

March 30th, 2024

Issue 8 | Ruin

SciFanSat

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



Featuring

jdeXpressions	From Ruin (Poetry)
A. A. Rubin	Earth Day (Micro)
Morgan RR Haze	Ruined Space Station (Flash)
Andrew L. Hodges	Growing boy (Short)
Jason H. Abbott	Shadow of the Black Tower (Serial)



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Editorial

This issue has stories and poetry aplenty, *March*-ing SciFanSat into thematic ruins as the month ends. Of note among many excellent submissions, A.L. Hodges's appetite for horror is on full display with his short story "Growing Boy" (warning: it may ruin your dinner). Ash Deza graces our carefully curated live reality feed with a glitch in "Close Your Eyes" that puts a dystopian filter over present-day concerns in grand cyberpunk style. Peter Gilbertson delivers the second part of "Derelict Skyrings" which began in issue seven, with space marine Mohamed Blackbear encountering wreck and ruin. Amid a lot of grim peril in our stories this month, "Truth Seeker" by That Burnt Writer provides a welcome respite and some hope to the eyes.

On the short side of the prose spectrum, A.A. Rubin and Nancy E. Dunne wrote splendid microfiction packed with power in small packages! Phasing into the realms of poetry, poets contributing this month include Isabella du Lac with the wonderful "Diary of a Sanguine Maiden", "From Ruin" by jdeXpressions, Voima Oy's "The Tower", and "Entombed" by Sean McGillis. Alan Vincent Michaels gifted us with several great poems and flash fictions too, accompanied with his usual illustrative flair.

As usual, the issue finishes off with the next instalment of my "Shadow of the Black Tower" serial. Its sixth chapter picks up immediately after the cliffhanger I rudely left readers on last month. The way to the eponymous edifice of the tale is now apparently clear, and that assumption is, of course, dangerously wrong.

Now on to some updates and upcoming changes for the magazine. First, the due date for submitting votes into the peer review poll to determine a winner of the Bartleby B. Boar Award for each issue is going to be set to a firm date. Up to now, we'd left the closing date float and be fuzzy, often leaving it open until the last day before the next issue publishes. This variation adds last-minute changes and stress on us as we produce the magazine. Therefore, **the due date for submitting votes into the peer review poll will henceforth be concurrent with the deadline for SciFanSat submissions to the upcoming issue** (the next-to last Saturday of any given month). We'll try to do better with getting reminders out to folks as well, and just so you know the poll is generally open for voting as soon as the latest issue releases or very shortly thereafter.

Second, we're going to revise and streamline our submissions process a little. **In the coming weeks, we will introduce and provide simple submission guidelines for document formatting.** This is very basic stuff common to submissions for any professional magazine that many of you are doing anyways. Those of you who do that are awesome and you should know it. However, some of you are new at this. Even Kim and I assembling the magazine didn't realize at first how much little things like an author not including their name or the title of their piece on the draft document can confuse and delay us in review, editing, follow-up, and typesetting. We hope to have those changes effective for all submissions starting with issue ten.

A related change **will be removing the ability to input the text of a submission longer than a microfiction or short poem directly into the form.** We're doing this because we receive everything done this way in an email. When the submission is a

hundred words or so long, that's not much of a problem. But when pieces are close to or over a thousand words, then copying, formatting, and keeping straight who submitted what begins to eat up an unjustified amount of time. For that reason, we're nixing it soon, except for very short submissions under one-hundred and one words.

When I transitioned SciFanSat from a microfiction and poetry event on Twitter to an e-zine, my assumption was its submissions would remain focused on short poetry and microfiction. The ability to input the text of a submission directly into the form was a convenience I wanted to offer so authors could copy their work from their microblogging application of choice and just paste it in, easy peasy lemon squeezy. But instead, many, many authors wanted to submit more substantial pieces of flash fiction and short stories to the magazine and make full use of the medium it provided. I've been overjoyed by this, and happy to accommodate! It outmoded the original design philosophy of the forms, however.

Most of you already submit your work on attached documents, even for pieces under a hundred words. Thus, I don't believe this will be an inconvenience, and I assume any author writing something over a few hundred words long does so typing in a document program anyway for saving and editing. We can open any non-sketchy document format sent to us, with docx being ubiquitous. More will be outlined when the submission guidelines for document formatting are up. And as stated earlier, the ability to input the text of a submission under one-hundred and one words will remain on the forms.

Finally, the "we don't edit submissions" policy at SciFanSat has been eroding for some time, as a number of you who have exchanged emails with Bartleby or I can attest. So, we are officially amending that to "we may do very minor edits to submissions after consulting with authors on matters we suspect are typos, editing fragments or misspellings in an otherwise acceptable piece for publication." These are small things that are easy to have slip past, and simple things we're happy to help fix. Editing of a level exceeding that remains beyond the constraints of our time, however.

Alright, please enjoy this new issue of SciFanSat! Our thanks go out to everyone who spreads the word and contributes. Every author and reader participating enriches the magazine, be that with their words or with their support of the speculative fiction writing community! This periodical is made for and by readers, just like you.

Take care and join us again in April for our theme of... ENCOUNTER!

- Jason H. Abbott



Poetry

Shedding My Humanity by Alan Vincent Michaels

I shed human skin
revealing my inner self
I must shapeshift soon

The Man's skin is pure
I'm saddened he must expire
I absorb his life

I cannot resist
the Woman's supple, bronzed skin
Humans—my *ruin!*

Find the Author

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Three Ruins in Haiku

by Alan Vincent Michaels

1

ruins of their moon
they held each other in love
shattered tomorrows

2

a new world for us
let's not ruin this Eden
memories of Earth

3

wish upon a star
make sure it's not a nova
don't ruin your day!

Find the Author

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Diary of a Sanguine Maiden - Week 0/2

by Isabella du Lac

On Monday,
I accepted the Kobold into the room, somewhat reluctantly.
My fears were realized, as he let the Bogons free.
Up in the attic they found me, tucked away in the Lee.

On Tuesday,
Could it get any worse?
Tis the Devil's curse,
Ambedo held us prisoner!
Locked in sensory exploitation too late to save even a vestige of sanity,
we sing with the Valkyries, moaning, wailing.

On Wednesday,
The Oracle came
that grand old dame.
Spoke to me over the devil's shoulder.
Told me I needed to grow older.
Your quest lies in the ruins' of the faithful, she said.
Now is the time,
take what is proffered, for it may not be offered again.
Where was the apostrophe? I wondered.
Should I take her literally?
Oracles are so cryptic with metaphor and alliteration
Yet upon them hangs the fate of a nation.
Perhaps it was time, I thought,
though it may all come to nought, so...
I faced the Devil and won, carefully I unlocked the curse,
feeling none the worse.
Realising that time was too precious to waste,
I dressed in haste.
Grabbed the most innocuous weapon in my possession
flew out the door, singing sagas of the North,
felt again the strong winds of freedom,
caressing my face, calling my name.

On Thursday
I had to smile; I found it locked in a box,
the poor Spring Equinox.
Mouthing words so vile, it took flight
in hot pursuit of the naughty Kobold Sprite.
"If you hurry you can catch him
he's on his way to Outer Zim."
...I dobbed him in.
Now I must hurry, for last year I was snatched from the jaws of depravity,
pulled out through the cavity, by my brother Amuletto.
I have a debt to pay.
Candobin is the price,
a faded flower
sheathed in a golden shower

and so...
I take a tumble through the hollow,
invisible in my cloak of displacement.
Searching for Candobin, I fly through the air
Spying an old ruin, I land with a flair.
Dame Oracle's words ring in my ear
is Candobin buried here?
with so much hurry, I created a flurry,
inside the walls I don't see it coming.
The fanged Tagon slaps against my thigh,
holding my breath I watch it float by.
Buried in deceit it can hear the slightest heartbeat.

On Friday
Friday came on leaden feet.
My search continues, I must be fleet.
It was the wrong place,
the wrong tumble down maze,
I realised this as I rushed in and out.
Eight hours later, airborne, feeling forlorn
still flying above the marble desert,
Oh how my body does hurt,
Oh how I long for my yurt.
I am made weary from the pounding of my wings,
as rain falls in reams and wind lashes the houses.
No human cry can be heard above the din.
I scream my name loud, deep, and complete...
Beware! Valion, of the Farangi, is awake.
As I fly on by, I spy from my perch on high
what was once a Temple of the Faithful
now just a crumbling edifice.
A lovers' kiss
A vagabond's hiss
with no soul, no face and no place, in this dystopian world of glam and sham.
Then as I move away I see,
a purple flame flickering in the ruin below,
the iridescent glow of Candobin shining bright and free;
beckoning to me, come pick me and see...

Find the Author

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From Ruin

by jdeXpressions

*the Youngyouth
turned in concert
sound emanating
from the desert ruin
similar to one from
their lost home world*

*drifting from shadows
into sunlight a figure
in amber robes
cross legged levitated
with hang upon knees
manipulating tone fields
much like the wind
through the lost symbol*

*they joined in chorus
their voices as one
shrill shimmering
across the sand
as their tears rose
in unison*

*to course the dunes
and flowers bloomed
and for a moment
a mirage formation
of the home threshold*

*then the deep rumble
of the human machines
shattering mirage
just like glass
so that all that was left
in their wake was ruin*

*listen
for when you hear
the sound of the hang
their tones will enrapture you
as written in the tomes
of the Youngyouth . . .*

~jdeXpressions~

Find the Author

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The Tower

by Voima Oy

the ruined tower
submerged for centuries
fish swim in and out

Find the Author

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Entombed

Sean McGillis

Furiously fought for my thoughts
The words, they did not come
The feeling faded fast
Stricken down and numb
Left lying in ruins
Under time's thick thumb
Trapped inside this this tomb
Searching for a crumb
Don't want to die in here
Somebody let me out
Veins icy with fear
Filled with fevered doubt
Please somebody hear
My terror-stricken shout
Is salvation near?
Soon I will blackout



Micro Fiction

Earth Day by A. A. Rubin

On the anniversary of the Earth's destruction, we gather to tell stories of our home world, of its beauty and of our folly, and swear false oaths not to ruin the new planet the way we had the old.

Already, the ships search for new planets to colonize and destroy.

Author Bio

Cast out of the universe like cosmic Cain, **A. A. Rubin** roams the planes of reality, jumping through the multiverse across the dimensions of space and time. A member of the SFWA, his work has appeared recently in Love Letter to Poe, Cowboy Jamboree, and Ahoy Comics. Follow him [@TheSurrealAri](https://twitter.com/TheSurrealAri), or visit his website, www.aarubin.com.

[BackerKit | The Awful Alphabet](#)



What We Found

by Nancy E. Dunne

It's just a ruin!" That was all I could think to say as the pod door opened and we got a good look at Earth - the real Earth.

"Of course," Translator sighed. "You've been gone 872 years. Time travel is tricky."

Find the Author

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The ruins of a forgotten civilisation at Fomelhaut 7

by That Burnt Writer

They *do* look fascinating, especially when viewed from the capital ship, geostationary above the atmosphere. Unusually configured, uncategorised alien ruins!

We've sent a shuttle down to the surface to investigate, naturally, and have taken all the proper precautions. Of course, that covers non-invasive means of examination so as not to destroy any archaeological evidence, as well as the usual protections for us to make sure we don't catch some weird-ass extraterrestrial disease.

Standing amongst them is awe-inspiring, and I stop for a moment of wonder at their other-worldliness...

Wait.

What was that? The power's gone down.

[DEFENCES ACTIVATED]

Oh shit.

Find the Author

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Flash Fiction

The Ruins of the Gods

by Alan Vincent Michaels

Strewn across myriad, inhabitable worlds and moons in our galaxy are towering stone and metal pyramids—some in a state of utter ruin, others working unceasingly for eons; some on open plains, others buried deep below ground. These ancient structures are gateways—entrances to and exits from the “Gods’ Realm.”

The so-called “gods” hide in the mists of time and the dark matter of space, denying humanity the benefit from their knowledge and mentorship, keeping us corralled here on Earth, as if we are nothing but zoo animals to be gawked at, and prodded and probed for their amusement.

I excavate the jungle-covered ruins of a nameless Mayan pyramid, hoping to outshine my archaeological cohorts, and I stand, filled with euphoria, before the ancient gods’ esoteric, technological devices that alter my body, my DNA, and my mind—forever.

I am no longer only human.

I am more *like* them now, but I will never *be* them.

Their devices altered me in ways I never thought possible, amplifying my humanity, my caring and compassion for all life, and my capacity to love others even more deeply.

Are the gods sadly missing these primal characteristics, or was it because I was *human* and they *were not*?

No answers come as I scour the stars. The gods attempt to flee from me, as sentient creatures surely would, but it is their sapience that must be eradicated. I know it is my destiny to destroy them in every age and in every corner of the cosmos, although a part of my consciousness demands they be shown mercy.

I dismiss that nebulousness of concern. There can be only *one god* who shapes the cosmos’ future from the ruins they left behind.

Was this their ultimate plan all along?



Find the Author _____

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Aliens vs. Angels

by Alan Vincent Michaels

"Mom, I'm home!" called Billy, then in a whisper, "I got kicked out of Bible Study again."
"How did that happen this—" said Alice, as she entered the front hallway from the living room. "Why is your hand—?"
"I asked Sister Anne if 'The Holy Bible' confused angels with aliens."
"Sweet Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! You'll be the ruin of me, young man!"
"I wasn't *completely* to blame—"
"Who are you blaming *this* time? That troublesome girl who tried to convince you our Blessed Virgin Mary was an *alien*?"
"A strange, little man handed me a flyer outside our church, and it made sense to me how similar aliens and angels were. Even their names use the same letters, except for one each."
"Haven't I repeatedly told you about *not* talking to strangers?"
"Well, we didn't actually *talk*. More like his words were inside my head—"
"Oh, my *complete ruin*, indeed!"
"I showed Sister Anne the flyer. That's when she hit my hand with her ruler."
"Well, that certainly explains the welt. Now, no more about all this *alien stuff*. Go upstairs to your room. Just you wait until your father gets home. *You're my absolute and complete ruin*. Help me, Dear Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"
"Here's the flyer. She told me to show it to you before she calls your cellphone—and there she is."

Not a significant difference!

ALIENS vs. ANGELS

- Are not from Earth
- Are more intelligent than us
- Are sometimes seen flying
- Possess powerful weapons
- Communicate telepathically
- May have had something to do with humanity's creation and development
- Visit Earth from time to time

- Are not from Earth
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- Possess powerful weapons
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- May have had something to do with humanity's creation and development
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Composited by Alan Vincent Michaels
Art by Pixabay - Text based on Internet Memes

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Ruined Space Station Captain Jason Singer

by Morgan RR Haze

"I thought our first sight in the Void would be more impressive," Aria says, staring at the small bit of space station visible in the asteroid..

"This is the deepest the J's explored. They scavenged much worth retrieving," the AI informs us. "Scans and calculations in progress for the next jump."

I had seen many abandoned space habitats, and this didn't seem any more ominous. But it didn't hurt to see if anything pertaining to our search was here. "Do we have time to explore the station?" I ask.

A curt, "affirmative," is all we get from the AI.

"Would you like to see if the inside impresses you more?" I ask Aria.

"Better than doing nothing, plus the sooner we get whatever Ell's after, the sooner we can find out where Gab- I mean the rest of the crew is." Aria blushes at the slip, but I won't tease her. I know Gabe has liked her for years, maybe absence will make her realize she feels the same.

"Ell brought us here for a reason. I'm curious to solve the mystery." Mark diplomatically agrees.

....

The outside didn't prepare me for the destruction inside.

"It's like people just smashed everything. There are valuable metals in the walls, so looting doesn't fit." Mark points to the intricate gold inlays.

"This area kinda reminds me of Jakodi. All the shops," a scream stops her mid sentence. "They went insane." She whispers, pointing into the alcove she was nearing.

The scene was shocking. Bodies float in the vacuum that fills the station. All show signs of trauma, but in ways indicative of self infliction. "That might explain why they didn't evacuate," is what I find myself saying.

"Yeah, they were too busy damaging themselves and the station." Mark shakes his head.

"Should we cremate them or something? It doesn't seem right to leave them like that," Aria whispers, tears floating around her visor.

"Let's get more information first. We don't know what caused this. I would hate to bring something back to the Waylay that was dangerous. Once we know, we can decide what to do about them, alright?"

"There seems to be something with a power signature up ahead. Let's hope it is a log of some kind." Mark's voice has hardened, the way it does when he is trying to control his emotions.

As we walk, Aria doesn't look away. "Could this happen to us?"

"No." I physically block her view. "I have a failsafe in place. If we start showing signs of insanity, the AI will lock us into our quarters and immediately head out of the Void."

"Oh. Okay. Good."

.....

The power was fortunately connected to an undamaged redundancy data storage module. We were able to access vid feeds, but even with what we had already seen, we weren't prepared.

"This is how old?" Aria asks.

"Millennia. The outer asteroid can be the only reason there is anything left of this station," Mark says.

"You're right they did go crazy. I've never seen such brutality. " I say.

"Having been in Fenix, that speaks volumes. They just went after each other, regardless of the damage they did to themselves," Mark agrees.

"The expressions are pure anger and . . . disgust?" Aria points to several of the individuals on the recording.

"Well this gives credence to the stories about the Void. Let's take the data to the Waylay." I turn to Mark and ask, "would there be enough power to create an overload?"

"For Aria's cremation idea? Should be. I might finagle it so the blast focus is toward the habitation areas. It seems like that's where most of the bodies are. They won't be left floating for another millennium, even if there isn't enough power to erase everything."

"Do you think the record will identify who was here? Maybe we can make some sort of memorial." Aria suggests.

"If there is a record, I give you leave to work on something. For now, let's work on putting them to rest."

Find the Author

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In the End

by Jaime Bree

Longevity.

We lasted five weeks after they came. It wasn't through lack of trying but through lack of resources. Their infiltration of our defences left us barren, their technology rendered our weapons useless. They were clever and we underestimated them.

A month before, our leader called a meeting. We met in the Grand Arcade. Our buildings were architectural masterpieces, renowned throughout the galaxy. It summed us up nicely. A massive fake facade hiding our troubles. The meeting wasn't honest. They couldn't even give us that. We all knew whose fault it was, but to them it was anyone they could blame. From the smallest child to the eldest citizen. If only they'd..., if only he'd... If

Only.

Boom!

That sound you hear, over and over. The one that resonates in your mind. The one that permeates your dreams, rocks the actual foundations of your surroundings. A warning maybe, but the effect was greater than the impact. Time was closing in fast. With every echo our fate was sealed. With every echo our hearts sank. With every echo, we died just a little. Time was closing in.

Minute

by minute by minute...

Our clock stood as it always had, rising high above the land we'd worked for centuries, highlighting our lifespan. Ancient. Revered. Every movement constructed with utmost precision and class. Founded by our grandfather's grandfathers. Maintained by their descendants. Admired by us. Our 'heartbeat.' With every boom our hearts died little by little, tick-by-tock.

Years

Of conditioning does this to a man. You think you have hope. You think they are on your side. You think what you do has meaning, until you understand the situation. They wear you down

Until

Eventually you have to run. Run from oppressors. Run from those you know will be victorious. Run from the fight, from your failures. From those you should have protected. Run.

Coward.

I pause.

I watch the sand heave, the air become foggy, the clouds of dust approach.

I blink until I have to pull my goggles over my eyes.

It's hard, but my boots remain embedded in that position as if they were never meant to leave. I breathe but there's air in my lungs. I'm not done.

I close my eyes. Hear my mother's voice. See my father's smile. Touch my lover's face. I wipe away her tear. I wish they were here.

But they lie in the ruin of a coward's escape.

What have I become, if I succumb to this fate?

Someone touches my hand. The dust settles. I hear swords unsheathed before I see them in the flesh. An orange hue of silhouetted Godliness.

This is our land.

This.

Is.

Our.

Home.

You come to ruin?
I don't stand alone.



Short Story

Close Your Eyes

by Ash Deza

I sat there, in the waiting room, biting my nails. I hadn't done that since I was little, but the nerves were getting to me. This deeply alien feeling of being *disconnected*. A fucking Ludd, except involuntary.

It started earlier today... or no, actually it started last night. I keep forgetting that. Me getting up to piss, hitting my head on the fucking medicine cabinet door. I swore up a blue streak and then went back to bed. Didn't think much of it at all. Until this afternoon. The museum.

It was time to take the class on their yearly field trip, watching all of the old stuff people used to use. I'd just explained to Jimmy what a phone was, how people used to use those weird contraptions before neural implants became a thing... when the first glitch happened. Fucking scary, I tell you. One minute the museum was as it had always been, all shiny marble and modern glass, the next it was a grey concrete box. I mean, I get it. Why bother making the place look nice when you can just push a theme to everybody's implants instead? But still, seeing it... it gave me shivers.

I disregarded it, but not 10 minutes later the next one hit me, right as I was taking a piss. Damn near made me soak my shoes. The whole bathroom changed. Goodbye nice white porcelain, hello industrial steel. And the smell... you take for granted how much your implant filters out for you.

Now I was getting freaked out, so that was the moment I decided that I needed to get myself checked out. A glitchy implant can fuck you up pretty good. Luckily, the clinic had a spot for me. But getting here... that was a completely different story.

I'd figured I'd hop on the subway here, no sweat, right? But the moment I went down the escalator I noticed something odd. No ads. Nothing. No jingles in my ears, no women on the posters trying to sell me shaving cream. It was eerie. So quiet... it was unnatural. Then, I get to the turnstile, try to pull up my wallet app to pay and.... nothing. I walked straight into the turnstile, and it hit me in the gut. Damn near had me puking on the ground right there. My wallet app wasn't responding. No wallet, no payment. No payment meant that turnstile wasn't budging.

So yeah... I didn't realise it was even possible, but my implant must have crapped out completely. There I was, in the middle of a crowd in a subway station, and I felt so deeply and desperately alone. Disconnected from the world. They say that in the old days, everybody was disconnected all the time. I have no idea how they survived without going crazy.

So, I decide to hoof it instead. At this point I'm freaking out for real though. Is it even legal to not have a working implant? I remember that there used to be Ludds around in the

cities, but I haven't seen one in years. Didn't they all move to enclaves? Or was it camps? I don't remember to be honest.

When I got to the street, that's when it hit me for real. The sky... it looked... grey. Smog. The streets were filled with garbage, I swear I saw a rat run by. I nearly tripped over a man sitting on the sidewalk. He'd been just staring ahead, but when he saw me looking at him, his face lit up.

"Please sir! I'm a veteran, please can you spare some money? I lost it all in the war. "

That was when I noticed he was missing both legs from the knee down. I was probably the first person to actually see him today. Like most people, I usually had my implant set up to filter out the homeless, but now that it was on the fritz... I was left with the awkwardness of having to pretend I didn't see him.

I quickly walked on, shaken. That war he'd been going on about. Had there been a new war recently? I'd blocked war reports from my news feed years ago. There wasn't anything I could do about it anyway, and it just made me feel sad.

My path lead past a little park. The trees looked pretty sad and sparse, but there was a group of people doing gardening work. They didn't look too great. The grey uniforms they wore looked cheaply made and didn't fit well. All of them had bulky collars fitted around their necks, and none of them looked like they'd had a decent meal recently.

Two guys in guard uniforms stood by and kept watch. One of them was rolling a cigarette while telling a joke that made the other one groan. I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. Were those prisoners? No, prisoners wore different uniforms, and none of these people had brands.

Wait, maybe they were peons. I vaguely recalled debt peonage being reinstated a few years back. It had been touted as a way for people to clear their debts through honest labour. A way to contribute to society. It had sounded like a smart idea, so I think I ended up voting for the guy that proposed it. Looking at the scene now made me feel slightly queasy. This wasn't what I had imagined to happen.

One of the peons had been pushing a wheelbarrow, but he stumbled and fell. By the looks of it, he was at least 70. Lazily the guard who'd been rolling a cigarette walked over and barked at him to get up. When the old man didn't immediately respond, he received a sharp kick to the ribs. He collapsed coughing. Now both guards were on him, ordering him to get up right now. The old man tried to get to his knees, but fell back down. The guards exchanged a look, and one of them went glassy-eyed for a second, probably accessing an app through his implant.

The light on the old man's collar turned red, and shocks ran through his body. He convulsed a few times and then went still. The guards called some of the other peons over, and motioned at the body. They loaded it into the wheelbarrow and carted it off.

I'd been standing there gawking like an idiot, and they almost saw me. I suddenly realised how much trouble I could be in if the guards caught me staring. I wasn't supposed to be able to see any of that. Law-enforcement was only visible if they wanted to be. Their implants automatically interfaced with the implants of people around them, erasing their image from the viewer's perception. This meant an officer could be watching you at any time. It had always made me feel safe, knowing that I was being watched over. Now, I felt deeply unsettled.

The world... it had changed so much since I got my implant. A little block on my newsfeed here, some environmental filters there... and I'd created my own happy little world. Right until today that is. I hadn't realised how much had changed, and I didn't like it at all. A mixture of feelings that I couldn't quite describe took hold deep in my gut.

My reverie was interrupted by my the assistant calling my name, saying the doctor would see me now. It only took the doctor a minute to check my implant, find it faulty and to schedule me for immediate replacement surgery. As I went under, I told him:

"While you're at it, please erase the last 24 hours from my memory. I saw some things I wish I hadn't. I don't want those memories keeping me up at night. "

When I woke up, I got a clean bill of health. The doctor told me the routine maintenance on my implant had been a success, and I walked home. The sky was blue, the trees were luscious and green and the streets looked picturesque. Life was good.

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Truth seeker

by That Burnt Writer

She studies me through ruined eyes, a billion galaxies swirling in the void of her gaze.

"Why," she asks, "have you really come here?"

I do not have an answer.

"I," she continues after an overlong pause, "was once like you. Driven, a seeker of Truth with a capital 't' at any cost. But look carefully; this is where it has gotten me. I see terrible things that I dare not give a name to, lest they seep into the existence of this physical plane and destroy us all. "

She gestures at her face, and I shuffle uncomfortably.

"I am cursed with, and by, these. I was told once, by a young man, that he could drown in them, and I thought it the most romantic thing in the world. I wish I had chosen that life instead of this, but I left him thinking my fate was sealed and that I did not deserve his love. "

She sinks into a reflective silence.

I wait for a moment before clearing my throat.

"Tell me," I say. "Tell me what drove you to this, what happened. Whether there is anything I can do to make it right?"

A single, solitary tear rolls down her cheek.

"Others have tried and failed," she replies. "I have been seen by the best doctors, the finest Magi and healers, and none of them could assist me. The problem is not just with my body, no. They cannot heal that, nor can they remove the deeper scars of what I have witnessed from my memory. Only one entity can help me now, and He will not come. "

"God? After all that has happened to you, you still believe that God exists?"

"No, although I've seen plenty of evidence of devils. I mean Death. "

"But all things die. "

"Not this thing. "

I freeze, stunned. Is she saying that whatever she has been through has made her immortal?

"I know," she says, "what you're thinking, and no, I cannot die. I also cannot have these removed, for they will grow back, their power multiplied exponentially each time. It has been tried, and each time they return, and the visions become more vivid. Starker. More hopeless. "

"What sort of visions?" I ask, trying to stall for time whilst I think.

"Scenes I cannot describe. Not that they are beyond description, but to do so would taint your soul, and your very blood if you even consider them. It is my penance to witness them. "

"After what I have been through, I'm not sure I have a soul worth very much at all, try me. "

"They all say that. . . until it's too late and they realise what they have lost or bartered – all for information that they come to understand that they never truly wanted. "

Dusk is near, and I reach into my pack to withdraw a blanket.

"Come," I say, "night is falling. Let us move you back inside, light a fire and, provided you do not object, I would like to spend some time listening to your stories. Let us not stay out here where the predators are about to emerge. I would not like for you to be easy pickings, as I cannot imagine that, even if parts of you grow back, you'd wish to go through that pain. "

She snorts. "Pain is grounding, pain is real, pain reminds me of my mortal, physical self. I would welcome it, for it reminds me that I am alive, and not entirely trapped in this

between-worlds state. I should have died forty years ago, and in one way I did, but the universe decided it had other plans.

"Still, I should welcome a fire and, if you have any provisions or something stronger than water in that pack, well, then that too. "

I start to stand, then pause. "How do you know I carry a pack?"

She laughs then, pure and melodious.

"I can no longer see perceive real world objects but, from the foretellings, I knew you would come.

"Besides," she smiled, "my hearing is not yet gone. "

I shake my head softly, before gently taking her arm, careful of the paper-thin skin that would look more at home on a corpse. After helping her up, I guide her back to the relative safety of her cave. Once there, I busy myself making a fire and butchering the small pig I caught this morning. When it is roasting on a spit, and she has taken a swig from my flask, she sits back with a sigh. The flames dance in the twilight, and shadows cavort on the walls.

"That smell. . . I've not eaten anything like it in years. Can't afford to have a fire if you've got no sight. "

"Wouldn't your gift allow you to protect yourself?"

"Gift?" she snorted. "More like a nightmare, and no, they're not consistent. If the light and warmth attracted. . . *them*, those that roam the forest and beyond, then I might not always know. Far safer to keep quiet, still, and out of sight. "

"I have to help you. "

"You're unable to, young man. I shall never find peace, and I am resigned to that fact. "

"You. . . you don't recognise my voice, do you?"

She sits up, suddenly wary and alert. "No. Why, should I?"

"It's me," I say. "I've been trying to track you these past four decades. You left without ever telling me why, and I never stopped loving you. "

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Derelict Skyrings

Part II – The Labyrinth of Ruins

by Peter J. Gilbertson

“Blackout protocol initiated,” Mohamed Blackbear whispered into his headset. Instantly, his squad’s orbital assault uniforms became matte black from helmet to boot.

“Running pan-optics scan,” he whispered again, an unnecessary habit. Not only were the OAU helmets soundproof, the squad was about to enter a corridor that might be a vacuum, where sound could not travel.

Their OAU gear was designed to handle all outer space missions and situations. The helmet alone could sustain breathing for 20 minutes, but when coupled with a rebreather harness and solar array, breathing could last indefinitely. In addition, the helmet’s external ballistic shell was made of a nano-diamond filament that was both transparent and had an impact resistance five times greater than Kevlar to protect the wearer from bludgeoning and projectile attacks. Beneath the shell was where the pan-optics layer was housed.

“Pan-optics scan complete,” Mo whispered. “No threats detected. Requesting permission to enter the Gatehouse. ”

It didn’t always happen, especially not during a mission, but this time saying pan-optics out loud caused Mo to have a flashback of his great grandfather’s reaction.

“Pan-optics?” Ronald Blackbear said with a barking laugh in his hospital bed after Mo had told his great grandfather the name of the new technology. It was against regulations to discuss any government weapons and gear, but Mo had figured it was okay since Great Grandpa wasn’t going to tell anyone anything soon. “That’s a pun, right? Like Argus Panoptes, the Greek cattle guardian who had 100 eyes, saw everything all at once, and never slept? That’s terrible. I love it! What else does your classified magic helmet do?”

Mo had to admit that like the legendary figure, the pan-optics did provide wraparound sensory input for the heads-up display. That way he could see “everything all at once” when it was on sentry mode. Looking straight ahead was like looking at a honeycomb of tiny screens, a hexagonal array of micro-visual displays. But the OAU helmet also had a separate guided rotational visual orientation mode, primarily used for combat, that required extensive training. “You can look up or behind you without moving your head,” Mo explained. But more than that, the pan-optics created a hybrid visual of thermal and motion detection, with on-demand telescopic and microscopic capability, night vision, and auditory and olfactory sense detection beyond human range. It also protected the wearer’s senses from light, sound, and chemical attacks.

“Surround vision, huh? Kinda like lenses on a dragonfly’s compound eye?”

“Kinda,” Mo agreed. Then he explained how beneath that layer was the high-impact padding with advanced absorption and wicking properties for comfort and air recycling.

That was the last time they spoke. Mo had planned on going on leave to visit his great grandparents tomorrow.

“They reading us?” asked Corporal Rondo.

Mo snapped his attention back to the present. It had only been a moment since he contacted mission control. It felt longer. Still, there was no response.

Have our comms and power gone out like everything else aboard the International Satellite Ring System?

Mo took a deep breath – he could smell the sage from his great grandmother’s garden that he had smudged on his helmet’s padding – and waited a moment longer.

“We are receiving you, Alpha Rex,” replied Commander Jayna at mission control. “Comms and heads-up visuals operating and recording. Proceed with caution. ”

Corporal Collins flashed a hand signal behind Mo. The pan-optics caught the signal and Mo instantly understood. The pause in communication was suspicious.

"Verify identity, mission control," Mo said.

"This is Space Elevator Transfer Station One Two, Commander Jayna Lynn. Code Sequence: Delta, Bravo, One, Four, Niner. Requesting countersign."

"Copy that. This is Mohamed Blackbear, Alpha Rex of Alpha team. Countersign: Lima, Lima, Six, Three, Zero. Please, confirm."

"You are confirmed. Proceed."

"Roger, we are opening the Gatehouse compression corridor on my mark. 3. 2. 1. Mark."

The Space Marine squad kept their tactical lights off, their combat knives sheathed and their other specialized weapons and accessories stowed in their modular packs, but the soldiers covered every corner of the corridor with their tandem round rifles. The tandem rounds were designed to offset Newton's Second Law of Motion in order to prevent the soldier's backward movement whenever the rifle fired.

The hatch opened.

Inside, the compression corridor was empty. Only dim red emergency lights illuminated the passage. They were powered by SE One Two's rescue rocket, docked outside the compression corridor.

"Deep scan it, Sam," Mo whispered. The military AI assistant complied and surveyed the corridor by coordinating the pan-optics of every Space Marine onboard, plus, every piece of functioning detection equipment – land based, tethered, and docked to the skyring – pointed in their direction. The deep scan searched for visual, thermal, and sub-audible images, sounds and patterns. When the opacity of Mo's heads-up display color shifted to lime green, he knew all was clear. Had there been any danger or anomalies detected, a neon red tint would have appeared and the entire display would have swiveled its orientation to pinpoint the source of concern, or the most proximate one in the case of multiple hazards.

"Uncle Samantha reports all-clear. Team Alpha will proceed on foot to the second Gatehouse security airlock after we send the messenger. Activate magnet soles. Rondo, take the lead. Pilot your drone to the keypad. Everyone else, maintain cover and keep an eye on those murder holes – four on each side. Once it is secured, and the door is opened we advance into the processing chamber."

"The bullpen," Rondo muttered. He'd been incarcerated before and knew the lingo.

Mo's helmet provided a split-screen heads-up display so he could simultaneously watch Rondo remove the orb-shaped drone and keep an eye on the final Gatehouse door.

The Gatehouse was the most heavily fortified component of the skydings. It needed to be. Some captives were newer contacts, while others were older and had been relocated from the prison facilities at Area 51. All of the Gatehouse's occupants were extraterrestrial. And all were being held against their will. The Gatehouse was jokingly referred to as 'orbital Area 51' and 'Area 51's satellite campus'. Only Rondo called it 'the labyrinth', because it's "a space maze, laboratory housing monsters." But its purpose and designs were no joke. Its purpose was for the safekeeping and experimentation of its occupants. Concentric failsafe measures independently developed by separate international consortiums were designed to repel external assaults and withstand internal breaches even in the event of a total power outage. If one or multiple doomsday scenarios occurred – if hostiles invaded or escaped, or the ISRS lost power, had a critical mechanical failure or went into freefall – the defenses of the Gatehouse would remain in operation.

Or they were supposed to, Mo thought.

"Drone unresponsive, Alpha Rex," Rondo said and held up the flightless orb. Mo's OAU helmet orientated a full-screen, zoomed in, sideways visual of Rondo without Mo having to turn his head. "Permission to enter the corridor and attempt hardwire opening with umbilical?"

"Sam? Control? Do you copy?" asked Mo.

This time there was no pause.

"I copy, Alpha Rex," Uncle Samantha answered.

"We copy," said Commander Jayna at mission control. "Corporal Rondo, proceed with caution."

Rather than risk the pressure plates which would trigger the corridor's jettison safeguards, Rondo deactivated his soles and propelled himself through the corridor. His tactical helmet monitored every angle of space in his immediate surroundings. Its sensors noted the arsenal of unmanned shock, laser, projectile, gas, netting, and adhesive weapons and restraints within the room and that none followed his movement. It also verified the portholes were unmanned and that, so far, the compression corridor they were in had not been jettisoned.

Mo watched Rondo, his worst best friend, float through the corridor with the 'umbilical' – a safety cable that also supplied power and communications – unspooling behind him. Rondo was an elite Space Marine and a trash pile of a human being. He was a known xenophobe, genderist, thief, and scumbag that everyone avoided on leave. But Rondo was also someone whom no one would rather have beside them in combat.

Rondo plugged in the cable. It took a moment, but the relay activated the keypad to the processing chamber.

"Team, this is likely to be *at least* one of those worst-case scenarios. We trained for this. Be ready."

They all took a deep breath, steadied their weapons, and braced themselves.

Their crisis scenario training had anticipated what opened before them. But nothing could prepare them for encountering the reality inside: beyond the threshold was a nightmare.

The chamber was black, but the OAU hybrid display showed that it was in ruins.

"We've got movement," Mo said. "But no signs of life."

"Jesus, it's a graveyard!" said Corporal Collins.

Corpses, torn open and disemboweled, floated within the chamber beside drifting globules of gelatinous blood, fragments of wall panels, shards of shattered light fixtures, rifles, tandem round casings, and exposed wiring.

"We've got more bodies," Mo reported. "Scanning wounds. Rondo, anyone got a functioning drone?"

"Negative," reported Corporal Rondo.

"Same here, Alpha," confirmed Corporal Collins and the other Space Marines.

"All drones are off-line," Uncle Samantha reported. "Cause unknown. Diagnosing."

Mo's OAU helmet zoomed in on the nearest corpse. Its shoulder insignia indicated the deceased had been a transfer coordinator.

"Sam, analyze and report," Mo whispered. "Looks like Corporal Ih. My money is that a Xoidian got him."

"Xoidian!" exclaimed Collins. "Fuck me! I saw footage of one of them knock a whole crew into the fetal position with one high-pitched scream. Then it took its time clawing each one apart."

The Xoidians were sphinx-like species to human eyes.

"We all saw that footage," Rondo said. "Shut up and focus. They're just a bug, bird, bat hybrid. Treat it like we're going fowling. Our helmets and suits will stop their attacks."

"If they're unarmed," Collins answered.

"Stow it, both of you," Mo snapped.

"Confirmed," Uncle Samantha said. "Transfer Coordinator Ih was disemboweled by a Xoidian talon. However, I've scanned the other corpses. Captain Rivera's body displays the exsanguination wound pattern from a Lothgurian bite attack."

"Lothgurian?" said Mo. "They live in ammonia oceans. How are they able to breathe out of confinement?"

Samantha continued, "And from the amount of clothing floating in several more personnel were dissolved by ..."

"Watch the walls! The Symbiote Colony is out. Use the coagulant spray!"
Every Space Marine reached for their fire foam thrower.
The OAU gear was designed for this specific encounter scenario.
"Fucking slimy sand ambushers!" shouted Rondo. "Where are they?"
"Scanning," said Sam. The Symbiote Colony was composed of two sentient species. One was a transparent ooze; the other was a swarm of minerals that appeared to be black sand. Both were nearly impossible to see with the naked human eye. But Sam could bullseye either of them.
"No hostiles detected," she said. "No living humans or aliens encountered."
"Thanks, Sam. Control, did you copy that?"
"Well, where are they?!" asked Collins.
"That's three species that have escaped," Rondo said. "Think there are any more? Think they all got out? You think ... he got out?"
Mo whispered into his headset, "Mission control, this is Alpha Rex. Do you copy?"
A response came, but it was not who they expected.
A voice came over the Gatehouse speaker. "Welcome aboard strike team Alpha. Sorry, but I believe your weekend plans have been ruined."
The door behind the rescue team closed, severing the comms and power safety cable.

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Growing Boy

by A. L. Hodges

Mom told me not to eat that candy I got from Ms. Bezinger. She said it would ruin my appetite.

I reckon she's only saying that on account of she thinks I ruin most everything. Other day, she said I ruined her carpet when I come in after playing in the creek with Billy Patterson. That time, she about burst a vessel, seeing me dripping water all over Creation. Day before that, she was on about how I ruined her petunias when I was playing tackle football with the boys in the backyard. I told it was Josh Foricker who tackled me into the dang things, it wasn't my idea at all, but she wouldn't listen to me. Not that she ever does, anyway.

And every time she gets two or three glasses into a bottle of wine, she starts on about how I ruined her marriage. Far as I can tell, all I did was be born, and dad decided he'd had enough. I don't reckon I remember much about him, just kinda how he looked, kinda burly with a dark beard and short hair. He always seemed to have a racing cap on, and he always looked like he was smiling. I liked dad, but I don't know if he felt the same way. Last year, I only saw him on Holidays, and my Birthday seemed to slip his mind.

But mom's one to talk about appetites. Every time she wants to shove some glop she's slapped together for dinner, I hear this whole riot act about how I "need to eat" cause "I'm a growing boy". Listen to this woman! She couldn't keep a story straight if her life depended on it! Well, I guess now I'll be a growing boy with some candy in my mouth, huh?

Thing is, Ms. Bezinger's house is always popular on Halloween. If you can brave that yard of hers, with all those creepy flowers (they seem to sway towards you, like the tentacles of a jellyfish), and if you got the guts to ring her doorbell, you'll get the best sugar eats there are. Popcorn balls, candied apples, you name it. She's got an herb garden out back, so she says, and she seasons everything to perfection. When I was a kid, mom used to march me up to her front door every Halloween and make me take a treat and say thank you Ms. Bezinger and all that jazz. But I tell you what, any fear I had of being poisoned by that hag dissolved when whatever it was crossed my tongue.

Cooking and flowers, that was Ms. Bezinger's specialty. Everywhere there was a flower show, a bake off, or any gathering of el birdos with veiny hands competing in home ec drudgery, you'd find Ms. Bezinger with those weird plants and delicious treats of hers. She never went to church, as far as I could see, but she was always at the luncheons and prayer breakfasts of the First Baptist and the Mother Mary's Catholic popping out deserts with every other bible-thumping crone. Talk about persistence! She'd make your eyes bleed with those flower arrangements and your tongue tingle with those sugary snacks.

Trouble was, cooking and flowers was mom's thing, too. I weren't never much of a fan of mom's cooking, but I reckon she saved the good stuff for the county fair judges. She was cordial as you like to Ms. Bezinger on the street, but I think deep down, she was tired of coming in second and third while Ms. Bezinger brought home blue ribbons time and time again.

I guess Ms. Bezinger had to be good at something, seeing as how God hit her with about fifteen ugly sticks. She's the weirdest-looking lady you ever saw with the most beautiful garden in the whole state, and that's the truth. You take the shortest, gnarliest, wrinkliest old woman you ever come across, and I guarantee you ol' Ms. Bezinger can beat her for weirdness, no contest. She's shorter than me even, with a back bent like a corkscrew. Maybe it's just her glasses, but she has an enormous pair of eyes that don't never seem to wink. And her hands? Man, she's got huge mits with fingers that got to be almost a foot long! She always holds 'em folded close to her chest, like a T-Rex from a movie. When she smiles, you should see her teeth: they ain't no dentures, but long teeth, like a

gopher, long and sharp-looking. Just looking at her shuffle along with those humongous hands and big ol' eyes is enough to give anybody the creeps.

I tell ya, it's a heck of a thing to live next door to the local witch lady. Or whatever she is. Most of the boys got a complex about coming over, on account of us living next door to ol' Ms. Bezinger. Thing is, what if a ball goes over the fence into her yard? Then what? I sure as heck wouldn't go get it. Ms. Bezinger? That's suicide.

Josh Foricker has a regular business, talking to kids about Ms. Bezinger and sharing local legends with anybody who will listen. See, it was Josh who convinced me that one time to sneak up to her house and peek in the window. I was against it but he coerced me, that way he does, where he just gets under your skin and crawls around until you give in.

Of course, Josh has his work cut out for him on that one. People have been talking for a long time about how Ms. Bezinger isn't human. Josh's theory was always that she was an alien, and come down to colonize Earth with her weirdo flowers. He said that even though our town ain't but three thousand souls, there weren't nobody he ever heard of that ever called Ms. Bezinger by her first name. Fact was, nobody seemed to know anything about her, where she was from or who her family was or any such thing. Josh's older sister, who just went to college, said that Ms. Bezinger was old even when she was our age, and Josh said even his dad let slip that Ms. Bezinger had to be nearly a hundred because even he remembered her being old and wrinkly when he was a kid. Josh is known for making up tall tales, but I reckon he might be onto something. I've lived next to Ms. Bezinger for as long as I can remember, and I ain't ever seen anybody come to visit her, no family or anything. Heck, she barely even comes out, except to go to the store.

And it's a small town, people talk. The kids at school sure as hell never get tired of chewing over Ms. Bezinger. Every year, some kid comes up to me and Josh and asks me about what it's like living next door to a witch. Or an alien. Or a serial killer. Whatever the story is that year. And Josh lives for that, because then he gets to ramble on about how Ms. Bezinger came here in a UFO in the 50s, and how she catches kids and grinds them up and uses them for fertilizer for her alien plant people. Pretty soon, those flowers will bloom into pod people, who will take over the human race, just like in a scifi picture. So on and so on.

But Josh, he's always got his head on making money. And what he did, he started charging the boys to have a peek into her house. One of the guys would come for a three-way sleepover, and Josh, he'd pop the big question: you wanna take a peek in the old lady's place? And at first, they'd be all coy about it. Then Josh would start in with those stories, and he'd be prodding them for a quarter of an hour, and finally they'd buckle. For five bucks (which is a heap of money when you're ten) he would sneak them across the fence and right up to her back window and let them take a glance inside. Like she was a zoo exhibit. Next day, we'd split the money, and I think in one summer we made thirty bucks a piece that way.

I didn't like it at first, but you can't argue with good money. And I gotta tell you, I got to getting pretty curious about what was going on in that saltbox next door. See, her house is pretty funny, and like her, extremely old, with furniture that looks like something from the dark ages. These old couches that are like something from a period piece, and oil lamps, and stuff that doesn't make any sense. I don't mean odd-looking nicknacks, but furniture that I can't see no purpose for. Like it wasn't made for human beings. All the rooms on the bottom floor are like that, and all of them full of weird things that I really can't put no name to. But the kitchen is the worst.

First of all, it's full of tools that aren't like anything I ever seen. They're like something between doodads from an alien abduction piece and surgical implements from Frankenstein's castle. All nasty looking, and I don't mind telling you, I've often had dreams of her wrenching me apart with them. But second to that is, the kitchen is where she spends most of her time. Just about every peeping Tom session we did ended up watching her in the kitchen, futzing about, working on something or other. I wish I'd written everything we saw down, because looking back, so much of what we witnessed didn't seem to make much sense in the context that we saw it.

For one thing, she sang while she worked. And I'll tell you, it wasn't like any language I've ever heard. Heck, I've never heard a human throat make noises like that! She would sing to herself while she cut up flowers, but those flowers...

See, that was the second thing. The flowers had things inside them, growing. I thought they were bees at first, but even though they looked like insects, they were

Different

Wrong

I can't explain it. They were critters, with chitin and tons of legs and wings, but I can't really find the words for it. Plus, we watched this from the window, so I never got more than a glance at them. But they weren't like anything that looked like a flower. And she cut these things up and used them to...

Well, I don't know. She had pots going, but she always seemed to be making something that I didn't recognize. Everything we saw was just so weird, the context never helped us understand it. And of course, remember, we were trying not to get caught, so we could only watch her for a minute or two before running back to my place. I tell you, all those kids me and Josh took over there got their money's worth! Ms. Bezinger never disappointed.

But I tell you, I was getting creeped out. It was all ok for Josh, because he went home the next day. Me, though, I had to live next door to that weirdo. And I knew it was only a matter of time before she caught on to us.

Turns out, only a matter of time was yesterday. We pulled the routine like we always did, me and Josh and Billy and a new kid at school named Nick Kasbrak. Josh wheedled Nick something terrible, new kids to our circle are always a sucker for those Ms. Bezinger stories. When Josh was finished, Nick looked like he might piss himself at the thought of even going near the house next door. But he relented, as they all do, and with our flashlights we snuck over the fence and through Ms. Bezinger's eerie garden of strange flowers.

Everything went off without a hitch. Until the next morning, when mom got a phone call.

Did we leave footprints? Or did she outright see us? Maybe she knew all along, and decided for whatever reason that this time was the last straw. Either way, mom gave me the nastiest talking to I've ever had yet. Apparently, she thinks Josh is a bad influence, and wants me to have a "proper male role model". She started on that kick even when she was with dad, but she's really ramped it up since dad flew the coop. She's always lending me out for chores for little old ladies from church, just like I was a vacuum cleaner or a pair of hedge clippers. I guess it was only a matter of time before I ended up working for Ms. Bezinger, but I was hoping it wouldn't be so soon.

Of course, I'm more scared of mom than Ms. Bezinger. The old woman is just creepy, but mom is downright psychotic these days. When I found out I was spending one day of the summer, one of my precious days of freedom before the start of the school year mowing Ms. Bezinger's substantial lawn, I said no way, no how. But she gave me that look, the one every mom has in her arsenal, and stuck her finger in my face, and told me I better hup-two and do a good job. This was compensation, for upsetting our poor neighbor, and I best not ruin it, like I did everything else.

So I mowed the lawn for her. She stood on the porch watching me push the mower back and forth, her eyes rolling back and forth from behind her thick-as-a-brick glasses. The crazy thing was those flowers, which grew all around her lawn and back garden. Having seen what I had seen, I had this horrible fear that I would touch one by accident, or that I would inhale pollen from one. I had seen them in the dark when sneaking up to the house a million times, but by daylight they took on a new life. They swayed in their eerie way, orienting themselves towards me as I passed by. I couldn't help but feel they were reaching out for me, as if begging for help.

But I finished, God help me. I stumbled up the porch, sweating my head off, where Ms. Bezinger was waiting, holding a bowl in her humongous hands. And she had this smile, so that I could see her creepy gopher teeth. She told me what a good boy I was in her cutesy

granny voice and dug around in that bowl with her long, crooked fingers. She had what looked like giant malted milk balls, huge round gobs of chocolate, one of which she selected for me.

"I made this myself" she said. "Something sweet, for a sweet young man. "Then she pushed it at me with a big grin. Well, I didn't want to take it at first. But it just looked so delicious. Round, smooth, sweet-looking, perfect. I took it, and her smile broadened until it looked as if it would split her head in two.

"That one is for you. The rest are for your friends, when the time comes. "

Then she turned and shuffled back into the house.

When I got home I was holding it, thinking about whether to chow down on it or not. Of course, mom started in with her whole spiel: ruin your appetite and all. She's making pasta in a creamed spinach sauce tonight.

I hate spinach.

When I put that thing in my mouth, I was riding high. The taste was incredible, indescribable. There was the smooth taste of chocolate, with something underneath, something tart and chewy. It was like candy, but no candy I'd ever tasted before, something next level. I'd heard people whistle Dixie about Ms. Bezinger's cooking, but this was something else!

And now

Turns out, I really am a growing boy. My clothes ripped and my bed broke. The whole room looks smaller and I feel

I feel a lot hairier now. And my hands are getting bigger, and my fingernails have grown a heck of a lot.

And mom was wrong. That candy didn't ruin my appetite the first bit. In fact, I feel hungrier than I can ever remember feeling in my whole life. For some reason, I got this craving for raw meat.

Man, I really want the taste of blood in my mouth right now.

I'll go downstairs and see mom. Maybe she can help me out. She's not much of a cook, but I'm sure she's delicious.

Author Bio

A. L. Hodges was born in Suffolk, England, but has lived the majority of his life in Virginia. He has worked as a paint contractor, a biology teacher, an ER volunteer, and a hospital orderly, all experiences he draws on for his writing. He currently lives with his wife.

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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 Agamenaë



Chapter Six: The Eyot of Ages

Tetree reached the end of the toppled obelisk. Her gaze unblinking and focused on her feet, she took another methodical, slow step and lowered the heel of her sandal. Past an edge of black granite, it met shattered masonry in a rough pile at the base of the fallen monument. There, ancient rubble formed an uneven slope with enough broken flat stones to serve as inadvertent stairs to the ground. She descended them playing her flute in a nigh

trance.

Close behind her followed Korr, eyes darting between the witch and the vague shapes orbiting in fogged air around her. Sword drawn, he glowered at the unnerving dance within thin mist, waiting for her. He began his descent as soon as she reached the grey flagstones below. The barbarian caught sight of black-robed Addala as he glanced back to the vapor shrouded trek across the obelisk, but not Skalos, before he dipped out of view.

With a mountaineer's confident stride, his soft leather boots trod the ruined paving of the island with ease. Even encumbered with one arm bracing a huge bundle of rope over a shoulder and his other brandishing a weapon, Korr's steps were swift. He trailed Tetree crossing triangle mosaics: Once precise and interlocked five-pointed stars now made uneven and heaved with age. She paced a dozen yards further along with him following an arm's span behind her, before stopping.

Still playing, she initiated a slow heel turn in place, lifting her head until a blank stare fell on Korr. Exhaustion evident on the blonde's face, glassy eyes narrowed to a glare on the man as she continued to work the instrument with tedious concentration. Her raised foot smacking the side of his boot at last prodded the Borean lug to move aside and join her in looking back.

They discerned Addala finishing her way down the rubble, but found no sign of the scholar. With a look to Tetree, he saw her anger, or perhaps fear, as her shoulders slumped with creeping weakness.

"Where is that fool?" he said aloud through gritted teeth, despite beeswax deafened ears. He faced the ravine again. "Did he fall? Did he linger too far behind and doom us all?"

In a full run, Skalos emerged from the mist. Sandals slapping on the obelisk's wet granite, he reached its edge and leapt to the uneven slope of broken masonry below.

Upon seeing Korr's reaction, Addala turned. She beheld the scholar hurrying down amid knocked and tumbling stone fragments. Shock overtook her face, witnessing his display of remarkable dexterity or fortune as he bounded onto the flagstones faster than any of them had.

His carrying yoke and its bundles swaying, he didn't stop reaching the bottom. A gander at his terrified eyes and hand on her wrist were enough to coax her into a sprint with him to the others.

The pair skidded to a jarring halt before the witch and warrior as Korr scrutinized them with an eyebrow cocked. His attention shifted as one last thin whine blew through the flute. While unheard, the trio felt the end of the music's sickening resonance in the pit of their being. They observed Tetree as she pulled the instrument away from her lips, gasped, and swayed with eyes rolling back. Her knees buckling, the barbarian cast his bundle aside and caught her by the waist as she fell backwards in a faint.

With her limp body held by a muscled arm, he wedged his sword's tip in a crack between flagstones and left it upright. He laid her on the ground with care, and kneeling over her, his thick fingers tapped her cheek. Roused after a few moments, she unblocked her ears, groggy-eyed.

Korr dug the wax out of his own, the others observing him and doing the same. The thundering din of the falls returned. With a squint, the Aravian slave caught the last of the rotating sphere dissipating in the mist while Skalos panted to regain his breath next to her.

"It is done," Tetree said.

"Are you alright?" Korr asked.

"It was taxing. I need, a brief rest."

He helped her sit upright, lingering to hold her in a fleeting embrace. Attention drawn to the quick exchange, Addala noticed his eyes close in momentary contentment. The faintest of rare smiles on the grim slayer's face, Tetree's hand caressed his, before grasping at the waterskin on his belt.

"I'm parched. Water, give me water."

He tended to her as Skalos' touch turned the robed woman's privied gaze away.

"Are you alright?" he whispered, less winded and recovering from his run.

She nodded, glancing to affirm the others preoccupation prior to mouthing back her voiceless reply.

Are you?

He returned a nod of his own, then touched her waist whispering. "And our—"

Two paired fingers silenced his lips. She lowered them, cradling and swaying the pair with her other hand until they slept hovering near her navel.

Their eyes meeting again, she mouthed a second question. *What happened back there?*

"I'm not entirely sure," he said, hushed. He moved the collar of her robe to confirm the elder sign on her necklace was identical to the symbol he'd seen on the obelisk. "I found one thing and encountered another. The discovery left me uneasy. The encounter, prompted a fleet escape."

She studied the concern on his face while rolling a still soft ball of beeswax between her thumb and forefinger.

"Nameless, come tend to me and not your would-be owner."

Her expression soured at the tug of Tetree's command. Hand becoming a fist, she flattened the pliable glob within it fighting the choke of the necklace for a few seconds: A moment of delay unnoticed by her mistress, but not by Skalos as she slipped and concealed the wax in the fold of her sleeve.

"What was all that recklessness for, Scribe?" Tetree asked after Addala turned and started walking to her side. "Were you half-mad hearing a stray note?"

"No. I fell and lagged behind, nearly tumbling off," he said. "But there—"

"Whatever would we have done if you had fallen," Korr interrupted, retrieving his sword, then sliding it into his scabbard.

"I apologize for my clumsiness, but I ran because—"

"If you hadn't run like a madman to finish crossing when you did, the god of the tower would be tearing us apart right now," Tetree said. "If your delay had been a moment longer, I could have misplayed the hymn. Or collapsed with you still upon the wards!"

"There was a person!" Skalos blurted, silencing them. "As I got up from my fall, I saw someone standing on the cliff where we had been!"

"A person?" she said, motioning for Addala to help her rise. "Who?"

"I don't know."

"Was it a man or a woman?" Korr asked.

"It was a person. As for a man or woman, through the mists I couldn't see much more than a dark figure in my glimpse."

"A being, who cannot be described?" Tetree asked, risen to her feet. "Do you have a memory of yellow and red?"

"No, no colors."

She regarded the bent asymmetry of the flute in her hand. "Then it was not the High Priest of Leng, hearing the hymn across the ethers."

"They were more like a shadow," Skalos said.

Korr turned to the witch as she slid her instrument into the long pouch dangling from her belt. "The Shadow Herald?"

"They and the priest may be the same entity," she said. The blonde eyed the scholar again. "Were they of solid black, even the eyes? Not a human shade, but black as ink or pitch. Were they horned?"

"No," he answered. "No horns. Not black like that. Just indistinct, except for the eyes. They were human eyes."

"Well, now I'm far less concerned," Tetree said. "If it were *He Who is Not to Be Described* or the herald you witnessed, I doubt your run would have reached the end of the monument. Or that we would be speculating who it was at this moment instead of dying in unravelling agony."

"Maybe some Zadii survived and still lurk around here?" Korr asked.

She snatched the waterskin from his belt. "Perhaps, Pet. Or some other bushman

savage."

The scribe peered back into the mist that abutted the island like a horseshoe shaped curtain, blotting out any view past the rivers until the waterfalls. "Belay said all the native peoples won't come within leagues of here. As we have encountered no one else in two weeks of travel, I'm inclined to believe him."

The witch drained another gulp from the skin and wiped her chin. "Possibly, Skalos, you saw a baboon."

"I haven't seen a baboon since we left the grasslands of Noba."

"Reading weakens the eyes," Korr said to him. "And cowardice makes men see something to fear."

"Regardless, I'll still keep watch for your spiders," the scribe quipped, flattening the Borean's smirk.

Tetree tossed a now somewhat flaccid waterskin back to its owner, which he caught with an angry grab from a hand drawn away from his sword's hilt. "I'm confident in our ability to handle one or a few savages, if that's what it was. Yet given the overgrowth hugging the rivers, I doubt a human foot has stepped on or near this island since the Zadii."

"I was told animals avoid this place, too," Skalos said. He scanned the cloudless blue sky past a thin haze of moisture. "That birds will not land here, or even fly close to it."

"They feel the wards, and the danger," she said, looking about as well. "Like I do."

The Sycoraxian snapped her fingers. "Come, Nameless, the tower awaits, and we must act while the stars are right. As for you men, do join us. Or you can stay here and guard against a baboon attack that will never come."

A quick scoop from Korr's arm slung his dropped bundle over his shoulder as the women left. Skalos stretched his neck and rebalanced his pole before starting off again.

"Few are those that have dared infer that I am a coward, to my face," Korr said, his back a wall of muscle and scars turned to him. "Fewer still, those that have done so and I've let live. You've even known my hand at your throat today, and it didn't curtail your voice."

Body tense, but not paralyzed, the scribe took sideways steps to pass him where he stood and not strike him with his carrying yoke. "I have a knack for language, and my tongue abides."

"Your words didn't keep your head attached to your neck just now," he said with a cold dagger stare as their gazes met. "It's because I can't tell if it was bravery to respect, or foolishness to cull."

Skalos held his gaze until he had to face forward. "If I am a fool, you can always kill me later."

"Agreed."

Both men walked, catching up to the women as the mist clinging near the small island's boundaries thinned away. The tower stood at the thick, abrupt end of a wedge of land between forked river rapids and the ravines they'd cut over epochs of time. To the right and left of the structure, the crests of roaring waterfalls cascaded over the edge of the vast crater behind it. Concealed by perpetual clouds of churned vapor, water hammered in its plunge to the lake thousands of feet below.

"The map called this islet, *The Eyot of Ages*," Skalos said, surveying the grounds as they moved.

"Apt," Tetree replied ahead of him, where she led the group in their loose line.

The scholar scrutinized dips and heaves distorting the carpet of shattered and displaced mosaics that covered most of the island: Remnants of a flat plane laid with utter precision an eon ago. A courtyard or promenade paved with fitted tiles or shaped flagstones crafted with inhuman skill. Now dilapidation warped an alien aesthetic that would have been unnerving enough without witnessing it in decay. He shivered overlooking the austerity of weathered grey and black slate never placed by, or intended for, humanity.

"These grounds should be overgrown like the riverbanks," Korr said, passing Skalos, whose eyes remained fixed on the scenery. "There's not a tree or bush anywhere. It should

be wooded from bank to bank.”

“It has a caretaker,” Tetree said. “In much the same way as I have Nameless.”

The barbarian kicked loose a tuft of misshapen weeds that filled one of the many long, interlaced gaps between the flagstones. “From the looks, she would do a better job.”

They continued walking, the scholar lagging farther behind them with slow steps. He eyed the line of tall grass, now missing a chunk after Korr’s assault. Waving in a tepid breeze, the narrow band of vegetation stretched out and through sunken depressions and rises amid the tiles.

He stopped, breaking out in a sweat. Wide eyes traced one path of weeds to its intersection with another, then darted to chase a new swaying curve of coiling geometry. Beading perspiration on his cheeks mixed with tears as he found himself unable to blink. His entire focus locked onto the spiraling layers of non-Euclidean patterns beckoning and unfolding before him. Swirling inwards. Outwards. Within a tunnel, next an all-encompassing world of groundless sky. All at once.

“Thu, the, thu—” he huffed, heart pounding as twisting tesseract stretched into Möbius strips.

Only keen-eared Korr, strides ahead of him, heard the gibber over the noise of the falls. “Are you winded already, Runt?”

“Th, th, th—”

The Borean stopped and looked back. His expression shifted from annoyed to perplexed as he found the thin man shaking and fixated on the flowing strands of grass.

“Th, the, th—” he panted and stammered again, before forcing out a desperate cluster of words. “They make, shapes!”

“Tetree!” the warrior shouted.

“Where do they begin or end? How are they touching me?” the scholar rambled as the witch and Addala turned about hearing the cry. “I don’t, I don’t, I don’t...”

Her attention removed from the tower, the Sycoraxian studied Skalos head to toe from where she stood at a distance. Face betraying bafflement, she then followed his locked stare out into the weeds. Seconds later, she yelled commands.

“Korr! Slap him! Nameless! Eyes to your feet!”

His brow surprised at the order, the barbarian pulled back to throw a prodigious blow with a grin of relish.

“Don’t break his neck! Just hit him!”

Zest ebbing, he grabbed the man without gusto and landed a calloused hand across his cheek.

Addala reached them first thereafter, her eyes down as commanded, but caught Skalos as he slumped, smacked senseless. She lowered him to the ground, crouching to support his head while sliding off his carrying yoke.

“Prop him up, Nameless,” Tetree said as she knelt. Her instruction obeyed, the witch lifted the Agamenaean’s chin.

“Focus on my voice and let go of what you’ve seen,” she said. “It’s more than we can hold.”

He stirred, lifting clenched fingers. “The shapes—”

“Leave it. Forget them now, or they will never be gone and encompass all your thoughts until death.”

“What happened?” Korr asked, shrugging above them. He turned and scanned the weeds himself. “Did he stumble into a ward or some other sorcery?”

“No. He’s perceptive. I’ve a trained eye, and I walked us right into something unawares that he found just peering curiously at the scenery.”

Skalos began to gibber again. “How can they be both within and without themselves? How are they inside me?”

Tetree hushed him. “I told you to let it go. If you try to comprehend the whole of what you’ve beheld, it will be more than the breadth of your being can bear. It will break it.”

Korr surveyed gentle waves of vegetation. “I see nothing but nonsense lines of grass.”

"You wouldn't," she said, her focus locked on the scribe.

"What did I witness?" Skalos asked. "I can't, I can't, make sense of it! It doesn't end. And it won't leave!"

"This is like what I said warning you about the flute, remember? However, it's something you've seen instead. You have perceived a fraction of something few can. That makes you deliciously rare, but no human born can comprehend the entirety of it."

He tremored, fingernails raking across a flagstone. "I don't understand."

"And you won't. It's beyond us," she said. "Think of your mind like a cup: It can only hold so much. It can be dipped into the ocean, immersed, filled with it, but it cannot be said to contain it. It can rise brimming from the waters after the experience, but its contents reflect only an infinitesimal portion of the whole. If a goblet tries to retain the entirety of the sea, it will burst. If it stays submerged too long, it will sink, a chalice lost to the depths forever."

His rapid breaths slowed. "What did I see?"

Tetree reached out and swept her fingers through a line of tall grass. "If it will help sate the curiosity pulling you into a maelstrom; it's a map of pathways laid down by the elders. That's all I dared parse in overview. Delving into the how's and where's of it would break me upon the globes of Yog-Sothoth as surely as it would you. Yet I doubt they made the mosaic of old here as a trap. I suspect it's a mere display of their knowledge and power for decoration."

"Why do so with something so dangerous?" Skalos asked.

"Not to them," she said, eyes back to him. "They were bigger cups."

"Please, tell me how you removed it from your thoughts. It won't leave mine!"

"I have the benefit of training. As a daughter of the covens, I meditated and learned to protect my mind while working magic. I was trained using mandalas that are rudimentary and crude compared to the surrounding design. I can't impart years of mental conditioning to help you in the few minutes left to untether it from your memory before it consumes you. You must find a way."

Korr scratched his ear. "I could choke or punch him unconscious. He'll lose his thought then."

"No. He'll dream of it, which is worse."

Skalos' eyes grew wild. "Why is this happening?"

"You have a particular way of seeing things," Tetree said, grabbing his head and locking them into a stare. "It's separate from your sage mind, which is admirable of itself. You have a waking awareness of the dream that is the world. While both a dream and a dreamer, as we all are, you have a lucid perception beyond the base senses. When cultivated and trained, not only do we perceive the weaving of the world, but how to tug and pull upon the tapestry of reality and make it do our bidding."

She released him and rubbed her hands clean. "Now let go of what you've seen! Or squander all the potential I've just revealed to you and surrender to madness!"

Addala lowered Skalos until his head rested upright on her lap. Eyes still forced downward by Tetree's command, she could at last see his face. Pupils constricted to points, he alone beheld her fear-locked expression concealed under a draped hood.

"A pity," Tetree said, rising to stand. "He had valuable skills, all lost. What a waste."

He blinked, feeling the stroke of Addala's finger on his cheek.

"What now?" Korr asked.

"He'll be fully incoherent soon, screaming and wandering about. We can't drag him along or risk leaving him to meander behind. He could trip a ward now, feebleminded, and alert the god of the tower of our trespass. Korr, end him quick and cleanly."

A hand raised, free of tremors. "Wait."

The witch halted the warrior as he reached for his hatchet, then both peered at Skalos laid on the ground.

"I think, it has passed," he said. "Yes, only a fading afterimage. Like the mark of the sun after viewing it too long."

Tetree studied him for a moment. "A fitting analogy, Scribe, given that which illumines can also blind. How did you release it?"

His eyes continued to peer up into Addala's, her expression lightening. "I spilled the thought, refilling my cup with others more valuable."

"Elementary, but we crawl before we can walk. Can you stand?" she asked.

"If I may, I request a minute's rest. The world is still spinning."

"Of course, that would benefit us all. Nameless, leave him be to recover and come with me."

Addala left him, a furtive *I love you* mouthed on her lips as she rose. Laid face up, he peered into a cloudless sky, free of form or shapes.

Minutes passed, and Tetree returned to her place leading the line. Skalos stood leaning on his pole, rubbing the welt on his cheek from Korr's blow. He balanced the yoke across his shoulders again. The group set off once he was ready, no words spoken, but their pace more cautious than before. Their eyes on the tower or the ground.

The scholar spotted a gully eroded into the flat landscape to their left, and let out a relieved sigh when they moved alongside it. He followed the uneven trajectory of the grass filled trench stretching most of the way to the structure, its naturalness a refuge his vision retreated to, avoiding the elder geometry around them.

They all walked single file beside it, and the tower loomed ever taller and closer.

Enormous and cylindrical, it flared out at the base in a manner reminiscent of a tree's trunk or an elephant's foot. This flaring extended further at points with buttressing walls. Three faced the party as they approached, gripping the paved flatness of the island talonlike at semi-equal angles.

Skalos had seen the remains of another two buttresses reduced to remnants on the tower's cliff-facing side from the top of the veldt, and during their rest by the crater's edge before that. "If we were birds flying directly above it," he said, looking back to brown grass in the gully, "I believe the tower would've appeared like a five-pointed star ages ago. That's a pattern we keep coming across here."

"It is a sacred shape to the elders, common among their artifacts," Tetree said. "It may be connected to their reverence for the number five, but no one knowledgeable in their lore agrees on why they revered fives."

Ahead of the scribe by a few paces, Korr moved away from the trench's edge to pass a massive Cyclopean cube of solid black schist in the way. Skalos followed him, the line of adventurers snaking between many such blocks that were ten feet to a side. They became more numerous as they drew closer to the tower, dotting the eerie plain of the islet like tossed dice. His attention drawn by the end of his pole hitting one of the obstacles by accident, the Agamenaean found signs of ancient impacts and shattered paving around them.

"No ziggurat nor pyramid surpasses this tower's stature," Tetree said, raising her voice to be heard over the pounding din of water that grew louder with each step. "Mankind will never attain the greatness its builders possessed."

Skalos shifted his sight back to the structure. Joined by Addala, he shielded his eyes from a glaring sun and scrutinized the jagged slant of its uneven apex.

"It was once taller," he said. "Something far greater than the elders swiped the top off their tower and reduced their city to a pit."

"Yes. Now dear Skalos, you know how poorly humanity compares to the true masters of the cosmos."

They walked winding paths between debris, attention turning to the ground level of the spire. Unable to find apparent entrances or windows, Korr spied transverse ribbing carved upon the buttresses. Pointing that out, he spotted arched openings into the edifice atop their terminus.

Within a half-hour, the quartet stood paused at the base of the central ramp of the three intact acclivities leading to assumed ingresses high above. The twin waterfalls thundered louder than ever on either side of the tower. Amid deafening noise that pained

their ears, they assessed the slope and its steep, but not unscalable, incline.

Built for something taller and wider than men, its raised ridges were not spaced or sized for anything approximate to a human gait. Grabbing handholds, they began to climb like children ascending the vertebrae of a long dead titan's spine.

Find the Author

Jason H. Abbott

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Promotion

from A. A. Rubin

The Awful Alphabet, now on **Bakerkit**, is the picture book for adults in the tradition of Edward Gorey's Gashlycrumb Tinies and Neil Gaiman's Dangerous Alphabet, but also Go The F*ck to Sleep and All of my Friends are Dead. It's the perfect elixir for the ennui which envelops your heart. Adulting is hard. Nourish your inner (emo) child.

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SciFanSat News



Alan Vincent Michaels

for their short

Liminalities in the Travelverse



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. Authors may submit multiple pieces to the same issue up to a total of 5,000 words. If a writer submits only one piece to an issue, the word count limit is extended to 7,500 words.

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

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

Theme:
Encounter

Submission Deadline Saturday, April 20th, 2024