

January 27th, 2024

Issue 6 | Symbol

SciFanSat

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



Featuring

- | | |
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| Alan Vincent Michaels | Carry Me Into Future Days (Poetry) |
| That Burnt Writer | Will they never learn? (Micro) |
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Cover Illustration "Embrace My Fire and Be Unharmed" by
Jason H. Abbott

Layout & Typesetting
Kimberly Abbott

For more information, address:
Blue Boar Press
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Editorial

Welcome to our first issue of 2024! For this January's SciFanSat, we have a wonderful assortment of fiction for you. To name only a couple of pieces out of the bunch, David Jesson's short story "Living the Dream" was one of my favorites, and "The Tattoo" from That Burnt Writer tickled a dark funny bone within me.

The only thing of note announcement-wise for SciFanSat is a minor refinement and clarification to the due-dates of submissions. Previously, submissions for the magazine closed "at midnight" on next-to-last Saturday of the month. This has caused confusion because the word "midnight" can be interpreted as either when the day begins (12:00 am or 00:00 in 24-Hour time) or ends (11:59 pm or 23:59 in 24-Hour time). To cease confusion over the matter, **henceforth all submissions to SciFanSat are officially due by the firm — but less poetically stated — moment of 11:59 pm / 23:59 hours, Eastern Standard Time, on the date of the next-to-last Saturday of the month.** This is what was always intended to be conferred by the wording of "at midnight".

Also, prior to this issue, some benefitted from the fact that we needed to close the submission forms manually and thus were usually asleep "at midnight". For that practical reason, we functionally closed the submissions hours later when we awoke on Sunday morning. Although we didn't mind in any way that a few folks used this loophole to get a last-minute submission in during overtime, our new submission system allows us to automate the closing and opening of the forms. So going forward all should be aware that after the 11:59 pm due-date time, the SciFanSat submission interface will close and turn into a pumpkin for a week. Yes, a pumpkin. A derpy one. The forms will change back and reopen concurrent with a new issue's release on the last Saturday on the month.

Many thanks to everyone who spreads the word and contributes to SciFanSat! Every author and reader participating enriches the magazine, be that with their words or with their support of the speculative fiction writing community. Enjoy the issue, and please accept our invitation join us again next month!

Jason H. Abbott



Poetry

The Sixth Sun

Alan Vincent Michaels

A December 21, 2012 A.D. solstice poem still relevant today.



Art by Pixabay & Public Domain

Composited by Alan Vincent Michaels

Symbols

eerily confounding and cryptic
pleas from long-dead Mayan priests
stark warnings
echo down the mists of time

Egos

we refused to admit
our ancient forebears had wisdom
deep-time knowledge
we read, but did not heed their words

Questions

we traced their carved riddles
answers revealed symbolically
deciphered allegories
we chose to ignore new life paths

Answers

their Long Count Calendar ending
their 13th Baktun ending
futures unquestioned
the Fifth Sun setting was a warning

Tears

we remain, as if children
not heeding our parents
throwing tantrums
what does the Sixth Sun setting portend?

Find the Author

AlanMichaels.com
[Instagram | @AlanVMichaels](https://www.instagram.com/AlanVMichaels)



Carry Me Into Future Days

by Alan Vincent Michaels



Art by Pixabay & WOMB0 dream.ai

Composited by Alan Vincent Michaels

High upon the ancient stone wall
cloaked in moss and sinuous vines
are shapes and carvings
symbols of intelligence
made by forgotten ancestors
long before the mental word

I climb the splintered rocks
touching each mark reverently
but I sense only alien concepts
beyond my comprehension
obscured by the veils of time
impossible to appreciate without context

GRAND CENTRAL
TERMINAL

What do these fractured ciphers mean
amidst soaring evergreens wide with age?

Were my forebears sharing in harmony
when they communed near these symbols?

Did their spirits seek winged flight
their thoughts open and unfettered?

Myriad questions churn within me
but no answers rise from family memory

I try to imagine the answers
but that is not the same as knowing

I gaze at the nearby sunflower fields
smiling at the moments after my father's birth
his eyes searching his mother's face
their shared love embracing my soul
reminding me that my children will remember
and carry me into future days

Find the Author

AlanMichaels.com

[Instagram | @AlanVMichaels](#)



Hands

by Voima Oy

And what of the cave of hands, what of the round black pot in the Museum, a single hand print on one side...don't you want to touch it, palm to palm, hands across time? The Hand of Fatima, the hand of protection. A young hand, modeling a ring. The gardener's hand picking tomatoes, warm from the sun. Work, work, and all the days of hands. Hands on a keyboard. I was here.



Micro Fiction

Will they never learn?

by That Burnt Writer

Every species ends like this, or least with some variant of it.

"What do all those symbols mean?"

"I don't know. And please use the word 'glyph', we're supposed to be scientists."

"Do you think the color's significant?"

"No, studies have shown that different species perceive electromagnetic frequencies differently, so an alien's interpretation of red might be good."

"There's lots of red ones around this button."

"There are."

"I think I should push it."

"We need more time to study..."

"I'm going to push it."

"I wouldn't if I were..."

The first speaker pushes the button.

"Dave, you're an idiot."

Find the Author

X | That Burnt Writer



No Entry

by nancyd_writes

It was a boring shift on the bridge. Translator had long since headed to sleep in a room on the ship I'd never been invited to enter.

I crept cautiously down the corridor, my steps clicking against the metal floor. His quarters were unremarkable, save an alien symbol burned into the door...what did that mean?

"It means do not enter," I heard from behind me as my fingers hung in space, inches from the charred sigil. Translator.

"What are you," I asked, trying to laugh, "a teenager?"

He did not laugh as I heard the locking mechanism click.

Find the Author

NancyEDunne.com

[Linktr.ee | Nancy E. Dunne](https://linktr.ee/NancyE.Dunne)



Flash Fiction

Caveat Emptor

by Alex Minns

I had that feeling again. The one like I was being watched. Which was possibly due to the bar being packed. I searched around for Heather; she'd gone to get drinks so long ago I was beginning to think she'd given up and gone to distil her own. This place was never normally this busy and you could usually hear yourself think.

Everywhere I looked, people were leaning in and chatting to each other, or throwing their heads back in laughter. No-one seemed to be paying me the slightest bit of attention, so why were the hairs on the back of my neck standing up?

'Is this seat taken?'

I nearly fell off mine as I swivelled to face the man who had spoken.

'Er, yes, my friend is just at the bar.' I cast a hopeful glance that way praying she would suddenly appear.

'Fair enough, how about I keep you company just until they get back?' He looked friendly but I hesitated. 'There are a few guys over there that have been prowling round anyone on their own and they clocked you a minute ago.' His eyes travelled over my shoulder. I didn't turn, I wasn't that stupid, but I did use the wall mirrors and check. And there they were, two brooding men staring in our direction.

'Ah,' I nodded. 'Then yes please.'

He pulled himself up onto the tall chair and smiled. His eyes were a dazzling blue; I almost had to look away. 'I'm Michael.'

'Lily.'

'You don't look like you're really enjoying yourself Lily.'

'Was hoping it would be quieter.' I had been hoping to talk to Heather. All kinds of weirdness had befallen me in the last week, all the electrics in my flat were going wrong, some guy in the street starting shouting at me until I jumped in a taxi just to escape and the stupid tattoo I'd gotten a week ago was still stinging even though it looked okay.

'Hmm, it is taking your friend a while to get to the bar.'

'You should see the queue in the toilets.' Michael laughed and the sound was much deeper than I expected. I scratched at my irritated arm absently.

'Now why would you do that?' Michael nodded at my new tattoo.

I frowned and did another check for Heather. One of the men Michael had warned me about was talking to her. 'Oh, I should...' I tried to move but Michael grasped my wrist, just above the tattoo.

'She'll be fine. Now, why did you go and mark yourself like this?'

I tried to pull free, but his grip was inhumanly strong. 'I did it because I was fed of people telling me what to do.' I slid from my chair, hoping the change in angle would help but all it did was nearly break my arm. 'Let go of me.'

'You have marked yourself. You are the enemy.' The loud buzz of the crowd seemed to die away as the panic rose in my gut. Those were the same words the crazy man on the street had shouted at me. Where his hand touched, my skin started to burn. I yelled out as I tried to fight but everyone around me seemed oblivious.

'Now Michael,' another voice spoke from over my shoulder. 'I don't go round indiscriminately attacking your followers now do I? Unless you're declaring war?' I tried to twist to see who was talking but the pain intensified, it took a second to register I was listening to my own scream. The newcomer moved like lightning and held something to Michael's throat. 'Let her go. Now.'

Michael's glare was fixed on me. A bright light flashed. I squeezed my eyes shut but still I was blinded. I blinked frantically and realised Michael had gone. The other two men he'd gestured to were gone too.

'Bit loud isn't it.' My saviour clicked his fingers and everything went still. Everyone was frozen except us. I started to swear, but this only made him smile. 'How's your arm?' It hurt like hell, I stared at the angry red marks around my wrist. The black lines of my tattoo looked like they had bled too. The man held up his hands. 'May I?' I was still too

shellshocked, but I did yelp and recoil when he touched my arm, expecting another wave of fire.

Instead, my arm instantly cooled, even the irritation I'd had all week died to nothingness. When he removed his hands, I was stunned to find my arm looking completely healed, including the tattoo.

'I do apologise for not getting to you sooner. I normally get to see you before the goons try and smite followers but you weren't on my radar at all.'

I just stared at him. He raised an eyebrow. His eyes were the same intense blue and he was scarily handsome, all chiselled jawline and perfect black hair.

'You have no idea who I am do you?'

'Should I?' He pointed at my tattoo. 'What? I just wanted to rebel, I told the guy I wanted some kind of black line design and he did this.'

'Of for the love of hell.' He pinched the bridge of his nose. 'I'm going to need you to take me to this tattooist. And then I'm afraid you and I are going to have to have a long, very overwhelming chat as I'm afraid this,' he waved at my arm, 'cannot be undone.'

'I could laser it.'

'A tattoo yes, not a binding sigil.'

'What?'

'Exactly, long and overwhelming chat.' He held out a hand for me which I instinctively took. He bent his head and kissed the back of my hand. 'Short version, I'm afraid you are now one of my followers and therefore bound to me. Good news, I'm actually quite laid back about the whole thing, bad news, Michael's lot take it quite personally.'

'And you are?'

'My dear Lily, my name is Lucifer.'

Find the Author

[Linktr.ee | lexikonical](https://linktr.ee/lexikonical)
[Amazon | Fall Into Fantasy 2023](#)



The tattoo.

by That Burnt Writer

"Come away child," the woman said, tugging at her arm. "That's no sight for someone of your tender years."

Tarla resisted the pull. She knew that Sister Clemence, as she'd introduced herself, meant well, but this, she felt, was important, although she couldn't quite put her finger on why. She prodded what was left of the corpse with her boot, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

"If you won't step away, then at least avert your eyes, little one," the nun continued. "Sister Mary, that's the lady who was with me, has gone to fetch help."

Still, Tarla didn't move. She'd heard the sharp intake of breath, the whispered conversation, and the scurrying footsteps, but there was something about this man, lying on the ground not moving, that wasn't quite right. Well, apart from his lack of a head and all the blood, that was.

"I think..." she said, then lapsed to silence again.

"What's the name of that bear you're holding?" Sister Clemence tried, changing the subject. "He seems to be well loved. If you come with me, I feel like I may have a matching eye I can sew on for you back at the commune and, of course, you'll be welcome to stay for a hot meal whilst we fetch your parents..."

"Pickle," Tarla replied absentmindedly, then looked up. "That's it! My parents!"

"Pardon?"

"You've just made me realise what's wrong with this cadaver. It's that tattoo on his arm. It's a symbol."

"Goodness me," said the nun, "I didn't think someone of your age would know a word like 'cadaver'. Well done. And what a lovely name for a bear. Come with me, let's see if we can find him another eye."

"Oh no, there's no need for that, thank you," said Tarla. "He only needs one. And I called him that, because that's what all my pets will be called in the future too."

"Pets?" replied the sister, feeling that she was regaining control of the conversation. "Oh, lovely. We can't keep those where I live, but what sort of thing do you want?"

"Well, I suppose I'll have to settle for a minor demon at first, then work my way up."

The silence that followed Tarla's statement stretched past being uncomfortable.

"A... demon?"

"Yes, but only a minor one."

Hurried footsteps announced the return of Sister Mary, accompanied by a member of the citadel's police force. He inserted himself between Tarla and the body, and crouched down.

"I think you've seen enough, young lady," he said, trying to be kind and failing miserably. "I'll need to ask you some questions later, but you'll have to let me try to work out who this poor chap was. Step back please."

Tarla complied, but continued looking past him.

"Can you take her away, give her a whiskey or some candies, or something?" the man asked the two sisters, who nodded and started to unsuccessfully try to bundle her away.

"I know who he was, and who did it."

The words stopped them in their tracks, and the officer turned back toward her.

"You think you know who this is? Who did it?"

"Yes. He was called Jerth, and worked near the docks. And as for who it was, the tattoo will tell you. Three concentric circles, bisected by a broken dagger."

"Those are big words for a... what, seven-year-old?"

"Eight, actually. And I've had a good education."

"And who do you think killed him?"

"I did."

They were sitting on a bench in the courtyard of the convent eating soup which Sister Clemence had fetched from the kitchens.

"So, tell me," he said, placing the bowl carefully on the ground, "How do you think you killed that man? No offence intended, but you're rather young, and slightly built, and the force needed to remove that gentleman's head and inflict those injuries... well."

"Ok, well strictly speaking, I didn't do it personally. And he wasn't a gentleman. But my friend did because that man was trying to hurt me."

The adults exchanged glances.

"Hurt you? How? And who's your friend? Can we meet him?"

"He was part of a sect that are sworn to hunt me down and destroy me because of my power. That's where I remember the tattoo from, we had someone come to visit me and Mama a year ago to warn us. I'm going to rule the world, and they don't want me to because I'm apparently going to be evil and ruthless. Not to Mama though. She's still going to get all the cuddles."

Tarla noticed them glancing at each other again.

"Okay. I can see you don't believe me. How about I prove it?"

She stood, placed the empty bowl and Pickle on the bench and took two steps forward. Spreading her arms, a guttural noise came from her throat as a mist started to develop in front of her, growing until it was twice her size in every dimension. Behind her, she could hear whispered prayers to a God she knew wouldn't answer, and the inspector start to swear.

Within the portal, something ancient and massive stirred. It uttered a single word, Tarla's name, accompanied by a fetid breeze that smelled of corpses and decay.

"This is my friend, shall we go and meet him?" Tarla asked brightly, spinning round to face them.

"Erm... no thanks, I'm sure that's OK. We'll just... we'll say he had an accident."

"Alright then," said Tarla, shutting down the gateway and collecting her bear. "Thank you for the soup, Sister, it was delicious. I'll find my own way home, don't worry. No one's going to hurt me or Pickle."

The inspector gulped audibly as Sister Clemence fell to her knees. "I believe you. I don't think anyone would stand a chance."

Find the Author

[X | That Burnt Writer](#)



Cold Case 01-19-94 0AAA

by Peter Gilbertson

From field notes of Detective Josephine Arndst found, discarded, at the crime scene

Case File

Crime Scene Location

Riverside Caverns, formerly sealed entrance reopened due to recent rockslide?

Time of Investigation

02:15 - [left blank]

Initial Observations

UI victim chained by the wrists and ankles to "altar", UI symbols carved across the body, further onsite analysis of photos and sketches also by witnesses and onsite experts defy ID. COD presumed blood loss, rendered chest cavity/violent organ removal determined to be postmortem.

Prelim exam suggests scalpel used to carve markings into both arms and legs. Cavity opening, organ evacuation done by animal claws? Vic bled out over altar, sacrifice(?). Blood flow presumably activated a hidden trigger causing altar (catafalque?) to rise. Prelim interviews with local patrol, park rangers, and persons of interest suggests hidden altar/trigger was unknown/not common knowledge before tonight.

Trigger also revealed hidden entrance beneath altar. Spiral stone staircase. Have yet to inspect. Will perform after concluding notes.

Leads/Suspicious/Conclusions

Footprints suggest several participants, men, dress shoes(?), no signs of struggle. From the underground entrance I observed the footprints/pawprints of some large bipedal creature with clawed feet (bear?) emerged, fed upon vic, and returned to down spiral steps into cave.

Supervisor Post Script

01-20-1994

Chief Inspector Mark Staeb, upon my arrival, Detective Josephine Arndst disappeared from crime scene. Evidence of "altar" and "hidden entrance" described in Det Arndst notes not verified. All photos and sketches mentioned are also missing. No witnesses or "experts" could corroborate Detective Arndst's field notes. Subsequently, case has been closed due to lack of evidence, repeat not body, altar, or unsealed entrance was found.

01-19-2009

[REDACTED]

01-19-2024

Cold case reinvestigation pending. New cave entrance on site believed to be found.

Find the Author

[X | @PeteJGilbertson](#)
[Amazon | Zombies at the Gates and Other Tales](#)



Marked

by MCHYL

The symbol appeared on my arm overnight. A black tattoo, the size of a golf ball, flowering just above my right wrist. It looked like a snowflake, and like snowflakes, none of them were the same. The symbols had been emerging on people's bodies across the world, permanently ingrained into skin. No-one knew why or what they meant.

When I saw the unwanted sign on me, cold dread clenched its fists over my heart. I had become one of the Marked. I rushed out of bed and showed it to Erik, who had just come in from feeding the chickens. He dropped his gloves on the floor and grabbed my arm, "Shite, shite, shite." He examined the dark pattern, rubbing my skin with his fingers, gripping me tightly. "How do you feel?" He asked, fear drawing his lips tight, blue eyes wide and panicking.

"I feel ok. It's... it's like they say on the news, I don't feel anything."

"But Anni, what does it mean?"

I shrugged helplessly. Staring at his worried face, and feeling myself sinking into a whirlpool of stress and terror. The scientists were conducting tests as fast as they could to find answers. Doctors had determined the marks were benign; they were not infectious and had not harmed anyone.

So far.

In the meantime, the thousands of people who had become Marked were told to stay home, quarantine.

"I don't know what to do...there's nothing we can do." I squeezed Erik and gently removed my arm. "I have to water the tomatoes."

I stepped out of the house and paused to gaze out at our little farm. The Old Oak tree stood with branches raised, worshipping the breezy mellow morning. I walked towards it, and the long, low bough that dipped invitingly at hip height. It was my favourite seat. As I settled under rustling leaves, Kobie came bounding up to snuffle me. Prickly fur warmed my fingers and an inquiring nose nudged my legs. My garden climbed and curled before me. Green globes just about to turn red glowed plumply under the sunlight. Little strings of beans peeked out from beneath heart shaped leaves. Blueberries popped in pairs and trios in the bushes, promising to burst sweetly between my lips.

None of it brought joy today.

Hesitantly, fearfully, I turned my hand over and looked down at the alien thing that had invaded my body. It was a striking design, reminding me of the intricate carvings decorating the walls of temples in Bangkok. It wasn't a random growth of cells, like cancer. It was structured, thoughtful – beautiful even.

But what was it?

Was a cosmic artist using human skin as some kind of warped canvas? Were we being branded by something supernatural?

I whimpered and clutched my tainted hand. The urge to scrape it off with a knife was overwhelming. Why me? Why did it choose me? My future was shrouded with unknown horrors, thoughts of an ugly death from a novel virus, my hand amputated... drove me to bury my face in Kobie's fur. I hugged her. Tight. She licked my face, over and over again. Chocolate eyes looking into mine lovingly.

Then Erik was there. Holding me. And I cried.

Afterwards, I sat with Erik in exhaustion, the goats bleating and the hens clucking in the background.

"Maybe it'll give you super powers." He said.

My mouth lifted a little.

Maybe.

Find the Author

X | .@mchyl!



The Wedding Present

by Mario Kersey

Angelica was poetry, and I was discord. It was the heart of our relationship. She knew the rhyme and reason of me. I hated her for it. I should have known we would not last beyond college. I liked being esoteric, but she broke through every firewall in my system. Every attempt I made to reinforce my defenses; her smile sliced through like a crescent moon through a parting fog. So, I loved you and for the first time in my life I felt stable, like I could hold a relationship. Too damn bad I had to sabotage it. Momma said no woman would like a nutjob like me. Momma's voice grated me like concertina wire. Glad my meds work well enough to allow me to focus less on the things I could not control like the weather outside the church I'm in.

The raindrops rattle the roof like spent shells. I thought it was bad luck to marry on a rainy day. Maybe it's an omen. I like signs, but so did you, which is why you left me. Your smile had hardened to me and my eccentricities. Do you see the signs now? Is that why the wedding has begun? You knew I found you. I don't want my gift wasted on the S.W.A.T. droids filling the sanctuary.

They surround me. Electric eyes read my heart rate; surely, they know I am calm. Brave.

"Donavan. It doesn't have to be this way. Let's talk."

Her voice is still gentle after the years. I may have a chance with her. I give her another chance to make amends. I raise my hands, showing my innocence. My absence did make her heart grow fonder.



Short Story

Living the dream

by David Jesson

Every morning, Peter got up, slipped on his ragged shirt and shorts, and walked along the beach. His timing waxed and waned with the low tide. He meandered between the water's edge and the sea-wrack that marked the high-tide. This mark varied with the seasons, although the weather in this place didn't seem to change much. Now and again, he walked that line purposefully, collecting driftwood and other flotsam and jetsam. Sometimes he would collect the broken fronds of seaweed and make soup with the kinds that he knew were good to eat and fertilise his little garden with the rest. But mainly he collected stones.

He'd started this daily ritual long ago with one good sized stone, simply to mark the day. He'd gone the entire curve of the bay like this, tens of thousands of stones. Peter couldn't really recollect those first days though. How had he come here? Had he been shipwrecked? Had he come here deliberately? There had been him, a ramshackle hut, a sandy beach, and nothing else.

After a few days (or tens? or hundreds?) of waiting for something to happen he'd been walking down the beach one day when he'd found the stone. Something about it called to him, and he picked it up. It nestled in his hand, smoothed by the action of the wind and the water and the sand. It was not quite perfectly circular, slightly domed on one side, flatter on the other. Peter walked to the water, crouched slightly, and skimmed the stone. He got three skips out of it before it sank into the turquoise water of the bay. He looked around and found a couple of similar stones. One sank without a trace; one skipped twice. After this he went back to his shack.

Thousands of days later, he had settled into a routine. He'd found a bucket in the shack, and this he filled with promising looking stones. After his walk forth and back, Peter would have some breakfast, and potter around with some chores whilst the tide came in. When it started to ebb again, he would take his bucket and go and skim stones. With all this practice, he had become adept at picking only the best, most suitable stones. Geology paid very little part in his selection. He had a very slight preference for granite. Their density, their sense of permanence appealed to him. But lumps of sandstone, slivers of slate, man-made ceramics, all found themselves shied out over the water. And these days he could guarantee at least ten skips out of any stone he threw. Some days, when he felt in a particularly good mood, or wished to challenge himself, he would pick stones at random, or try to skim stones with his left hand.

By throwing the stones at high tide he found many of them again when he wandered down by the low tide mark. Some become like friends he found them so often. He began to wonder if the stones that he threw most frequently were becoming worn by his actions. One of his very favourites was lost to him when the stone skimmed further than he had ever managed previously. Peter had mixed feelings about that day.

Peter stopped doing the stone markers at the top of the beach when he had gone all the way round from one side of the bay to the other. He did contemplate starting a second tier, but the will to perform this chore had waned with the ascendancy of skimming stones. He assumed he must do other things with his time. For one thing, the shack where he lived had grown and become more robust. His garden had grown and become vibrant with all the colours of the rainbow, with greens shading from almost yellow through to nearly black. He must eat, must cook meals with vegetables grown in the garden and perhaps with fish caught from the sea, but he never remembered having eaten those meals. Nor, did he remember any of the work that he had put into the shack.

One day, who knew how long since that furthest throw, let alone when he had first arrived here, Peter had an epiphany. He had half-filled the bucket and was coming back down to the shoreline when he found his favourite stone. He stood and stared at it for at least five minutes before bending down and picking it up. Peter washed off the grains of sand that stuck to it in the waves lapping at his feet. Still crouching he looked at the stone nestled in his hand. His stone had come back to him. He suddenly had a vision of the

stones creeping up the shore. Peter dropped the stone and fell, scrabbling back up the beach like some demented crab.

The frenzy passed as quickly as it came upon him. What was this foolishness? Rocks had no volition, no free will. He stood up and walked back to his stone, picking it up again. He turned it over in his hands. What if the stones really were trying to come up the beach, to come home? Was he stopping them from this, sadistically lengthening their journey? Or was he helping them get back to their true home, and it was the tyrannical sea that was pushing them away? He put the stone in the bucket and wandered back to his home, thinking.

That afternoon, he went without his skimming practice. That night he dreamt. He was his favourite stone, washed and buffeted by the waves, flung up the beach, picked up and flung back into the sea. Flung up the beach and back to sea. The dream repeated, again and again. Now he was a different stone. Thousands and thousands of times he was picked up and thrown, dropping into the sea closer to or further from the shore.

#

"How are things going?"

"Well, doctor, I think he's showing signs of improvement. We've run the cycle 100,000 times now, and there's evidence of integration. But I'm a bit concerned about this. There's some unexpected activity here and...here."

"Hmmm. Yes, I see. I've read about this. Ideally, we'd run a few more thousand cycles. This area here could do with being a bit stronger. But I think we've run out of time. He's starting to come out it. And of course, we're still finding our way with this therapy -the brain is complex and no two behave exactly the same."

The doctor tapped on a partition and gave the nurse by the bed a thumbs up sign.

"Peter? Peter? Can you hear me? You were in an accident. You're making great progress. It's time to come back now."

The nurse watched as Peter's hand twitched, fingers curling around an imagined stone.

End

Find the Author

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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 Four: Beyond This Marker

Addala loosed the last strap of the pack harness, and Skalos' burden of coiled ropes slid onto the ground. He straightened his back with her help, and she flinched hearing the cracking of his spine above the muffling noise of unseen waterfalls.

"In the Borean Marches, we toss runts like him to the fenrir as babes," Korr said, hacking down a bush with his hatchet. "To be rid of their nuisance!"

"My pet," Tetree said, "He would have fallen fording the river as burdened as he was, given how rapid it sounds. Then we'd be without our scribe."

"A pity," he grumbled, swiping again as he cut a path in swaths towards a riverbank hidden by undergrowth.

"We would also lose rope we can't replace," she added, watching Korr's muscled back.

"I suppose."

The Sycoraxian witch waggled her bare ankle, sitting on a squarish rock. "He or Nameless can fetch more from our supplies if what we bring is inadequate. And this way, our dear scholar has a chance to prove he can be of more use than a lackluster mule today."

Skalos placed his palm on the weathered block of black stone beside him. He leaned one-handed and stooped against the multi-ton monolith under Addala's concerned gaze.

"I'll be fine," he said to her with soft words almost muted by the rumble of water.

He stretched his neck and shoulders with a few more pops before raising his voice to be heard over the noise. "I thank you for your patience with my weakness. I'm sorry for any hindrance I've caused."

"You have not imposed a delay," Tetree said, examining her fingernail and removing a fleck of dirt she found. "Korr is still clearing a path to the river."

"And I still don't see a bridge!" he said between chops of his hatchet.

Skalos pulled himself fully straight. "The map has one marked."

"Perhaps it has fallen," the Borean snapped.

"It is old," the scribe shrugged. "Its references in Sarnathian script ceased being used in Euronian over nine hundred..."

Still standing next to him while the others paid them no attention, Addala glimpsed his puzzled face turning to the ten-foot cube of slate his hand leaned against.

He slid his fingers along where his palm had rested, scrutinizing a series of small depressions.

"There are markings here," he said, "chiseled into the stone."

Tetree returned her eyes to him, rising from her seat. "Sigils, or words?"

He pointed out the engravings and grabbed the applewood handle of his grandfather's knife. "Words. Kumatan cartouche."

"Nobian, with Kumatan script?"

He cut away a vine obscuring a chipped surface. "No. Older."

Korr paused in his efforts, looking back as she stepped closer to Skalos' discovery and gestured to Addala. "Nameless, clear the rock."

The ensorcelled command putting her to work, the pair exchanged gazes before the witch came close. Pulling rooted vines free with her hands, he worked with her to sever them. Then, observed by both women, the Agamenaean picked centuries of dirt out of the carvings with his knife.

Sullen, the barbarian twirled the small axe in his hand. "I might reach the river faster if a few of you helped me, instead of fawning over vandal scratches on some dammed rock."

"You are doing a fine job without us, Pet," Tetree said, not looking back to see his glower. "Do let me indulge while you finish."

Korr's reply was a grunt, followed by angry hacking as he disappeared down the slope of the riverbank felling bushes.

"These are ancient," Skalos said, the engravings now cleaned to legibility. "Archaic First or Second Kingdom: This is Old Tah. Kumatan hasn't been written in this style for millennia."

The Sycoraxian waved Addala away. "Tah conquered the trade routes of the Shaell and the black kingdoms long before Kumatan reduced them to a remnant. Can you read the cartouche?"

He nodded, translating the markings. "*Beyond this marker stands the house of death. Forty entered, none returned.*"

Eyebrow raised, he pulled his finger away from the glyphs chipped into slate.

Tetree adjusted her shawl. "Forty unprepared fools entered. Does it say anything useful?"

He reexamined the stone that time and the elements had left uneven and broken. "That's all there— wait," he said, fingers feeling the surface for any worn down pictographs and finding a rough spot far to his right.

A swipe with his blade dropped another vine and uncovered a discernable series of patterned lines. Markings flowed and intertwined in a vertical band running up to the cube's top. Above Skalos's head was a smooth second cartouche containing odd, grouped dots in sunken recess amid the eroded mural carvings.

"That's not Taheseian hieroglyph of any time," Tetree said.

He sheathed his knife and opened the leather scroll case on his belt. "It's the devilish language jotted on the Euronian map and rambled about in the Mnaric fragments."

"Clear the rest of this side," she ordered Addala. "See if there is more."

The Aravian woman lowered her hood and wiped sweat off her brow with the sleeve of her black robe. As she tugged portions of the vegetative curtain draped over the cube, Skalos withdrew an antique document and unrolled it.

"I've seen this inscription before," he said, holding the parchment up. With it pressed beside the cartouche, he unsheathed his knife again and used its tip to point out the individual holes in the stone.

Tetree switched her gaze from the carvings to the jotted dots on a scribbled margin. "They're identical."

"Yes. Likely proof this map's maker stood here themselves long ago."

"It's unfortunate no sage from here to Aquillion can translate—"

"*Eli... det-li... e-tok... seci*," Skalos said, his blade tapping a separate grouping of marks with each syllable.

Tetree's eyes widened. "You... you have matched meaning to the symbols?"

He lowered his knife, looking back at her. "My understanding is incomplete, and my pronunciation is approximate. The Mnaric fragments are more half-mad notes than a key to translation."

The blonde's lips pulled into a smile both beautiful and unnerving. "Now you impress me, Scribe! The Witch-Queen of Sycorax has an entire chamber of tablets etched with this language, and no one has ever deciphered them!"

"They lacked the clues I've found," he answered, shaking the map. "Their authors deserve most of the credit. And from the state of their annotations, they traded sanity for the privilege of knowledge."

She appraised him with cold blue eyes. "You are now infinitely more valuable than you were before. Do you realize that, Skalos?"

He glanced to Addala as she pulled off vine and root to uncover more of the block, then back to Tetree.

"Oh, you can still have the slave. She's yours, as we agreed, once I claim the treasure of the tower. But consider this offer I make to you for afterwards: Accompany me with Korr when I return to Sycorax."

"I—"

She hushed him with a raised finger. "With the wealth of the tower and Korr's sword beside me, I'll have my vengeance upon the Witch-Queen. I'll end my exile with her crucifixion, and wear the crown that should have always been mine. I'll let you learn all the secrets, all the knowledge waiting within that chamber of tablets. You'll become a sage unparalleled, my royal advisor with gold and concubines. For all this, you need only share everything you discover in the vault beneath my court with me. And with no other."

"I, still only desire your slave's freedom," he said, almost shaking. "It is all the treasure, and gracious compensation, I want from the future queen of Sycorax."

"Do you not want anything more after this venture?"

Skalos swallowed, but his voice did not falter. "After fulfilling my obligations to you, my desires all involve a homecoming to Agamenaë. But once I am there, I will scribe you a treatise containing all I know of this language. With it, you, or any sage of your choosing, could translate the tablets."

"A pity," Tetree said, pulling back. "I'd prefer your genius in the flesh at my court, but I'll accept your compromise."

"I'll begin work on it as soon as I return to civilization," he said, facing the carvings again.

Her gaze fell upon Addala, still busy clearing overgrowth off the stone. "Still, it's a shame I possess no treasure to bargain with capable of changing your mind."

"I am sorry."

She pointed to the cartouche above his head. "No matter. Tell me what secret it tells."

Skalos tapped the groupings in ascending order. "*Eli det-li e-tok seci... The Masterful Place of Growing Ferns.*"

"Ferns? What care would the rulers of an elder age have for ferns?"

"It may be more accurate to say, *To a Place of Masterful Living Ferns.*"

Tetree crossed her arms. "What gibberish! What Rubbish! Ferns! I'm once again dubious of your competence, Scribe!"

Diligent and working as commanded, Addala grasped a dangling tangle of vines and gave them a stout tug. The shallow roots at the top of the weathered cube ripped loose, and a curtain of vegetation fell away in a prodigious clump. Dirt trickled down upon a revealed, thick vertical band of mural sculpture starting beyond the arabesque Skalos had discovered with the second cartouche.

As the trio stared up, it became clear in a moment the massive stone block was not in its original orientation. Some calamity long ago had toppled it and flipped it on its side.

Time had worn away much of the masterwork that had made the carvings, although enough stunning detail lingered in relief to make its subject undeniable despite an acute alien perspective:

Ferns.

Tetree put a hand to her chin, pondering the imagery. "I retract what I have said."

"That is not a fern like the rest," Skalos said, pointing to the upper corner of the mural above them.

Eroded to where only a half-rendered silhouette remained at the edge of the block, the figure resembled a bat-winged barrel with a starfish riding atop its one visible end.

"What is it?" he asked.

"One of the race who carved this part of the stone," Tetree said, eyes betraying a somber surprise as she studied the worn etching. "The builders of this tower when they were the masters of the world. That is a depiction of the authors of the language your genius has deciphered."

He turned away from the image, and the loathsomeness it retained even as a shadow out of time. "Their markings display artistry and skill unmatched. Yet age has ravaged them much more so than the words chiseled here by the men of Old Tah thousands of years ago."

"Indeed, they are far older," she nodded, transfixed on the mural. "They, their tower, these blocks of rubble. They are all elder things who predate Atlantis. Remnants of a time when the human race and our gods were not even a dream."

Skalos spied Addala shaking as Tetree continued to ruminate on the graven image. Her gaze fixated on a broad fissure in the block. He followed her line of sight and saw what at first appeared to be another vine, before it made a serpentine sway.

In the crack where it had been disturbed, a viper coiled itself as the thundering waterfalls drowned out any hiss of warning. With patches of vegetation and dirt still covering the mural, Addala's tensed hands strained to resist magical compulsion and command.

Her will was overwhelmed as she flashed a terrified, trapped expression at him. A quivering hand reached for a root dangling beside the snake, and there was a flash of fangs as it sprang for her wrist.

Korr heard Tetree's scream having just seen the edge of whitewater rapids. He turned without hesitation, sprinting down the rough path he had hewn. Propelled by his iron thighs, he burst into the clearing like a roused lion ready to fight any opponent. He saw Addala on the ground, his lover recoiling, and Skalos facing both women with a blade drawn.

He launched himself and tackled the scholar mid-run, shouldering him hard against the black mural. A savage grip twisted the knife from his hand with ease and threw it down.

"What have you done, Runt!?" he asked, raising his hatchet as the Agamenaean gasped from having the wind knocked out of him. "If you've harmed her, I'll kill you! Slowly!"

"Korr!" Tetree yelled. "There was a viper! Don't!"

The edge of his axe stopped short of annihilating Skalos's face. It withdrew, leaving only a cut on his nose and a drop of blood. The warrior kept him pinned with an elbow on his throat and turned an eye to the women.

She put her sandaled foot atop a decapitated snake still writhing as Addala rose. "Had he not struck it so quickly with the knife in his hand, and pushed her out of the way, Nameless would be dying."

He glared at the choking Skalos again, the scholar's feet dangling above the ground while Korr continued to hold him aloft and pressed against stone.

The serpent's body stilled under her heel. "You know how much she means to me."

Released, the scribe slid and fell.

"I've seen the river," the barbarian said, turning his back to him and walking away. "Its rapids separating us from the island of the tower make wading across suicide. I'd like some help to finish cutting the path, so I may scout for the bridge I've yet to spy."

Addala finished standing as he left, and stepped over a recovering Skalos. She continued clearing the mural stone with a face still tainted with shock.

Tetree spoke as he watched Addala and caught his breath. "Did he harm you badly? Anything broken?"

He shook his head, retrieving his knife from the grass.

"You're tougher than you appear. I've seen Korr kill much bigger men than you barehanded with similar roughhousing."

"I'm surprised, myself," he said, wiping off a bloodied edge on his tunic.

"You're better with a blade than I'd expect from a scribe, too. Faster than a viper's tooth. Skilled enough to swipe it mid-strike an inch from Nameless' hand."

He sheathed his grandfather's gift. "I can cut more than quills. As a boy, I was adventurous. I pruned trees and more in my family's orchard before a scholar's life. However, I credit most of any fighting prowess I have learned to the company and life I have kept of late."

His words evoked a slight, sly smile from Tetree's lips as she left with a clap of her hands. "Nameless, stop that. Come with me and help Korr finish cutting the path."

Skalos stumbled, trying to rise, but Addala steadied him while walking past to join her mistress. Her touch was fleeting, her mouthed *thank you* silent.

"My wife in heaven, if not on earth," he whispered as they lost sight of each other's eyes.

Alone, he picked up the scattered parchment fragments dropped in the scuffle. Finished, he gave the monolithic cube, and the disconcerting being etched in its corner, a final scrutiny. His vision drifted above it to gnarled treetops, then the looming spire of the black tower.

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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.

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Issue 7 Prompt

SciFanSat

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Theme:
Threshold

Submission Deadline Saturday, February 17th, 2024

