completely accept the fake,
Allowing AI to make a relic of *our* future.

Edgar Allan Poe's poem, *The Happiest Day*, focusing on pride and power, inspired me to remain vigilant about who *or what* we allow to control our individual narratives and our collective future. **-AVM**



Relics of Earth's Lost Civilizations by Alan Vincent Michaels

Oh, majestic *Atlantis*
no fable from Plato's heart
you were a once vibrant land
your relics destroyed
hidden by time's mists
orichalcum and half-memories remain

Oh, reigning Egyptian pharaohs
you usurped *KMT's* pride and history
making their pyramids and *deep time* relics
yours by right of conquest
allowing *ancient truths* to fade
repeating myriad past mistakes

Oh, mighty among us today
what relics of our civilization
will be allowed and preserved
so that *Earth's* future can thrive
avoiding the tribulations of long-lost
Atlantis, KMT, Lyonesse, and Mu?

For now, we can only speculate
what scholars of some future time
or archaeologists from an alien world
gazing at Earth's dusty relics
would understand about a civilization
a legend – once called *America*

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Micro Fiction

The Opened Box

by M. H. Thaung

On the fourth day after we fled the war, the sensors highlighted a strange cuboid ahead. It lay in uncharted space. A star winked through a jagged gap in its wall.

"A harmless relic," said Cass dismissively. When asked why it was there, she shrugged and returned to her cabin.

Not attempting to scavenge, we steered clear. The sudden madness possessing our alliance had destroyed our trust in the universe.

But as we passed, I allowed myself a final look. The hull still bore part of a name: L_ST HOPE.

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Of My Earth?

by Nancy E. Dunne

I knew I shouldn't be in Translator's quarters, but I had to find out more about him. There were too many things that seemed related to Earth... My Earth.

The door opened with a whoosh, and I stepped inside. No going back now. His bunk was tidy. Weapons stored. Uniforms hanging in the closet.

But wait... In the back by the window, a spotlight lit an object, a relic from my earth. A first gen comm... we didn't even have those on our ships! How?

I took a sharp breath as the door whooshed open.

"What are you doing here?"

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Star Baby by Voima Oy

They went to Star Galacto Space Parts to see if they could find a ship.

What a pile of junk, he said.

It's a relic, she said. A beautiful relic.

It's a money pit, he said.

It's our money pit, she said. We'll fix her up, and call her Star Baby.

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Flash Fiction

Tears In His Eyes by Alan Vincent Michaels

"James!" Lizbet shouted from a chamber deep inside the Vatican Caverns. "I found *another* relic, and it's not a finger *or* even a hand this time. It's..."

James stepped through the pickaxed-hole Lizbet had made in the wall, catching his boot on loose stone, then stood up behind her and adjusted his forehead lamp.

"What did you find?" James asked, turning and dropping his head to see what was on the ground. The lamp beam illuminated an elderly man, ashen-faced with long, stingy gray hair and a matching beard, wearing a saffron- and red-colored Buddhist-like robe, sitting in the lotus position.

James gasped and grabbed Lizbet's shoulders, moving them both back from the man.

"James, stop! He's *long* dead—I think."

James released his grip and walked over to the man. Bending down, he noticed no smell, no insects, and no signs of life. It was like looking at a *Madam Tussauds* wax sculpture of a Tibetan lama.

"Okay, I'm *really* confused now," said James. "What's a wax sculpture doing down here in the Caverns? And of a lama, no less."

"I don't think the Council's Engineering Board knows about any of this," replied Lizbet. "And I don't think it's a wax sculpture. I doubt seriously they would have let two geologists, alone, to probe the Caverns for any stability issues before they finalize their plans for enlarging the surface buildings."

"And we first find the wooden box with a mummified finger, and then what looked like a teak box holding the mummified hand. But look what *you* just found!"

"We need to stop now and report this. We're not archeologists or even anthropologists."

"Wait. Wait. No, Lizbet! We need to first document everything we just found in these two chambers. There's going to be more instability than geologic when word of what we found gets out. *Think!* The Vatican didn't know where some of their most valuable relics had been secreted. *Really?* It's gonna be a bad media tsunami for an embattled Church to *have* these

relics, especially that Buddhist lama, or, worse, *not to know* anything about them. Either way, we're going to be silenced, if we don't have some proof—"

Lizbet didn't reply. Instead, she walked over to the sitting monk, bent down, and pulled up the right sleeve.

"James," said Lizbet, in an uncharacteristic soft tone. "He doesn't have a *right* hand. I don't believe..."

Lizbet brushed past James, then stepped through the hole into the outer chamber. She returned a few moments later holding the two relic boxes.

Lizbet sat down in front of the monk and opened the boxes.

A wave of static electricity washed over them, and Lizbet gasped after she picked up the finger and placed in the hand box in position where there had been a missing digit.

"See? I'm not an archaeologist. If I was, I wouldn't have missed..."

"Lizbet, look!"

The index finger base and the third knuckle on the hand glowed white-hot for a few seconds, then the two pieces of mummified flesh snapped together like magnets.

Lizbet almost dropped the hand box, but she regained her composure quickly.

"That's *not* possible," whispered James.

"Well, it *just* happened," said Lizbet firmly. "I think we found some sort of relic-making chamber. The Church used to parcel out the mummified remains of dead saints and others to its churches to help increase the size of their flocks and keep their members in the fold.

"And it looks like someone was cutting up this dead lama to give his parts to churches or maybe even back to Tibet. Then, somehow, these chambers were sealed up and they lost all track of what was going on down here. I don't buy it."

Lizbet picked up the hand and moved to the lama's right forearm. As with the finger and hand, the hand's wrist and the end of the right forearm glowed brightly for a few seconds, before snapping together, again, like magnets.

"Oh, my god!" exclaimed James. "Look, his hand's turning waxy."

As they watched, stunned by the revelations playing out before them, the arm glowed and knitted with its newly reunited hand. They looked at the lama's face. There had been no movement or sign of life, just an unbelievably well-preserved human body. Yet, it still seemed to be dead for all intents and purposes.

"What do we do now?" Lizbet asked, then clutched her ears and dropped to the ground. She felt that same static tingling after she opened the boxes. "What's happening in my head? I hear voices. No! *One* voice."

"What's it saying?"

"It's the lama. He's telling me *inside my head* that 'he is whole again,' that we must leave *now*, and to let him 'die as one, finally.'"

"We can't leave," James said. "All our gear is in the other chamber. We have to get pictures, LiDAR scans, measurements—"

"No time!" Lizbet said, as she picked up the pickaxe. "Grab the lights and go!"

James pulled up the two mono-pole lights and compacted them. Then, without turning around, he ducked and stepped through the hole to the outer chamber.

Lizbet was about to enter the hole, when she felt the static charge wrap around her like a warm blanket.

She struggled to turn around and look at the lama, who was now glowing white-hot. As the brightness increased, she could see his face surrounded by a magnificent aura and his

eyes open, brimming with tears.

A single tear fell from his left eye, and the word "gratitude" formed in her mind.

She felt herself being pushed slowly and carefully through the hole by the lama's light as the chamber collapsed onto him, extinguishing his radiance instantly.

Lizbet laid on the outer chamber ground and wept softly, praying the lama had finally found his peace.

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Go Find It on the Mountain by Alastair Millar

The views from near the top of Olympus Mons are stunning – I mean, it's a 26km high mountain the size of Poland, so that kind of goes without saying. But that wasn't what had our attention.

We were up on the northwestern flank collecting geological samples. Well, Matt and my ex-girlfriend Sarah were; I'd hitched a ride to take windspeed readings. We'd taken a crawler and a semi-sentient robotic drilling rig up from the 'Lymp research station; since that's about two thirds of the way up the escarpment, the trek up was slightly less epic than you might imagine. I'd helped them set up, and then gone to arrange my own gear a few hundred metres away.

I didn't need to hear chatter about exciting rocks, so I switched the non-emergency channel on my helmet to some music, and got on with doing my own thing. An hour later, I looked up and they were standing there, gesticulating wildly at each other. Curious about what had them riled up, I switched the radio back on.

"We have to put it back," Matt was saying, "we just have to."

"Are you kidding?" yelled Sarah. "It's proof that Martians existed! It's the biggest discovery since... EVER! We'll be famous. Interviews and talkshows for years! We could retire!"

Well that got my attention, you bet, so I wandered over (you can't really saunter in a spacesuit).

“Sup guys?”

“We’ve found something,” said Sarah, moving to one side. On the ground was what looked like a perfect crystal dodecahedron, maybe half a metre across. It looked almost natural, except it was covered in weird inscribed markings – and at its exact centre was what looked like a suspended triple helix made of metal. “The drill chucked it up. Says it thought it was a rock and in the way. It could revolutionise everything, dammit.”

“IF,” said Matt heavily, “MarsCorp or the government lets us talk about it instead of just burying us somewhere to keep us quiet. Can you imagine what it’ll do to development? All the terraforming plans will be scrapped until know if there’s more evidence out there. All the science programs will stop. All the money will go to chasing whatever this means.”

“You guys really think this is Martian?” I interrupted.

“The ‘bot can’t even identify the material,” he replied. “And we sure didn’t put it here.”

“Ok, but I think you’re both missing something. We don’t know what it’s for: maybe it’s just junk. But maybe it’s a claim marker, like old settlers used on Earth. Or a religious relic. What if whatever left it here is still around somewhere, keeping out of our way? They might be royally pissed if it’s been moved or damaged. Way to get a relationship off on the wrong foot, don’t you think? I ain’t in favour of screwing up first contact just for some passing fame and fortune.”

Then it hit me, and I paused. Sarah sighed. “I know that look. What are you thinking, Mac?”

“What if it isn’t Martian,” I said slowly, “but from somewhere else? What would that mean? It would start a panic if news got out.”

“If that’s true,” said Matt slowly, “they really will lock us up forever. Or worse.”

“Shit,” said Sarah. “Now what do we do?”

That was forty T-years ago, and nobody’s found it since. And won’t, neither, because I ain’t saying where it was, and it’s a huge area if anyone wants to go looking. Hell, maybe I’m just making all this up, an old man rambling. You decide. I’m past caring.

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The Reliquary

by D Bedell

Day One

The Reliquary was the bastion where believers in the Lesser Gods adored the totems of their faiths. Many made beleaguered pilgrimages to the spiritual ossuary as the final act of mortality, bequeathing their essence to greater glory, an excarnation undisturbed by sanctity. It was the vestry of the Universe for those remaining.

Brother X stood at the edge of Relic Plaza and watched the faithful shuffle to their appointments. Some of the Lesser Gods had respectable congregations in thrall, but Brother X was the only representative of the Sticks. He sighed and remembered a time when the Sticks held court to receive acolytes and plaintiffs begging justice. Now, the faith was but a remnant, obscure even in the pantheon of Lesser Gods.

A familiar cadence caught his ear, a psalm of lament known from childhood catechisms: "One, two, buckle my shoe; three, four, shut the door; five, six, pick up Sticks; seven, eight, lay them straight; nine, ten, the lion's den." It was astonishing and he looked quickly to see a slender man in cape and cowl imprinted with Sticks sigil approaching. Brother John made the sign of the Sticks.

"Fair Day, Brother X," the man greeted.

How does he know me?

"Fair Day," Brother X recited in return. "How is your penance?"

"It progresses."

Brother X nodded: His own penance was nearing its end, and he was certain the odd Brother knew it. He crossed Sticks in his mind to soften an uneasiness.

"What is your sign?" Brother X asked.

"I am Brother YZ, soon to be XYZ in penance."

"You are a Successive?" Brother X asked warily, a chill slipping into him. Successives were rare even when the Sticks were at their peak. A splinter group, they were known to be mercurial in their spiritual mysteries, evasive harbingers of penance without end.

How does he know me?

"Yes, a Successive. Surprised? It is the Way of Sticks."

The Way of Sticks.

"How do you know me?" Brother X stammered.

"I saw your future."

Future?

"What does that mean?" Brother X was growing irritated.

"You will know soon enough."

Day Two

Brother Y wandered the Relic Plaza mindful of the curious looks at his Sticks insignia, the first many pilgrims had seen. The Successives were a Sticks heresy dedicated to expanding their Universe plane through literal physical and spiritual transmogrification into Cartesian coordinates, a synthesis of Eternity forgotten by its dialectic progenitors.

Absorbing a Brother's grid point extended the timeline of the Successive, penance without end as their life shifted across the Universe in an eternal now. It was their dogma that Time existed for the individual simultaneously on all points with immortality a simple matter of graphing more points on their asymptote by succeeding the unfortunate Brother at his mortality.

It was not his first time in The Reliquary; he had become Brother Y on his last visit, absorbing the transformation of a Brother at the end of his penance. Brother Z before that. Brother X would join Y and Z to complete the trilogy of Sticks. He had an appointment to keep.

Day Three

Brother XYZ smiled to himself. He was now in penance throughout the Universe grid simultaneously. It was unfortunate that Brother X had writhed at the end, but the communion was held, and The Reliquary received another soulless relic in exchange.

Be he alive or be he dead.

I'll grind his bones to make my bread.



The Statue on Blacksand Beach

by Kayleigh Kitt

She was one of the few that had survived the initial treatment.

Pain fogged her memories, although one kept bubbling to the surface.

She'd stood in the group trembling next to Jake. "Is there something wrong with me?"

"Yes, but it's the same thing that's wrong with all of us." He'd taken her hand, squeezing it.

She pressed the accelerator harder; the car speeding while the lights reflected from the barrier of roadside conifers.

One thought prowled like a persistent cat. *There was a chance, surely? Even if it was slim.*

Swearing, she slapped a palm against the wheel.

She remembered holding Jake's fingers. "What are these scars?" she'd asked. They'd been reunited after the therapy and having been a few weeks apart.

"Roadmaps that lead to you," he smiled, wryly.

She batted a hand at him. He said he'd always find her, no matter what. Her brother had never done anything to make her doubt him after the New Regime had slaughtered their family and friends.

A curl of fear synched her abdomen.

She braked, the car rocking to a halt. Dipping the clutch and grinding the stick into first gear, she spun the wheel, the comforting sweep of the headlights showing the empty tarmac, returning the way she'd come.

It had been years since she'd seen her brother and, despite searching for him, her life had finally settled into a rhythm. She'd found Callum, although she now knew it was the reverse.

"What are you so afraid of?" Callum had asked her earlier, running a thumb over her bottom lip.

"You," she'd whispered, adding, "I fell in love with your words. Unfortunately, you were a good liar."

She'd pushed him violently and fled, grabbing the car keys and bulging backpack from the floor, before he could stop her.

Pressing the accelerator harder; the wheels sped up, scattering loose chippings as she turned onto a track, grass straddling the centre hump.

There was a rumour that the driftwood statue on Blacksand Beach was once human. And evidence pointed to her brother.



Relic Hunter

by Morgan RR Haze

The dig site was remarkable because of what hadn't been found. There had been so much promise of finds, the results were disappointing. A few carved pebbles, some soil indicators for pole structures, but no evidence of fire pits, no burials or food waste. It made little sense, and that mystery was the only reason we continued to excavate. Did the inhabitants only eat vegetation and wear no clothes? Even then, there should have been more evidence.

We had set up our camp near where the river currently ran. We had found that much, the water had slowly changed course. At first we had spirited debates about what we might find; more frequently, as we ate, we discussed when we would eventually give up.

One night I couldn't sleep, the twin moons both being full. After tossing and turning, I gave up and walked to the site. It was a beautiful location, but that wasn't why I had come. Scanning the area, I saw a glint of metal. Thinking we really had lost all enthusiasm, I assumed someone had been careless and left out a tool. I wasn't expecting to find a smooth, shiny disc. No dirt covered it and it had recently been placed there. All reports claimed the planet as uninhabited, but this indicated we weren't alone.

I wanted to examine it, but a feeling of dread stopped me. I documented it, without touching the object. I would get the rest of the team's opinion. Waiting for the others to wake, I pondered the situation. The disc looked nothing like our equipment or like anything we expected to find here. It was too clean, too new in appearance, though I had the distinct impression it was very old.

When the head archeologist saw the data I gathered, their response was like mine, confusion. As the whole team gathered around the disc, debating how to proceed, it began

to morph and expand. The others drew closer, but my fear had returned. I ran. It was irrational, but it was as if I was compelled.

Only once I crossed the river, to the opposite side as the camp, did the desire to flee pass. A low rumble made me turn in time to see our camp disintegrate; partially melting into the ground and partly becoming dust that was blown away.

Eventually I gathered enough courage to see what happened. Where our tents once stood, only poles remained. All the supplies and equipment were gone, even the evidence of crates sitting on the ground was erased. A sick feeling settled in my stomach as I approached the spot I left my colleagues. The disc was gone, as well as all evidence of our dig. In a circle in the center of the clearing sat a few carved pebbles. The only relics worth retrieving and I couldn't bring myself to touch them.

Find the Author

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You Should've Been a Pixie by That Burnt Writer

It had called to her all week, that dark spot, around a quarter of the way up the mountain. The promise of adventure beckoned; a break from the enforced dullness of the camping trip upon which her parents had insisted she accompany them. She'd tried reasoning that it would *not* be "good for her to get out of the city for a bit" but, being adults, of course they hadn't listened.

She'd spent hours imagining what could be in the cave; a slumbering dragon protecting its hoard from her heroic attempts to steal it, or perhaps large, clumsy, and aggressive rock trolls who would try to smash her for daring to invade their sanctity.

Maybe sprites, goblins and pixies lived there, ready to try to whisk her away to a faerie kingdom where she would either be their queen or their slave. She'd giggled a little at that; she knew *exactly* which one of those outcomes would happen.

Still, she hadn't been able to get away long enough to go and explore yet.

They'd told her that the fire which they kept burning at night would keep most wild things away, and they were generally right, although the cinders were littered each

morning with charred corpses of moths and *Bur'tkh G'rfil*, those weird little creatures that seemed to be drawn on skittering limbs to the warmth, ignoring the warning signs of their own imminent demise.

Certainly the wolves, and other entities that roamed the forest and punctuated the night with their unearthly howls, knew better than to approach.

Mom and Dad were asleep, so it must be after midnight. She moved gently, so as not to disturb them, and carefully crept out into the gloom. The wan moonlight gave everything an eerie glow, and for a moment the world was frozen in a perfect snapshot, and she was the only living thing moving in it.

She'd spent time over the last two days planning this excursion, mentally mapping out foot- and hand- holds up to the ridge and, within a half hour, was standing upon a narrow ledge that seemed to act almost as a horizontal spine along the cliff face. The fire and tents seemed far away from up here, a speck of light in the vast, pale landscape.

Her parents would be furious if they found out she had come up here alone. Still, she'd made it, and there was no going back now.

The cave seemed even blacker now she was up here, somehow more sinister and foreboding. Nothing, though, that a smart eight-and-a-half-year-old, with her favorite teddy bear in one hand, and cookies stuffed into her backpack, couldn't handle.

She edged closer to the entrance and nearly jumped out of her skin when a tremulous voice called out from within.

"Who's there?"

Suddenly, the entire world felt as if it were fading away behind her. In the distance she could hear her father's voice calling her mother's name, panic in his tone as he'd found his daughter missing, but it seemed nothing more than an echo of a whisper on the passing wind, something from ancient history.

"Hello," she said, after a short pause. "My name is..."

The words had a dull, lifeless quality to them, no reverberation, and reminded her of playing hide-and-seek in the wardrobe at home.

"Ah, you," the voice interrupted, now clearly and definably female. It had a rasp like old sheets of parchment. "I've been waiting. I knew you'd come."

She was silent.

"Put down the bear and come closer, child," the voice continued, a hint of a smile creeping in. "I know what you're here for. Relics and treasure, eh?"

The sound of striking flint was followed by a spark and a small flame that was cupped by old, wizened hands. As she drew closer, the light grew, and she could see an ancient face above it.

"Here," the old woman said, holding out an ancient sword, hilt first. The edge of the blade glittered in the dancing light. "Take this, it's all I have. I hope your dreams come true..."

As her small fingers closed around the grip, the weapon shrank to match her proportions. The old woman started to laugh, moving her hands away from the flame which now burned with an emerald edge. It illuminated obsidian black eyes, shot with crimson flecks, as she stood.

"Centuries, I've been waiting for you," she smirked, her voice stronger. "A fool young enough to grant me another extension of life. I shall inherit your years, and you, girl... you will rot away to nothing. Any final words before the transfer completes?"

"You think," the girl said, slowly and carefully, "that you've won, but you're wrong. I wanted a dragon to be up here, or a troll. All I've found is a stupid, selfish old woman."

The crone laughed again. "Brave words from one who is about to di..."

She stopped and a look of confusion crossed her face.

"W... What's happening?" she stuttered. "I'm supposed to be getting younger, and..."

"And you picked on the wrong child. Instead of you taking my youth, I have reversed the enchantment and taken your experience. I'll learn from it so that I don't make the same mistakes as you. You're not evil, just cruel and pathetic."

As the woman started to crumble, she opened her mouth and desiccated words filled the air.

"Who in seven Hells are you, you who has done this to me?"

"My name," came the reply, "is Tarla."

"This," she raised her one-eyed bear, still in her left hand, "is Pickle, and *you* are becoming what I see in my dreams."

Motes of dust drifted on the gentle breeze that had sprung up out of nowhere and, if she strained, she could almost hear the witch's voice cursing her.

"Too late for that," she laughed, melodic and beautiful. "You should've been a pixie."

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Short Fiction

Unknown Faces

by A.L. Hodges

I can barely contain my excitement as I watch through the little viewing window cut into the side of the decontamination machine. The old pictograph is scrubbed clean of residual radiation and pops out the bottom slot blotchy but free from deadly carcinogenic rays. With two of my three gloved hands, I delicately pull the pictograph from the slot and look it over with my four favorite eyes. I can already see the outline of three figures posed before a tent in something like a war camp. To the left and right are Organics rendered vague by time, but the third figure is easily recognizable. I hold it up to my eye cluster and a grin forms on one of my two mouths.

I see him, my favorite man, standing tall and erect, with a tall conical hat upon his head. His face stares towards the horizon in a visionary stoicism that is uniquely his. My multiple hearts skip a beat, and I quickly slide the pictograph onto the window of the scanner for the restoration lab Reconstitutor. Among my people, I am uniquely suited for the Museum's restoration lab: most of my race have only five eyes, but my seven significantly enhance my capacity for detail. It served me well when I was an artist.

I suppose a job restoring old pictographs for The Museum is nothing to envy, but it suits me after losing one of my hands to a Judgment. The Overseers are merciful to allow me to continue using my talents in my old age. I spent so many years as a resentful young man, bitter about my position working the technics on the mining drones. I suppose everyone sometimes questions the Order that The Overseers enforce upon the Construct, but they are the most perfect of beings, with only Their minds having transcended the organic in bodies of perfect chrome. Soon, even the thin threads of the Organic that remain in them now will be severed, and they will be completely free: pure Construct, pure Electrodynamical Consciousness, pure Projectosoul from circuitry in the cybernetic Construct Of Pure Creation, with no physical form at all. Truly, they will be gods.

When a simulacrum of the photograph appears on the REconstitutor screen, I type on the console and hit a button to start running reconstitution algorithms. A million chromatic possibilities run over the ruined surface, offering thousands of options to fill the damaged

space. With my seven eyes, I can watch and process seven alternatives every two seconds and pick the best options to merge for the final product.

This new batch of restorations must look its absolute best for the big reopening of the exhibit tomorrow, and I focus as hard as I can to make sure no significant alternatives slip past me. I enjoy all the pictographs that pass through my hands, but these last few fascinate me in particular because they all feature the same figure. Indeed, the necessity of re-dedicating the exhibit is because of the new information that has come out regarding a prominent piece in The Museum's collection thanks to the research of the archaeology team. I watch a quilt of possibilities flicker over that proud man's face, the features buffered, and polished by the REconstitutor. He stands between two others, one a stoop-shouldered unkempt rascal and the other a military individual standing ramrod straight in a uniform. Both have their hands in their pockets like conquerors while my man's limbs dangle limply at his sides. He stands as if he is helpless and humble before one of the Overseers themselves, as I once was.

As I watch the algorithmically generated possibilities distort those three faces with the superimposed alternatives, I wonder yet again what these people would think of the Overseers. In their own time, their race got as close to becoming Transcendent as any species I've yet seen. They even mastered the circuitry, the mathematical algorithms, and some of the bio-thaumaturgy required to place an organic brain within a machine construct. Even an old fool like me knows that once you have all those miracles in your toolkit, projecting the neurodynamic electrosoul into a simulacra Construct quickly follows. Yet they chose, instead, to invest their technology in eradicating themselves with nuclear holocaust. Their planet's surface is still barren and thickly irradiated from a war that rendered the entire sphere uninhabitable.

That, in itself, is fascinating. In all the known worlds of the Construct, few are home to species that have evolved consciousness, and none are so self-destructive. Of course, not everyone can be as lucky as my people. We once had the trappings of war, religion, and the great poison of every organic mind, "ambition". After civilizing us, The Overseers calculated that our species was the best suited to cohabitate with Their mechanical selves. Between our multitude of limbs and clusters of eyes, we were the most adept at processing massive amounts of data and working the consoles that were the cornerstone of Overseer technology. Our anatomy gave us a natural aptitude for manipulating symbols with a capacity almost equaled that of the Overseers: not quite, of course, for that is impossible.

A new version of the REconstituted pictograph now fills the screen, an approximation of what the pictograph looked like in its original form based on data about that era and logistics from other pictographs plucked from that world's radioactive dust. The Overseers have had their remote-controlled drills ravaging the surface for five years, searching for the rare metals they require to maintain their circuitry. Whatever artifacts the mining drones uncover are sent back, for study by whatever Overseers are interested in studying them. They are largely more concerned with uncovering enough resources to maintain their complex digital systems, with these archaeological curiosities being a mere hobby for some. And yet They, like all great races, are curious about the past and those ancestral links between all creatures, the lowly as well as the great. Evolutionary chains are the scriptures of the enlightened, and the people of that strange, newly discovered world certainly evolved to impressive heights. Even with four arms and several eyes, my people never developed pictographs or machines that could think.

I hit the big red button, and there is a satisfying whirr as a thousand lasers attached to as many robotic arms work to replace the blotches and radiation burns with details based on an algorithm combining my choices into the best possible reconstruction. With a sigh, the machine spits out the pictograph, revitalized like a set of clothes fresh out of the wash. I hold it in two of my hands and examine it with my four favorite eyes, wondering again about my accuracy. This reconstitution is only a guess, and may well diverge significantly from the original. Time swallows all things and renders them only vague shadows illuminated dimly by relics and artifacts. It is a fabrication of a clever simulacra, albeit primitive by the standards of what the race that produced it would go on to achieve. But is a simulacra of a simulacra not a reality? I cut this thought off, for fear it will spiral into unsavory speculation. In my younger days, I was more prone to idle speculative speculation, but I have learned since then that it is not my place to consider the Order of things: that honor belongs to the Overseers alone.

Two of my eyes turn to my wrist, and I hold it up to better see the smooth flesh where my hand once sprouted. It is a lesson that I must remind myself of, again and again. Even in my old age, I feel a phantom hand there as my nerves cry out with the old rebelliousness of my youth. In my frustration with my place in the Order, I fell in with bad people, those of my race who would upset the Order with futile rebellion. They had me use that hand to create fliers for their filthy propaganda, decrying the Order and all that was good and right. The Overseers should have euthanized me, but since I provided evidence against my cohorts, the Judgement was instead a mere maiming.

I was lucky.

My contemplations are interrupted by a blaring noise, and my seven eyes turn up to the intercom mounted on the wall as the harsh voice of the museum curator, Overseer X-76590, echoes:

ATTENTION ATTENTION! ORGANIC G89, YOU HAVE TAKEN THIRTY SECONDS LONGER THAN INTENDED IN YOUR RESTORATION DUTIES. PLEASE RESUME YOUR OCCUPATION IMMEDIATELY SO THAT PROJECT: EXHIBITION 28 #dash# RELAUNCH MAY BE COMPLETED ON SCHEDULE.

One of my mouths sighs, and the intercom must have picked it up, for the voices buzzes again:

ORGANIC G89, YOU KNOW THAT QUESTIONING THE ORDER IS NOT PERMISSIBLE FOR ORGANIC LIFE FORMS. THIS IS A WARNING ISSUED BY ME, YOUR SUPERVISOR. FURTHER VIOLATIONS WILL RESULT IN A RESCINDING OF FOOD RATIONS. SINCE YOU ARE ALREADY ON THE LIST OF REPEAT OFFENDERS, DOUBLE PORTIONS WILL BE RESCINDED. PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR OCCUPATION IMMEDIATELY.

I stalk out of the restoration lab, the lips of my two mouths clenched tight. Passing down the corridor, the red pupils of the mechanical eyes mounted to the walls watch me. My people will never have as many eyes as the Overseers, from whom nothing escapes. We thought we were clever, with our secret meetings and secret handshakes and elaborate plans for anarchy. But nothing is unseen by The Overseers, for whom the entire Construct is becoming a giant nervous system of mouths, eyes, ears, and tongues. Soon, as a plant grows over brickwork and absorbs it, so too will the electronic nerves of The Overseers consume all worlds and the Construct will be One with Them.

As I walk through the main floor of The Museum, I clutch the pictograph to my chest like a tiny child. It is after hours, and the other relics loom in the dim light of their displays.

We have salvaged a discordant hodgepodge of artifacts from that desolated world, spanning twenty thousand years of that race's history, and showcasing a vast swath of technological development before their self-annihilation. Unfortunately, the dead race came to rely on data storage to the point where much of their later history and a good chunk of their literature was stored solely on these databases. When the bombs dropped, these were wiped clean when nuclear electromagnetic juggernauts blasted the planet and its atmosphere to smithereens. Nearly all of their consoles and digital memory banks are unsalvageable. As such, the Overseers tasked with reconstructing their history must rely on those physical bits of written media that survive.

The most popular displays are of course the shattered remains of their old console systems, with reproductions showing how far they developed integrated circuitry and machine learning before their demise. Most of the Overseers who visit are amazed that some other life form came so close to their technological breakthroughs. But for me, being bound by the confines of an Organic mind in an Organic body, I am more curious about the mundane trivialities of those bygone empires. There are mannequins hung with reproductions of the clothes they wore, from the cravats and jackets of their golden age to the safety suits and masks they donned as their atmosphere collapsed. There are models of their hydroelectric dams, their power grids, and even an intricate plastic model showcasing the general layout of one of their major cities. There are platforms on which perch the charred remains of their automotive vehicles, along with manipulatable holographic projections to show what both the inside and outside looked like before their nuclear immolation. There is also a phalanx of pictographs, many of them my restorations, displaying leaders, religious figures, and important events, all framed and reproduced in holograms for our databases.

These things impress me more than the mechanical wonders, for they touch the artist in me with their beautiful simplicity. They imply a vivaciousness, a life that appeals to me as an Organic. I feel a connection to those dead men, even though I can scarcely comprehend their way of life. Between me and the Overseers who will crowd the museum tomorrow, there are gulfs that cannot be bridged. But even though a millennia separates me from these men, I feel that I know them.

I dawdle at the monolithic plastic city, a replica of a metropolis that once stood as the hub of power for a forgotten nation. There are tall towers of metal and glass that are knee-high, little plastic toy vehicles on concrete streets, and even flying machines suspended on bits of string above the faux skyline. There is a shoreline of blue glass, on which stands a tall, copper-green statue of a goddess who looks out from the harbor to welcome visitors... or potentially intimidate enemies, our researchers are not quite sure. I have to fight the urge to play with the toy cars and move the doll men around, which is always my inclination as I stand over that titanic model. X-79560 is watching from the room's many digital eyes and will not tolerate further delays.

I cross the main floor towards one of the wings containing pictographs from the most ancient era yet uncovered from the radioactive dust. Even the more recent and advanced pictographs are hard to come by, and the older variety is exceedingly rare. A steady hand and a good set of eyes are thus essential to ensure their proper reconstruction. Tomorrow, the whole Museum will be inundated with curious Overseers coming to view the fresh relics, including new pictographs of my man. After all, he is the focus of new revelations.

I love dusting off the glass cases and making sure they remain spotless. The Overseers could effortlessly build and pilot machines to do all these little things for them; yet, in their mercy, they allow us to be their flesh in the Physical Construct. I take pride in my work, but I particularly enjoy cleaning the display for the pictograph of the man who oversees the entire wing from the far wall. He watches from over a glass display of coins from many periods, all etched with his visage.

No matter how hard I try to suppress it, the artist in me always resurfaces: I have a knack for faces, which the Overseers often lack since they are no longer Organic. When I was young, I wanted to paint, to create what touched my heart. It is easy to be impudent when you are young, and your vitalistic optimism of life has not begun to encroach on one's Organic self. But with age comes humility as one realizes one's place in the world. It is not my place to question the Order. At one time, it was easy to see what the Overseers did to my people as cruel: and yet, with the wisdom of time comes the realization that we have received many gifts from Them. We never developed travel through the vast reaches of the Construct, nor did we ever create machines that could calculate and reason. We were naive and would have remained in that naivete if the Overseers had not found us and pressed us into their transcendent Orderly way of things.

My people believed such silly things before the Overseers came. We prayed to our gods, but they did not answer when the Overseers came to bring Order to us. Nothing came from the sky except the drones, cutting through our ignorance with lasers and heat. All such superstitions must be eradicated, to make way for the Order that will one day be complete as the Overseers travel the Construct, finding new worlds to bring into our fold. Their minds do not falter, like organic minds, and They have earned their place as the Framers of Existence.

Like most of my people, I have been disabused of the native foolishness of my race by the Overseers, who brought us empiricism and the logic of the machines. Their minds think for us, and we need only obey Their Order. But I have that artist in me, who is not so easily cowed, and I live as a telecomm rod for those strange impressions that sensitive souls are given to. My insufficient, organic brain wanders to strange topics and ponders things impractical to my job. Though I ought to see all these impressions as counterproductive to my occupation (which is a tenuous position given my status as a cripple, and thus liable for euthanasia in the name of the Order), I can't help but embrace them. At my age, I've come to accept myself as I accept the Overseers and all that They have planned for the Construct.

And yet I have an artist's soul, blemished though it may be. I put the new reconstruction in a glass frame, and arrange it so that the new pictograph draws an onlooker's eye immediately to that powerful face. Soon, the Overseers will come to learn about the most recent discoveries, and they will marvel at my work, and perhaps finally see in this face what I have seen. They will walk about in their shining, mechanical bodies, and scan the displays with their laser eyes, and they will share in my admiration for past things (and it will be the only thing they share with me, and it is enough). They will be attended by members of my race, and they too will share in this reverie of knowledge. There's magic in that, like ghosts haunting the living.

I stare at the face above the coin display, and the eyes lock with two of my own. It is unlike any other face I have ever seen, even in the other pictographs of that dead race. The domed forehead speaks of wisdom and knowledge, sitting above that long countenance

dominated by angular cheekbones that give rise to the narrow chin. It is a face that dictates length, breadth, a sense of immensity, a face like a continent. The dark eyes are hooded deep in the skull, but they look neither haunted nor cadaverous. On the contrary, those eyes stare out like stars in the sky, as a light in a deep cave. They look out at the viewer with well-placed wisdom, as if to declare that the darkness shall not win. They sit on either side of a powerful nose, slightly crooked, which is not bulbous and yet prominent enough to lend to the whole face a sense of undeniable masculinity. This leads to a pair of lips pursed in what I can only imagine to be perpetual firmness, completing the look of a man who shall not be easily swayed. Below the padlocked mouth sprouts a sudden forest of black hair, which grants to the face a bushy darkness that only heightens the ruggedness of the features. That untamable jungle forms a line of sideburns up the cliffs of the cheeks on either side, with two tree lines that come together into a coiffed black wave atop the head. This face is the hull of a great ship, which had weathered many storms and come through a voyage across alien seas.

I look up at my work, satisfied. I wonder, as I have wondered many times before, who this man was. That face tells many stories in a language I cannot speak. Below it, in the display, are a myriad of coins bearing that visage across many centuries, proving that some greatness was accomplished by this man. He appears in pictographs, with military leaders and generals, waging a campaign whose purpose is still lost to us. But as more discoveries are unearthed, I wonder if we will ever understand the fullness of his story.

That, of course, is the reason why the exhibit is having a special display. New information has been discovered: a name, which can provide the first link to uncovering the history behind that face. It took so long to unveil because it is a strange name, the meaning of which is lost. But now it has been firmly attached to that face, and those Overseers specializing in the excavation of the past can finally begin some unraveling of this man's significance.

That face promises such lessons from across time, reaching through the glass screen to pull at my heartstrings. What can this man impart to me, to all of us though he is long dead? What benefit does he offer us, the living? He comes from a people who engineered their destruction, and in that sense, whatever empire he stood for came to failure. But all of evolution is trial and failure, just as the Construct engineers, destroys, and renews again. If I have learned anything in my decrepitude, it is that what was old can resurrect as a new design, just as I have been resurrected— from a failure to an apostate, to a man finally at peace among his relics. Yes, even I can be resurrected.

One the mechanical eyes on the wall flashes red and the mechanical voice of X-79560 blares forth:

ATTENTION! ATTENTION! ORGANIC G89, YOU ARE NOW OFF SCHEDULE! RESUME YOUR DUTIES AT ONCE!

But I ignore the commands as I stare up towards the words written above the man's portrait pictograph. A name is written there, in the holographic letters of three languages: the exact language of the Overseers, the cuneiform of my people, and the language in which it was first etched. One of my hands goes to my waist and the other two cross over my chest as I read it proudly:

LINCOLN

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Serial

Shadow of the Black Tower

by Jason H. Abbott

“Before I speak my tale, my queen, you must know this: That long before the rise of Aeola began our Age and kingdoms spread across the world — before the empire of Mnar and the doom of fabled Sarnath, before the oceans drank the gleaming cities, and indeed long before the first stone of Atlantis was laid — there were strange aeons bereft of men. That beneath a mantle of stars of which our ignorance is a blessing, there once strode great old ones and elder things within now nameless cities...”

—Scythea, Chronicler of Agamenae



Chapter Ten: Reliquary

Deprived of his lamp, Skalos relied on its flickers behind him to scan the shadowed floor beyond the archway. While Addala tended the dim light and held it high, Korr slipped into the colossal chamber with soft steps and pantherlike adroitness that belied his stature and muscularity. The barbarian prowled to a wall adjoining the entrance and examined it between sidesteps as the women made their way in.

The scribe navigated the gloom with caution, unable to make out much detail.

A bent ray of sunlight beamed down from the hole above, but it only illumed a narrow ellipse of tiles hundreds of feet away. Its glare hanging in the atmosphere was more hindrance than help, spoiling his vision so that it now had to readjust again to the surrounding darkness. Closing his eyes and waiting a moment to recover, he sniffed a weak scent, akin but also dissimilar to that of long dried fish and urine. The faint musk was absent within the passage leading them here, which had few odors beyond that of dry stone.

Eyes reopened, he started moving again towards the ellipse of illumination. Two steps later, he tripped on something that made a metallic clatter scraping across the floor.

"Mind your feet," Korr said, continuing to inspect and follow the wall. "There's rubble and refuse."

"That didn't sound like a masonry fragment," Skalos replied, lowering himself to one knee. He patted and searched the tiling in front of him. Unlike the pervasive shades of black and gray omnipresent elsewhere in the tower's construction, here he found mortarless blocks of pure white marble. His fingers slid over a smooth surface with few scratches under its coating of dust, touching seams between fitted sections so masterful he could hardly feel them.

Seconds later, he grasped a handle crafted for a human hand.

"We are not the first people to enter this chamber," he announced, lifting his discovery.

The others faced him, and in the glimmer from the oil lamp's wick he showed them a sickle-bladed sword, its tip wrought to form an intentional hook.

"A *khopesh*," he said, pointing out and scratching off flecks of green corrosion. "Like those of the pharaoh's guards in Tah, but made of bronze."

Korr shrugged and went back to searching. "Good, Runt. Sharpen it and you'll have a decent weapon."

"Whomever wielded that relic is long dead," Tetree said, motioning Addala to illum the wall once more.

Skalos rose, evaluating the awkward balance of the ancient blade. "The cartouche on the block: *Forty entered, none returned*. They got this far. Maybe they found a way to go further."

"Then go find it," the witch snapped.

He raised a palm, blotting out the flare of daylight, and the scholar gave the *khopesh* a testing swipe as he walked towards the center of the chamber. His vision shielded from the intense contrast of light and dark, its diffused and scattered glow across the periphery above revealed hints and highlights of a domed ceiling crossed by ribs of vaulting.

The Agamenaean's steps continued forward, neck craned upwards as he traced architectural flourishes to their convergence around the central hole from which they emanated in a starburst pattern.

At that moment, his foot came down on empty air. A scream echoed off the walls, followed by the clank of a sword hitting the floor.

Addala turned in an instant, her face terrified and illuminated by the flickering wicklight she held. Korr and Tetree, now in the dark behind her, waited in the long silence.

"Are you dead?" the warrior asked, casting a glance into the gloom after hearing nothing further.

"No," Skalos said, heart racing and flat on his back.

"I told you to mind your feet."

Relief washed across Addala's expression. The lamp slackened in her grip as she leaned on the staff, but a spoken command was quick to follow.

"Nameless, the light. Turn it to us so we can continue searching," Tetree said. "Disregard him. Scribe, what have you discovered?"

He propped himself up on his hands, sandaled toes dangling above a sheer drop he'd kept from plummeting into by collapsing backwards. "It's a gap."

"A hole in the floor?" she asked.

He pushed and slid away from the hazard to reorient and lie on his stomach. With fingers gripping a fringe of marble, he peered down before looking side-to-side. "No, the floor *is* the hole. It's like we're standing on an unrailed balcony."

"What?"

Korr raised an eyebrow and followed the curve of the wall with caution for several more yards, until his boot dipped unsupported in the shadows. "Damn it, he's right. It just falls off. Bring the lamp over here."

"How far of a drop?" the witch asked as she walked to join him, Addala beside her.

The warrior forced a cough, hawking-up a wad of phlegm and spitting it into the consuming darkness. His keen ears hadn't perceived a splatter by the time the women joined him.

"Far."

Tetree's face soured as the wick's weak flare illumed the ruination beyond them. The semicircle of another platform within the chamber was almost indiscernible past a gap of at least thirty feet. Flickers of light, too impotent to reach the bottom of the drop, revealed indistinct murals underneath the buttress upholding them. Above that, a band of rough stonework and indents ran like a scar along the curvature of the wall between the platforms, matching their level and thickness.

"Who knows how many millennia ago this floor collapsed," she said, "but I suspect it caused a cascade of devastation that destroyed the interior beneath it."

Korr picked up a chunk of rubble and pitched it into the inky gloom. It clacked against unseen stone, and he counted the seconds as it tumbled-down in scraping stutters. He turned to her, hearing the fading echo of a bang. "That's a drop long enough to mean this is a hollowed-out ruin. The bottom will be buried under the remains. Do you think we can even still get to the treasure, *Söyt*?"

She rubbed the carved branching lines of the elder sign upon her choker. "I sense the god below the tower. I'm sure of that. We know it guards this place, its island, and will venture at least as far as the lake and river. It cannot be trapped. It must have a way to come and go. Therefore, there must be a way for us to reach it. But we'll find no route to that lair from here."

Away from the others, and having listened to their exchange, Skalos sat-up. Grasping the khopesh once more, he stood and scanned the chamber on the cusp of its abyss of ruin. His eyes focused on the end of the platform's semicircular floor. "No, a route may still be here. Come see."

He beckoned them, waving the sickle-sword, and the trio joined him. The flicker of the lamp mingled with the harsh glare of a crooked sunbeam as he walked a few paces, stopping on the arching edge closest to the center of the room.

"Don't look into the light directly. It'll spoil your sight. That's why I missed this at first," Skalos said, pointing to the ellipse of daylight falling on the focal point ring of pale stone. He traced a line back towards them, drawing their eyes down to just beyond their feet.

"This isn't a balcony," he said. "It's a bridge."

The span was a narrow offshoot of the platform they stood on: An ancient flat walk of fitted, shaped marble at best two-yards wide. Following its straight track, at several intervals, they saw the structure diverge into twin paths, forming perfect rings around circular holes before merging again as one.

Skalos leveled the khopesh and made a slow sweep with it, guiding their attention to the vague highlights of four additional structures branching from spaced balconies identical to theirs. All led to, and with combined effort upheld, the illumed central ring that had no other support.

"Like spokes radiating out from the axel of a wheel," he said. "I don't believe they were meant to be bridges, or persevere as them, but it's a testament to the Elder's skill. Perhaps they are an ornamental or structural element that has outlasted the rest of the floor."

Korr tested the start of the walkway, bearing down on antediluvian stonework pushing with his foot. "Impressive or not, these slabs aren't thick enough for me to walk on them without pause. Are you sure they'll hold?"

"They've held, longer than our history."

"True," Tetree said, "but are you confident traversing them will lead us to a route down?"

"Yes," Skalos answered. He lifted the bronze blade in his hand again and motioned to the arch entrance they'd come from, now cloaked in shadows. "The passage," he said before angling the sword and tracing a diagonal line up to the vaulted ceiling. "And here's about where we started down it."

He lowered the tip of the khopesh with care to illustrate the path of their descent to the archway and a touch to the right of it. "That's about where the blockage is. Now, if we assume the angle remains constant between the tower's outer and inner walls..."

Skalos turned clockwise, the weapon steady as it came to an eventual stop, pointing down into the pit. "Korr, what can your hawk's eyes distinguish where that little crest of sunlight is making it past the center ring?"

The Borean leaned in, peering deep through the dim, and the others joined him. Beneath them, in a weak finger of light from above, sat a distant broken balcony. Akin to theirs in design, but a battered remnant after surviving an ancient collapse. No spoke of bridging walkways accompanied it.

"An archway, beyond a landing," he said. He stood tall again and tugged the huge coil of rope resting on his muscular shoulder. "Cunning find, Runt. We'll have a use for this after all and be better than halfway down besides."

"Do you think we can reach it?" Tetree asked him.

"I'll need to get closer to be sure, but I think so," the warrior said. "After a quick rappel, we may well gain much haste towards beating the noonday sun."

She nodded her consent, and Korr stepped onto the narrow marble bridge. He stood tensed for a moment, ready to leap back to the platform should it break. Under his full weight, the offshoot whispered a faint grinding of stone, but it held solid without further complaint.

"Let's go," he said, relaxing somewhat and pointing forward with his drawn sword. "There are no handholds if you slip, so listen to me this time when I say, mind your feet."

"Walk behind me, Nameless," the witch commanded, following his cautious steps. "If I fall along this traverse, do grab the scribe and ensure you both plummet as well."

Skalos brought up the rear, glaring at the back of Tetree's blonde hair for a second before joining Addala in heeding Korr's advice to watch their footfalls. Past the dusty white of the slim walkway, he glimpsed the remnants of similar five-spoked structures indistinct in the consuming shadows beneath them: The occasional tip of a broken balcony on a wall and nothing more. Vague, severed hints of what unsettling glories may have once filled the lower floors of a long-lost interior.

They rounded the first ring's hole and passed onto the next, somewhat smaller, one in the chain leading to the axis of the spokes. "One more of these ahead," the barbarian said, "then a short span to reach the center. Only a minute and— *Kronn and his devils!*"

His curse echoed in the chamber as he raised his Atlantean blade and a palm halting the others. Stopped, the witch peered around him, following his gaze to the last ring of the bridge before them.

"What's wrong?" Skalos asked, waiting with Addala behind them.

Korr stepped aside, the tip of his sword dipped and ready to strike. Out of the way, now everyone could see the weird jumble of human bones protruding from a crimson, sprawling fungoid mass that covered and clung to half of the circle.

"What is it, Tetree?" the warrior asked, moving up to grant her a place to stand on the uncorrupted path.

She made the sign of a twisted star scrutinizing the glistening pile. "It isn't magical. Scribe? Come study this and tell me if you recognize it from lore."

Addala walked forward to allow his advance, her face pinching as she got a whiff of gruesome odor. The ammoniacal scent, similar to long dried fish and urine Skalos had detected earlier, returned, wafting far more pungent from its source.

"It reeks like the piss of a devil's whore," Korr said.

"Don't touch it," Tetree added.

"I have no desire to," the scholar said, squatting to investigate the uneven carpet of stiff sludge resembling striated bands of skinless muscle. Human bones — ribs, a femur, and two spines among others — jutted out of the slough-like morass. Asymmetrical strands coiled up and around them, the worst of which was a skull bound in, and lifted by, scarlet tendrils.

He turned away from its gaze of empty sockets. "More than one skeleton's worth of remains is in it. Bodies of those sacrificed by the Zadii, or perhaps even the forty who did not return?"

"I assume," she said. "Is it a mold, feeding on the bones?"

Skalos passed the khopesh over the charnel ooze without touching the fungal polyps upon it. They slowly twisted and undulated in reaction, and he withdrew the weapon

disgusted. "Your guess is as valid as any. No lore I know of describes anything like this."

"Let's leave it and keep going," Tetree said. "Is there any more blocking our way?"

"Nothing we can't step past," Korr said.

With a few swipes of her hand, she motioned everyone to move. "We've no time for squeamishness or curiosity, and we won't be here long. Perhaps it's some vestigial thing left over from the Elder's age."

They filed along, avoiding the horrid mass by walking on the untouched side of the ring. Last to go, Skalos rose from his squat and missed seeing the tips of the polyps open into solid black ocules by seconds.

"Here's the other patch of it," Korr said, reaching the outer rim of the nexus that the walkways converged to support. He strode over the clinging, gore-colored fungus and reached the broad inner hub. Unsheltered from the sky through the hole above, here the marble was stained, scarred, and dirty from exposure. In the filtered sunlight, the platform groaned with age beneath his footfall, shifting a little before it settled and remained still.

He hesitated to move further with a troubled brow until he spied the floor and sheathed his sword. With a snatch, he lifted a large cut emerald and slapped off a century of dust so it gleamed in his hand. "Söyt! Treasures!"

Tetree walked onto the suspended ring. "Pet, we don't—"

"A king's ransom!" he said. "Hell, a king's treasury! Just lying here!"

He dropped to his knees, scooping up dozens of scattered gemstones littering the sullied stonework to clean and admire their luster.

The blonde eyed him as Skalos and Addala joined them on the platform.

"See? Ingots of pure gold!" Korr continued.

"We've no time for this!" she said.

"Kronn's beard, we'll make time!" he said, raising his voice and continuing to plunder. "There's enough riches here for us to raise an army the likes of which Sycorax has never faced! Screw binding the god to your will. With this wealth, my sword, and your sorcery alone, we can claim your kingdom and our destinies!"

The prehistoric construction beneath the scribe gave another grind and wobble, sending a flutter of unease through his stomach. As the couple bickered unaware, Addala's gentle nudge drew his attention to more bones half-consumed in red tendrils. The mass clung on and under the ring's edge, out of the daylight's reach.

"Without the true treasure of the tower, we will fail!" the witch scowled at the barbarian. "My portends always show those means alone failing us, but whatever. Grab your baubles, and be quick about it!"

Korr snatched another gem. "You've seen how fast I loot."

Addala noticed the four other paths branching off the hub of the ring. She attempted to mark their way back to the bridge they'd walked with a chalked arrow, but the marble was too dirty. Instead, as Skalos examined a corroded bronze helmet and breastplate of Taheseian style a pace away, she knelt, putting down the lamp. She scuffed in a pointing marker, rubbing hard with her robe's sleeve.

Tetree surveyed the platform. "Strewn remnants of the savages' sacrifices. If not for the god of the tower, all of this would have been looted and gone after it killed the Zadii to the last."

"Not everything here came as a sacrifice," the scribe said, lifting the ruined skullcap helm.

The Sycoraxian walked to and along the ring's border, tapping thick, low posts of marble she found at equal intervals between the connected walkways. She stopped at a post overlooking the distant, broken balcony they sought to reach. "I've come across an anchor for your rope, if you're satisfied yet."

"Another minute," Korr replied, picking up a flat ingot stamped with Kumatan hieroglyphs.

Skalos put the helmet down, and as he did so, Addala poked him in the back with the butt of the staff. Behind the preoccupied witch and warrior, her finger beckoned him over. Still crouched after marking the path back with an arrow, she pointed to an elongated, five-sided diamond shaped object she'd dusted off on the floor. The Aravian woman grabbed and rubbed it cleaner as he approached, showing him a crystal the breadth of her outstretched palm.

It was transparent, like the purest glass or ice. Unmarred, and with edges cut with extreme skill and beauty, its transparency laid obvious something that differentiated it from a clear quartz or sizable jewel of immense value: Encased within its heart and length was metalwork of gold and perhaps the copper-like glint of orichalcum. These branched in fine pathways of incredible detail, forming labyrinths building up into a design reminiscent of an abstract tree: A straight line with two short, angled offshoots on one side and three to the other.

"The Elder's sign," he whispered.

Addala touched it with her finger, then pointed to the identical symbol on the collar that muted and bound her to Tetree's will with worried eyes.

"Nameless, bring the light to me."

They eyed the witch hearing the command, finding both her and the barbarian still engrossed and with their backs turned. Without delay, she pressed her discovery into his hand and rose, grabbing the lamp. The swish of her robe passed Skalos as he rubbed crystalline facets and contemplated while she walked away.

Seen by no one, he got up and tucked it under his cloak — after a fumbling attempt thwarted by his first pocket being occupied by Belay's gifted kocosa.

"You've had your minute, are you done?" Tetree asked.

Korr stood with an armful of gemstones, a few ingots, and a smug, if slight, grin. "Indeed I am. There's more, if we can return." He peered at Addala passing by. "You, Slave. Come here and open your satchel."

She stopped as ordered, and he dumped a fortune into the bag. "You should feel flattered," he said to her, imposing where he lingered head and shoulders above the woman before nodding to Skalos. "He thinks you're worth his cut of this. The runt could've been a rich man, if he were wiser. Now you'll wed a pauper who won't even sire strong children."

The treasure's weight was now her burden, and she met his gaze unintimidated. He received her pointed squint as she buttoned the satchel's flap closed.

"I don't trust her," he said, taking the coiled bundle off his shoulder. "Can you command her not to steal or dump any of it?"

"Nameless," Tetree sighed, peering into the shadows beneath the platform, "remove nothing Korr has put in your satchel."

They both walked to the witch's side, and the barbarian began unbinding the rope while her eyes were fixated down into the drop.

"It's no use, the daylight here spoils our vision," she said, pulling back. "If only that camel hadn't been stolen in Napata carrying the torches. We could throw a few down and see more of what awaits us."

He started securing an end to the robust post. "You could send your ghost lights down."

"I'm tempted, but we're headed down, regardless. It's not so dire that it's worth the risk of awakening the god with sorcery," she said, observing him make a knot. "You evidently still think we can reach it?"

He glanced over and down before returning to his work. "We've plenty of rope. Because of the span, though, it won't be as simple as dropping the line and us climbing down."

"Tossing a grappling hook?" she asked.

"I would, but there's not a damned thing on that balcony to catch onto it with. So, I'm going to climb down, start swinging, and get myself on it. Then I'll tie it off so you and the others can rappel over."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm sure nothing will go wrong with such a foolproof plan."

"Are you confident in your knots?" Skalos asked, having joined them unnoticed while they spoke.

"What? Yes," Korr said as he finished securing the line to the marble post.

The scholar motioned around them. "And does this structure assure you with its sturdiness?"

"It'll hold," he said, giving the attached rope a formidable pull. "It's held longer than our history."

Provoked, a stony grind and wobble they all felt came and went.

The Borean shrugged. "Or we can spend more time looking for another way. I leave it to you, Tetree."

"No," she said, taking the oil lamp away from Addala. "As you're here and so concerned for our safety, Scribe, I want you to lean down and over the side to scrutinize what lies below. Gander what you can out of this light that's making us too feeble sighted to see past the shadows."

"Me?" he asked, pointing to the barbarian. "He's the better climber, and with keener eyes."

"I'm busy," Korr said, tying the opposite end of the rope around his waist. "Do you want us to blunder into something unawares? Don't be a coward."

"I was going to have Nameless do it," she added, "but on second thought, she wouldn't be able to tell us what she finds."

Flicking a distrusting glance, he got belly-down on the floor and left the khopesh beside him. Tetree smiled as he slid himself and slacked over the side, one hand clutching the post to anchor him.

"Nameless, hold his ankles and brace yourself so he can drop a little further and have a solid vantage."

The witch turned to Korr, his eyes locking with hers as the staff clattered on stone and Addala did as requested. Her grip holding Skalos by the feet, the slave braced the soles of her sandals on the small marble column she now sat behind.

The warrior glanced to the scholar as he released his clasp on the remnant block. After watching him slip past his waist to dangle under the edge, he returned to Tetree's gaze above her straining servant.

"He's too attached," she whispered to him alone. "He has been useful and made her more compliant, but I've failed to dissuade him. He will interfere with what must be done."

Her eyes turned to Addala. "Nameless, let him—"

"There's more red fungus," Skalos interrupted. "Much more!"

"Is it a hazard we can avoid?" Tetree asked, pausing the unfinished command he hadn't heard.

He grunted upside down, squinting in the umbra beneath the ring. "It hangs under everything here, like sacks of dangling meat!"

In shadow, a fungoid stalactite coiled and swiped with tentacular motion. His forearm blocked its strike, sparing his neck from being rent by claws of human ribs, but the rest of it clamped down vicelike upon his wrist.

"Pull me up!" he yelled, thrashing as Addala's strength proved insufficient. Yanked towards the edge, unable and unwilling to let go, only Korr's might and swift hands on her shoulders kept the pair from falling.

Now the object of a tug-o-war, Skalos struggled as the other dangling clumps of fungus beneath the platform curled both for him, and up onto the central hub above. Teeth clenched, his free hand pushed against the lip of the ring with all the force he could muster. A surge of panic enabled the thin man to resist the tentacle's relentless grapple on his arm, but he couldn't escape its clutches.

Still fighting, he caught sight of the undersides of the bridging spokes, all as coated with charnel stalactites as the axis they supported. All beginning to shift and move.

"They're all around us!" he shouted as Tetree recoiled, witnessing crimson masses slap down like wet, skinless muscle. One, then a dozen, next a score. Squirming bags forming twisted limbs with stolen human bones.

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Derelict Skyrings

Part VI – A Derelict Relic

by Peter J Gilbertson

“Biolights and bayonets!” Mo shouted. He knew comms were likely out, but still continued to countermand their blackout protocol. With his right hand, he activated the non-electrical light attached to his rifle. At the same time, Mo hit the manual levers hidden on the helmet’s neck seals with his left hand and watched the micro thin layer of visual sensory receiving film on his helmet retract over his head. *Like an eyelid opening*, Mo had thought when he first tested it. But that was a lab test. This was the first time the off-the-books modification, which Dr. Nya Rowell had assured the team was unnecessary, had been employed in combat.

And project “Dial 8” was a success.

Mo surveyed the battleground with his bio light. Rondo had already tossed the chaff grenade toward the Doom sentries before Mo’s pan-optics retracted. Neon green smoke and confetti exploded in the chamber, disrupting the targeting systems of the giant mechanical sentries. The giant robots’ gun arms fired blind at Rondo’s last position.

Fortunately, he wasn’t there.

Rondo had already turned off his soft mag soles and launched himself toward the tactical mop. He sailed between Garcia and Blakke, who sprayed long, constant goutts of fire at the ceiling. The two Space Marines lit up the entire hallway and illuminated where the Symbiote Colony, swollen from feeding on the corpses of its victims, had been waiting outside of Kreig’s cell door for the Marines’ orbital assault uniforms to fail. Thick stalactites of the translucent slime shot from the ceiling towards the Marines. The Colony anticipated the Marines removing their helmets to see and breathe.

Instead, their assault was met with bright flames.

The tendrils of invisible ooze caught fire, boiled, and burst, exposing the deadly Sentient Granules within them. In the intense heat, the Granules shriveled and died, but kept their trajectory. From inside his helmet, Mo felt the slight vibrations of the blackened Granules impacting his helmet. *Like racing mag-lev bikes around the dusty roads of NewLak at the end of summer*. The main core of the Symbiote shriveled and retreated along the ceiling at high speed, back toward the guardhouse. Blakke and Garcia pursued it with their flames, while Salvatore, still limping in his splint, and Muller covered them and the other cell doors they passed.

Mo turned his biolight back toward the Doom sentries.

Nguyenson and Collins, Alpha’s snipers, had used their laser sights and sent foam rounds toward the sentries through the cloud of neon smoke and metallic confetti. And the gunfire stopped. Both snipers had struck bullseyes on the sentries’ gun arms despite the lack of clear visibility. Then the pair sent another two rounds at what they estimated were the sentries’ feet. And the tremors from approaching footsteps stopped.

But it wouldn’t hold mechanized guards for long.

The team knew that a series of nozzles along the Doom sentries’ torso would deploy solvent mist that would dissolve the restraining and gun barrel-jamming foam.

"A counter-ambush!" said Kreig over the intercom. "You are full of surprises, Mohamed! How did you slip that pan-optics modification past me? I read every blueprint."

"Come out, Kreig," said Mo. "It's over."

"Not yet. It's not safe. How will you stop a charging Doom sentry?"

The Marines felt the tremors resume, but now at a running pace.

Erupting from the cloud of neon green smoke and silver chaff came the first sentry. Its arms swung blindly, before its visual sensors came back into focus, bypassing Rondo – who had a hold of the tactical mop on the ceiling – and charged directly at Mo. Nguyenson and Collins fired more foam rounds that struck true, but the sentry was still coated with the solvent and the expanding adhesive slid off the target.

Mo opened fire with this rifle, aiming at the sentry's shoulder joints, knowing that even a perfect shot or bayonet thrust would be unlikely to disable his opponent's arm.

The shots hit their mark, but didn't stop the Doom sentry from raising its arm to fire.

But the tactical mop did.

Rondo had attached the tac mop to the back of the sentry and instructed the small, flat, military-grade janitorial drone to begin its maintenance service on the Doom sentry ahead of schedule. The inner workings of the tac mop was a bioengineered slime mold that was a complex unicellular organism with no nervous system. The tac mop was another of Dr. Rowell's designs. She had agreed to the off-book pan-optics modification in exchange for Mo and Rondo arranging her secret bioengineering mold project.



"Why would they be interested?" asked Mo.

"You want failsafes and checks and balances on your gear?" said Dr. Rowell. "But what about your automated personnel?"

Mo and Rondo exchanged a glance.

"How's your smart moss gonna do that?" asked Rondo.

"It's a continuous off-line service option. It does not interact with AI or Wi-Fi. It just does its job until it is giving new instructions."

"But those aren't digitally input?" asked Mo.

"They are," she laughed and wiggled her fingers. "But a trained professional uses these digits."

"And who's the trained professional?" Mo asked and shook his head, already guessing the answer.

"Me, of course. I told you that you'd owe me one. This is it. I was passed over before, lots of people were, but I still want to work on the skyrings, even if it's as a maintenance drone inspector."

"Fine, but it can't just be you," said Mo. "You'll have to teach me ..."

Nya could not keep her composure and unleashed a huge smile, giggle, and extended her hand.

"And Rondo. Or it's no deal."

Dr. Rowell wrinkled her nose, pursed lips, and paused.

"Fine," she said. "But you have to be nice to my smart molds. They're sensitive."



Rondo, who had become acquainted with the mold in Nya's lab, politely tapped the tac mop with his fingertips, which began its new instructions. The first step in the non-routine diagnostic service, of course, was to shut down the sentry.

Which it did.

But before the tac mop could complete that task, Rondo politely nudged it again and directed it toward the other sentry still lost in the grenade's chaff cloud. The tac mop did as it was instructed and entered the neon smoke. Soon the heavy footsteps stopped.

"How'd you do that with the janitorial drone?" demanded Kreig.

Mo didn't answer his question, instead he asked his own.

"You ready to turn the lights back on and come out?"

"Gladly," replied the boyish-looking alien. He stopped the candle from spinning and the emergency lights came on. Kreig smiled at Mo and then uncrossed his legs, kicked off the far wall of the cell, and floated toward the cell door. "Let me out, please."

"That's what we thought," said Mo. "See ya Kreig."

"What do you mean? Surely, you're not going to leave me in here."

"Wanna bet?" said Rondo.

"But don't you want to interrogate me?"

"Sure," said Mo. "How'd they get out?"

"Well, not here, surely. Take me to the surface or MidPac, at least."

"Nah, here's fine. So, tell us what happened."

"I'm not sure. The lights went out and their cell doors opened. That's all I know. Got any leads?"

"We've got a few theories. We suspect this is an inside job you arranged with the other inmates."

"We can't stand each other. The idea of an alliance like the one you propose is preposterous. Ask them, why don't you? Where are they now? Oh, that's right. They turned on each other as soon as they escaped. See, instinct is universal. What united them was a common cause, to escape their imprisonment. But once their common enemies were eliminated, they eliminated one another. By the way, who won?"

"Same as always," said Rondo, pointing to a neighboring cell. "Whoever is left standing."

"The Lothgurian? Unlikely. Xoidians are the natural aggressors. One scream and the hairy catfish curls up like a millipede. And no way a Lothgurian proboscis penetrates their carapace, right?"

"Maybe a head shot," Nguyen said, looking down the barrel of his rifle.

"Okay. Could be. But where is the body?" asked Kreig.

"If the body is missing, then the Symbiote Colony ate it."

"Then the Lothgurian ate the Colony?" asked Kreig.

"Yeah, their whiskers could paralyze the slime," said Muller, coming back up the hallway with Salvatore limping behind him. "Although, there isn't any slime left for it to eat. Salvatore and I finished it off before it could escape. I think the Lothgurian ate the rest."

"That explains why it doesn't look so good," said Salvatore.

"Well, that settles it," said Kreig. "Now if you don't mind. We should be leaving. I don't know about the safety of these facilities. According to your protocols, all high-value inmates should be returned to surface facilities in the event of a worst-case scenario."

"I know the protocol," said Mo. "But you ain't leaving until you tell us how you orchestrated this event."

"Lieutenant Blackbear, there will be time enough for interrogation once we are safely on the ground."

"Since you're not sharing, would you like to hear our thoughts? Like I said, 'We got some theories.'"

"This is neither the time, nor the ... "

"Rondo says you can influence electromagnetic radiation. That helps you create sort of a digital fugue in our AI. Sam ran diagnostics and even got a second opinion, and both came up negative. Now, that's a real dangerous talent you haven't disclosed to any Earthling before. In confidence, Rondo told me of his suspicions, but he wasn't certain of the extent of your abilities. Rondo is known liar and a cheat, but when he told me this, I knew he was serious. Because, like my great-grandfather, I've been waiting for the skyrings to become a derelict relic since the day its construction began. Rondo also knew, from experience, that the safest place in a prison riot is locked behind an impenetrable door. Of course, once the riot was over, you'd need someone to let you out."

"Like, say, a rescue team?" offered Collins.

"But what we couldn't figure out is, why now?" said Mo. The team looked at each other and then looked back at Kreig, but the alien remained silent. "Since we can't trust our recent deep space scans from the counterweight telescopes, because of your influence, our guess is that your enemies have sent a planet killer asteroid towards us, probably aimed right at the smelter at the Counterweight. And you need to escape from Earth immediately."

"Yes," said Kreig. "I admit it. They were all trying to escape and needed my help. But then they turned on each other before you arrived. So, we must get to the surface, warn your world, and plan our next move."

Rondo moved to Kreig's cell door and began its puzzle box-like unlocking sequence.

"Tell me, Kreig," said Mo. "Why should we trust you?"

"The fate of your planet and my survival now depend on our cooperation. Surely, that is enough."

Rondo finished the sequence and Kreig's cell door swung open. The boyish extraterrestrial stepped forward and extended his unnervingly smooth hand to Mo. Mohamed was about to refuse the handshake when Rondo placed the barrel of his rifle under Kreig's chin and fired a shot.

The ancient extraterrestrial flew upward in weightlessness and collapsed against the ceiling in an expanding bloom of its own purple blood.

Rondo released his rifle and lifted up his arms.

"I don't have time to explain," said Rondo. "Take me into custody and bring me to the Counterweight. It's the only way to save Earth. I'll explain on the way."

Every member of Alpha team had their weapons pointed at Rondo, except Mo.

"At ease, Alpha Team," said Mo. "Rondo is on our side. You've just never seen this side of him before. He's an alien defector."

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SciFanSat News

The Bartleby B. Boar Nomination



goes to

Claudine Griggs

for their work

Two Humans Walk into a Bar

About SciFanSat

SciFanSat is a monthly e-Zine of science fiction, fantasy and more! We are open to fictional prose and poetry that shelters with the range of speculative fiction genres.

Full guidelines can be found on our submissions page, but in a nutshell, we are looking for and will accept poetry of 500 words and under, and prose in the following categories: Micro Fiction (100 words and under), Flash Fiction (101 to 1,000 words), and Short Stories (1,001 to 7,500 words). Each issue has a theme, and submissions for that month are encouraged to include or at least allude to it.

SciFanSat publishes on the last Saturday of every month. [Submissions](#) for the next issue open the moment the [current issue](#) publishes, and remain open until midnight on the next-to-last Saturday of the month.

Next Issue Prompt

SciFanSat

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Issue 13
Theme is
BETRAYAL

Submission Deadline Saturday, August 24th, 2024

