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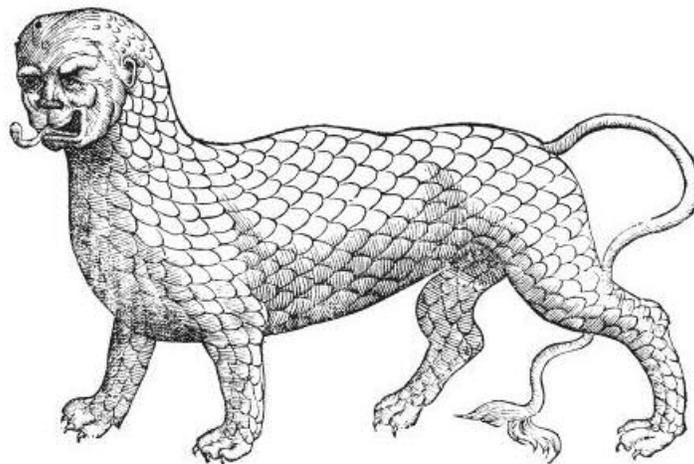
Page 1 – BACKYARD HEROES by Joel Elwell. Mr. Elwell writes, “I am a husband, father, and a former Marine who lives in Lincoln, NE. When I'm not reading, writing, hunting, fishing or playing in pool tournaments, I can be found spoiling our Great Pyrenees or being annoyed with our two Chihuahuas.”

Page 11 – WOTHAN THE WANDERER by Phoebe Wagner. Ms Wagner currently studies for her PhD at University of Nevada, Reno. Her work has recently appeared or is upcoming in Cosmic Roots and Eldritch Shores and Diabolical Plots. When not writing or reading, she can be found kayaking at the nearest lake. Follow her at phoebe-wagner.com or on Twitter @pheebs_w.

Page 20 – PREVIOUS TENANT by A. L. F. Fagan. Mr. Fagan was born and raised in Washington DC and is currently living in suburban Maryland. He has a BA in speech communication. Most of his adult career had been in theater tech. He enjoys reading fantasy, science fiction, and history. His leisure time is spent running, baking, and playing guitar. Find more on him at <https://alffagan.com/>

Page 25 – THREE SHORT-SHORTS by J. Scott Wade. Mr. Wade informs us that this is his first publication, and we are honored to have him aboard. He resides in Greenville, SC.

Page 31 – FREEDOM by Shainur Ullah. Mr. Ullah writes, “My name is Shainur Ullah and I am from England. I like writing short fictional horror stories on the creepypasta site (<http://www.creepypasta.org/user/ullahshy>). I also have a reddit account called Shortstory1 with more horror short stories. My most popular horror stories online have gone “viral” - “Crunched Up Paper House,” “The Camera Man,” and “The Guys Behind Hollywood.” They have also been narrated onto YouTube - check them out!”



“BACKYARD HEROES”

by JOEL ELWELL

Parker finished his breakfast a few minutes after seven, lapping the cold water from his stainless-steel bowl and letting it drip off his muzzle into his food dish. By using this method, he was guaranteed not to miss out on a single molecule of food. Satisfied, he padded to the sliding glass door and scanned the backyard and the fence to the south, but Steve the beagle wasn't out yet. This wasn't unusual, as Steve tended to sleep in until at least seven-thirty on most days, sometimes later. Parker's human, Ed, was still in the shower, so he wouldn't be going out for at least fifteen minutes. He turned around and made his way through the dining room, his nails clicking first on the cool tile, then on the slick wood floor of the front living room. Here he had a great view of the front yard, street and surrounding houses through the large picture window.

As the sun continued to rise over the light blue sky, Parker observed his peaceful neighborhood from the couch that was against the wall adjacent from the window. Leo the oversized cat was laying in the driveway across the street, just below the bumper of a car which parked there every morning. Parker figured that fat black and white blob was going to get squished one of these mornings, but it hadn't happened yet.

It wasn't going to be any big loss to Parker if it *did* happen, because Leo was possibly the laziest creature he had ever seen. Once he had even watched a garter snake slip right over the top of Leo's bulging stomach while he sunned himself in the lawn, and the goober hadn't even moved. Parker thought Leo was a real boob, because snakes made some of the best toys.

A mail truck turned the corner and came to a stop three houses away just before a bank of mailboxes. Parker's ears perked up, knowing that it was Davey the mailman. Davey would continue down the street for a while, his head occasionally bouncing up and down or side to side, listening to a tinny noise that came from the wires he had sticking into his ears. Then he would come back on his side of the street, park the truck and stuff paper in all the boxes on foot. Most of the houses on Parker's side were older and still had the boxes attached to the homes. Parker liked Davey: he was a friend to all dogs, and as a bonus, he delivered treats.

As he watched Davey put mail into their appropriate boxes, movement caught his eye to the north. A man was walking toward Davey, but he was walking in the street, coming up behind Davey's truck. The man didn't look right to Parker; he was walking

slow and a little funny, and Parker realized he was trying to hide from Davey. He jumped off the couch issuing a serious warning, and the strange man looked his way. He put a finger to his mouth, puckered his lips and blew towards Parker, then put his hand down. He stared in Parker's direction for a second longer, grinned, and then slipped through the driver's side door of Davey's mail truck.

Parker began barking as loud as he could, and he stood with his paws on the picture window glass. He had to tell Davey there was something wrong, somebody *bad* was now hiding in his mail truck, but Davey couldn't hear him. Those little wires were stuck in his ears.

* * *

Nobody noticed Rodney James Edwards hiding behind the plush green spruce trees on Bishop street, including the mailman starting his route early Monday morning. Edwards looked at his blue uniform, and immediately wanted to kill him. Common sense told him he was just a mail carrier (though he hadn't seen one in almost three years), but the blue uniform was a screaming reminder of the hospital guards. They were the ones that held him down when the white coats shot him full of Haldol or Thorazine when he wouldn't take the pills they told him to swallow. But he had shown them, hadn't he? Doctor Stephanie was never going to give another shot of anything, not to him or anybody else. He laughed a little as he pictured the Iowa Regional Center staff frantically searching the halls and rooms for him while

he sat camouflaged behind a row of trees fifty miles away in another state. Nebraska really was the good life, he thought, and this made him laugh harder.

He tried to sit up on his haunches, but the aching pain in his right heel and ankle made him kneel back down. An officer in blue had injured him after he kicked a doctor when he was new to the hospital. He stopped laughing and focused on the mailman who was driving slowly to the next box on the curb. The jackass was bobbing his head back and forth, listening to God knew what through his earbuds. He was just like the guards who stood watch over him in the day yard, giving him no privacy at all. They kept their earphones glued to their heads and waited for him to get out of line. He narrowed his eyes, and was suddenly sure this *was* one of the guards from the hospital. Sure it was. In fact, it was the very officer who had broken his ankle.

When the mailman turned the corner, Edwards crawled out from his hiding place and began following after the man in blue. The truck stopped in front of some duplexes, and the man stepped out and headed for several boxes, his hands full of paper. Edwards stepped into the street and walked behind the jeep, anxious for his opportunity.

A dog began barking at him across the street from behind a picture window, and Edwards stopped and looked at it. He silently told the dog to quiet down and smiled as he started limping to the mail truck again. He felt a happy sort of anxiety rush through him as he slipped into the

truck unnoticed.

* * *

Mark Warner was cinching up his tie in the bedroom when the Golden Retriever went crazy from the room down the hall. He loved that dog, but when he got excited about rabbits or squirrels or sometimes just a strong gust of wind, the barking drove him a little nuts. The hound had a thundering voice.

He slipped down the hall in his socks, grabbed Parker by the collar and put him out the back door.

It was 7:15.

* * *

Parker trotted over to the fence he shared with Steve and barked three quick times, which was their code. Quick and loud barks outside didn't usually warrant human attention as it would be bad to end up in the Big Metal Cage today. *Very bad.*

Steve poked his head through the dog door, yawned, and came outside. He walked to the fence, shook himself off, and asked Parker what was up with waking him so early. He reminded him that beagles needed more sleep than golden retrievers and all other dogs, except maybe their cousin the basset. Parker apologized and then told him about what he had seen only minutes before.

Steve came up with a few theories about Davey, but Parker logically shot them down. Soon after, they both agreed there was probably concern of foul play. Steve said maybe Duke would be out at lunch time and they could ask his opinion, and they both had a quick laugh about that. Parker

was called inside, so they agreed to meet at lunch. Steve went back in his own house in a partial daze to sleep some more.

* * *

At 8:55, Parker was barking his head off in the now empty house just like he was supposed to do when there was trouble. The weird man was on his porch and looking through the window, and there was clearly something wrong with him. The man was wearing Davey's mail coat and making gestures at him with his hands. The coat was stained, and he was smiling. Worst of all, there was no sign of Davey.

* * *

Edwards placed mismatched mail advertisements in the box next to the Warner's house and quickly pressed his hand and face to the window. Just an annoying dog barking to what appeared to be an empty house. He had jammed a screwdriver through the mailman's throat earlier, glowing from the satisfaction of the blood spraying over the letters and magazines in the back of the truck, laughing as the man gasped and tried to scream for help. He could give a rat's ass who's mail he stuck in who's box. The rusty colored dog inside was going crazy, threatening to eat him through the glass, but Edwards only pointed a finger pistol at him, fired, and smiled as he turned around. He whistled as he walked back to his new rolling mail castle, where neither man nor beast could harm him.

* * *

Parker sat at the window all morning, keeping watch for the new fake mailman.

Nothing. Finally, at 12:15 that afternoon, THE MAN came back home for lunch. He made his way to the back door quickly, so the fresh nose prints and slobber wouldn't be noticed on the front window. Luckily, the distraction worked, and he was let outside without question.

When Parker arrived at the fence, Steve the beagle was rolling around on his back, trying to scratch that never reachable itch that every dog has been cursed with. Upon seeing Parker, he jumped to his feet, gave a short howl in greeting and jogged over to the fence to visit with the young neighbor. They ran up and down the fence, conversing about the morning's events for several minutes before Duke, the great Pyrenees from the yard behind them, came to join the conversation. Duke's yard ran perpendicular to the other yards, so he was able to stand at the t-bone intersection of the fences and talk with both dogs. They invited Duke to jump the fence into one of their yards (something he could easily do and actually often did), but he declined. Apparently, he had already been scolded for smashing the cat a good one and didn't want to be yelled at again. He said he loved that cat, but sometimes just whomping him on the head with his gigantic paw when the cat was relaxing was just too hard to pass up.

Steve told Parker that he had indeed been aware of the dirt-bag mailman imposter who was undoubtedly up to no good. Steve said he could smell trouble right through the screen door, and where the hell was Davey, who pitched him a treat

when he was outside?

Parker, who was rarely outside when Davey came by to pitch treats, (but he did leave one inside the mailbox once in a while) said he didn't know where Davey was, but he was sure the new guy was planning on killing him.

Duke, who weighed about one-forty, said he usually got two or three treats, and who were they talking about again? Oh yeah, Davey. Parker liked Duke, but he wasn't the quickest dog on the block. When it came to muscle, however, Duke was your dog.

Steve, who had a way of explaining things even Duke could understand, summarized from what Parker had seen earlier and the strong odor he had smelled through the door, that Davey was either hurt badly, or already dead. With no treats delivered anywhere, Parker sadly agreed and Duke asked once more who they were talking about. Before they could remind him, he charged after a rogue squirrel in the neighbor's yard and crashed into the chain link fence. The squirrel chattered and cursed at Duke, but he just laughed and asked if the squirrel had seen Davey. The squirrel said something else that only squirrels can understand, and then vanished up a tree.

Parker rolled his eyes and told Steve he thought Duke had another concussion. He started to call after Duke but was summoned inside, so he let it go. Steve briefly studied his giant friend who was now gnawing on a steel fence post, and then went about trying to scratch his back

again.

* * *

Duke's master was a beautiful forty-something brunette, and she tried to walk him on her lunch break as often as she could. At 1:10, she hooked his horse-lead to his collar. He had proven long ago that he could break any regular dog leash.

"Come on, Bubba," Kathy Ziehoff said. Duke was already pulling her to the door, catching her off guard. "Hold on, Duke!" She pulled back on his leash, but he had already bounded out and was dragging her alongside the screen door. Kathy yanked back as hard as she could, which brought Duke to a slow pause. He gave an encouraging woof, trying to explain that his might was probably needed now more than ever. Kathy had time to pull the door shut, and then Duke was pulling her down the drive and onto the sidewalk, forcing her to jog to keep him from ripping her shoulder from its socket. Once she got even with him, she came to a stop and yanked back with all her strength. Grudgingly, Duke stopped and sat down.

"I don't know what the problem here is, but if you can't walk nice and behave yourself, we're going home. Is that what you want?"

They started off again at a slower pace, and Kathy praised him often. He was able to walk at a normal pace for only a few minutes before he started pulling slightly harder and harder. He couldn't stop himself - he was sure that his friends needed his help.

"Last chance, big guy. I'm warning you.

If you keep this up, you'll spend the afternoon in the kennel."

* * *

Edwards succeeded in claiming two more victims in the neighborhood before heading back towards the house with the angry red dog. He had decided to kill that dog because, well, he didn't really know why. He decided by this point, he didn't really need a reason.

The two victims he offed had been passed out when he entered the shack of a house, and the murders were too easy for him, giving little satisfaction.

Three other houses were empty, (it was amazing how many people left their front doors unlocked) and a fourth house had presented a small but infuriating problem: a chihuahua with little dog syndrome.

As soon as he entered the house, the little orange dog charged, startling him so much that he dropped the screwdriver he was holding on the hardwood floor. He kicked at the little barking freak, but instead kicked the screwdriver under a reclining chair. This particular chair also happened to be the favorite hiding place of said barking (and now very angry) freak. He got down on all fours and reached blindly under the chair for his weapon of choice, and that's when the little fucker bit him on the hand.

* * *

In a bedroom down the hall, seventy-six-year-old Mable Fenster woke from the light nap she'd been taking. She started to call out to her Cracker Bear to stop barking at the neighbors, then snapped her mouth

shut when she heard a man's voice. She picked up the phone and dialed 911.

A calm female voice answered on the first ring. "Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?"

"There's a maniac in my house," Mable whispered. "He's trying to kill my Cracker!"

"Calm down, ma'am. Who is in your house?"

"I don't know!" Mable covered her mouth, but she was almost screaming in a loud, hoarse whisper. "It's a man, and I think he's trying to kidnap or kill my Cracker Bear!"

"I can't understand you, ma'am. Are you at 2129 north fifty-first street? Just whisper yes or no if -"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Mabel, crying now, dropped the phone and crept to her door, head cocked to one side and listening to her precious Cracker snarl and bark in the other room.

"Ma'am? Ma'am? Sergeant, I've got a hysterical elderly female, claiming a maniac bear is stealing her crackers. I think she dropped the phone. She's sobbing in the background."

Had Mable been listening, she would have heard a male voice in the background advising to stay on the line, alert animal control and dispatch officers, code three.

* * *

Edwards cried out, drawing his hand back at once, and tipped the chair over with his other hand. He saw the screwdriver and grabbed it just as el loco chihuahua lunged at him again and bit his other arm, its needle teeth ripping the skin off as it

retreated. He stood up, panting and uttering unintelligible sounds, kicking at the dog again. This time the mutt ran under a couch, and Edwards started towards it until he heard muffled screams from a room down the hall. The freak of nature under the couch was emitting a constant snarling growl that he might have normally associated with a wolverine. He turned and stormed out of the house, leaving the front door wide open.

Good, he thought. I hope the little shit follows me out and gets run over by a mail truck.

Thinking of the mutt getting squashed by a truck of any kind struck him as extremely funny, but a mail truck really tickled him. Soon he was laughing out loud, forgetting all about the fresh wounds the furry orange tornado had inflicted on him. Blood was running from his hand, and it covered the Phillips he was carrying, lubricating his grip. He didn't notice.

As he walked down the sidewalk (he had abandoned the mail truck in an alley several blocks ago), he realized he was back to the beginning of his route.

"My route," he said out loud, and at first it startled him. He hadn't spoken a word in over two years since he decided to stop talking to his psychologist, his psychiatrist, and his counselor. They weren't helping him — couldn't help him — not as long as they continued to think there was something wrong with his mind.

How does it make you feel to look at this picture of your mother, Rodney? What kinds of feelings do you have towards your sisters,

Rodney? Draw a picture with this crayon that would represent your current emotions, Rodney. Why do you think you still want to hurt women, Rodney? Did Doctor Stephanie say something that bothered you before you hit her? How do you...what do you...why do you...

He shook his head wildly, hoping the agitation would still the voices.

“Got what she deserved!” He would answer all their questions now, by God. “I hate her, and her, and black inside, and I’m glad she’s dead, and they all should die! All...should...die!” He was shouting at this point, not knowing or caring if anyone could hear him. A dog was howling, and he couldn’t tell at first if it was real or in his head.

By the time he stopped walking, he was standing with a sticky, blood coated screwdriver in his hand, looking at the front of the house with the crazy dog that had tried to blow his cover this morning. More howling, and now sirens going off, and—

“Who cares?” Edwards said aloud again. Everything was probably in his head, and who cares, because he would just kill everyone and everything.

He was standing on the porch now, and after he slipped the screwdriver in his pocket, he placed his hands around his face so he could see through the window, and again all he saw was a fleabag dog crawling off the couch, snarling at him. He pulled away, and the blood on his palms left a smeared and unpleasant stain on the glass, one that rivaled the dog’s drool from the inside.

He would kill everything, starting with the noise maker inside. After that, he would go back and eliminate the scruffy orange thing that had bit him, and wipe out its owner for allowing such a poor excuse for a dog to exist. With all that decided, the stress deserted him and he started giggling with excitement again.

* * *

The howling from next door woke Parker from his early afternoon nap at 1:15, and he lifted his head and ears in full alert.

At first all he saw was a young rabbit hopping into his front yard. Poor Steve, he thought. Those rabbits always had it out for him. Of course, Steve had murdered quite a few of them, but still. He laid his head back down, then suddenly saw the no-good murdering mailman imposter sneaking onto his porch. He tried to be quiet, but a low, angry growl was escaping from him. He went slinking off the couch and low crawled to the front door. As he went, Parker saw that the impostor was carrying a dark colored object in one hand, and he had more stains on his shirt, pants and hands.

The man was talking out loud to no one...and giggling.

* * *

Duke looked down at his paws, feeling guilty and anxious at the same time. He couldn’t go back home, not with a no-good non-biscuit giving Davey Killer in the area. Still, he had to slow down a little, or his master would get mad. But when they turned the corner onto Steve and Parker’s street, he stopped.

The fake mailman was walking up

Parker's lawn toward the house, carrying something in his hand and shouting at someone, though Duke could see no one else around. The deepest, ugliest growl came out of his throat, and Kathy looked down at him, startled.

"Easy, Duke," she said, looking around with eyes wide.

Duke's lips peeled back over his exposed teeth, his growl blending with a fierce whining snarl of hate.

Duke shot off toward the man, who was now on Parker's porch. Kathy was not prepared for this, and Duke jerked her off her feet. He dragged her for about ten feet on her side, and she cried out in pain before giving up her grip on his leash and letting him go. Somewhere in the distance, sirens were heading in their direction.

* * *

Parker stayed hidden behind the front door, his growl now at a level that would have warned any normal idiot of certain death. The locked doorknob above him rattled back and forth, and he prepared himself for the door to swing open. Instead, he saw the man's figure move in front of the picture window, putting his face and hands up to the glass to look inside like he had done this morning.

Parker backed up, ready to charge the glass when he saw Steve the beagle running in from the left side of the yard, growling and howling at the same time. He didn't have time to wonder how Steve got out, because at that moment, a white and brown blur was charging in from the right.

* * *

Duke had gotten his speed up to twenty miles an hour when he reached the porch and leaped at the bad man. The man was looking the other way at Steve, who sounded angrier than Duke had ever heard him.

Duke opened his great jaws, said hi to Steve cheerfully in midair, and closed his teeth around the bad man's neck. His force shattered the picture window and pushed them through and onto the wood floor. Glass exploded in every direction, and Duke was cut badly on his snout. Still, he did not let go of the bad man.

Edwards screamed out in pain and surprise as he went through the glass, first smashing and then cutting the left side of his forehead and cheek. As he hit the floor, a hundred- and forty-pound furry alien landed on top of him, pushing most of the air out of his lungs. He tried to force air back in, but the thing on him was crushing his chest and tearing his throat open with its insanely huge teeth. He swung his fists wildly at the beast, but it would not let go. Blood began pumping out of his neck from the cruel opening, saturating his shirt and turning the large white and brown dog a reddish-pink color. The screwdriver had disappeared during the collision, and he felt around blindly for it. Instead, he picked up a four-inch shard of glass and started to swing the weapon at his aggressor. A new sharp pain stopped him mid-swing.

The original mutt he wanted to kill had clamped its teeth down over his right hand, making the glass twist in his grip. The reddish demon disguised as a retriever was

breaking the bones in his knuckles – he could feel them grind – and as he dropped the shard of glass, it slit open the meaty part of his first two fingers, severing the tendons.

Operating on pure adrenaline, Edwards brought his left knee up and drove it into Duke's side. The dog cried out and unwillingly let his death grip go, then slid off his chest and onto his left arm, panting and wheezing his breath in and out in quick bursts. With his right hand still secured in the stupid red dog's mouth, he kicked at it with his left leg.

New pain jolted into his left shin and calf, and when he raised his head to look down, he saw the stupid beagle from next door had ripped through his blood-stained pants and was apparently trying to detach his entire muscle. Instinct told him to kick the little bastard with his other leg, but that was when something punctured his testicles with miniature ice picks.

The insane chihuahua that attacked him earlier had latched onto his balls, playing tug-of-war with them. Edwards began screaming, then howling, and when the chihuahua freed one of his testicles from its protective sack, the pitch became too high for any human to hear. The blood loss and pain were too extreme to bare: his muscles relaxed, his vision faded, and he gave up his struggle.

As police cruisers pulled up with lights and sirens adding to the almost unbearable canine chorus coming from inside the house, Kathy stepped through the shattered window, crunching the broken glass as she

knelt down beside her dog. As she stroked Duke's blood drenched coat, tears fell onto his ears as she whispered to him, begging him to survive. His breathing slowed somewhat, and he didn't sound quite as labored with each breath. Still, she was sure she would lose him.

The police arrived just before Animal Control, and Kathy immediately put her hands in the air as the officers rushed the house with service weapons drawn. She explained what she knew of the situation, (which was practically nothing), and told them there was a dead man inside the house. An officer stepped through the destruction and identified Rodney James Edwards, the escaped psychopath from Iowa. Donning a pair of blue latex gloves, he made a quick check to the man's neck and declared Edwards deceased. Animal control was cleared to approach the scene, and they carefully loaded Duke in their truck via stretcher. They rushed him and Kathy to an emergency vet, leaving the police officers completely puzzled as to what had taken place.

Mable Fenster arrived as other Animal Control vehicles were coming and going, desperately looking for her dear sweet Cracker Bear.

Parker and Steve had both let go of Edwards on their own, but officers had to carefully remove Cracker from the dead man's crotch. She had almost severed both testicles, and they were unable to find one of them.

"Apparently Cracker has been snacking in between meals," an officer said, handing

the snarling pooch to Mabel. She whisked the snaggletooth gremlin away from the man, paying no attention to him. She was far too busy sobbing and smothering her sweet, precious Cracker Bear to be bothered by irrelevant details.

* * *

The leaves were turning red and gold on the neighborhood trees when the three dogs were finally able to gather again at the chain linked fence. Parker and Steve had met daily since the incident, but Duke had three broken ribs, so he had been let out in the front yard for a while to keep him from getting too excited around his friends. He was close to a hundred percent now, but he wore a protective canvas vest just to play it safe. Steve told Duke he looked like a canine football player, and Duke grinned with pride.



Steve said he had actually been praised for jumping through the screen to help his friends. Parker told them that he had gotten plenty of compliments and attention but was still occasionally scolded for putting nose prints on the new glass window. Duke thought that was great and said he was hungry. He told them his master had labeled him a hero, but he had no idea what that meant, so he had scrambled after the cat and he too was scolded. Soon, the three decided that a canine neighborhood watch was probably in order, so Steve said he'd see what he could do.

Cracker lived several houses down, and while she was absolutely *not* allowed to come visit, they could hear her high pitch and somewhat annoying bark most days, and all three sent hellos in return.

The orange sunset was slipping away from them, and soon Duke and Parker were called inside. They said goodbye, and as he went in, Parker looked back to see Steve roll over and try to scratch his back again. ❖

“WOTHAN THE WANDERER”

by PHOEBE WAGNER

Mary tracked the Norse god Odin and his tattoo shop to different locales as he joined a shady circus or the backside of a county carnival, but the proprietors never remembered his face or who recommended him or where his paperwork had gone.

After tracing his general pattern for a year, Mary guessed he'd stop next in Pennsylvania and called every fair or fireman's carnival scheduled in July, asking for information on his many names: All-Father, Gallows Lord, Wothan the Wanderer, Shifty-Eyed, the Gore God. A worker at the Wolf's Run County Carnival said he might've heard something about a weird tattoo artist going by the name of Wothan.

Mary gripped her satchel as she followed the walkway packed with men and women in hunter's orange, parents pulling children by their wrists, boys in sweaty undershirts holding hands with girls in cut-off shorts. Junk jewelry carts and woodcraft sellers vied for attention with the food vendors, but ninety-degree heat caused long lines at the ice cream stands and lemonade carts. People crowded the benches, slurping milkshakes. Mary tasted sugar in the air when she passed a cotton candy vendor. Her stomach clenched, but she refused to waste money on the overpriced food. Flies blackened overflowing trashcans, rising in a

swarm if somebody tried to pile another ketchup-laden French fry container on top. A local radio station's truck half-blocked the path and wailed country music while across a demolition derby arena, amusement park rides creaked and rattled, their whining engines constant as the flies' buzzing.

Mary slipped through long sheds housing crafting contests and baked goods raffles but skipped the freshly painted barns reeking of cow manure and horse sweat, searching for the out-of-the-way corner where psychics, religious groups, and oddity sellers lurked. She skirted the neon barricades of games as children begged for one more try to pop the balloon, and the barkers called for attention: “Plush teddy bear, just what the pretty little lady wants. Here, Miss, have a try.”

As the game stalls thinned, she took a side path lined with tents selling biker's leather and Confederate flag T-shirts, the air scented with new leather. Down the path, a walk-through trailer's western-style paint job advertised a Sight to Marvel and Malign the Mind—the World's largest Rat! smallest Horse! and ugliest Lady! The Christian and Missionary Alliance's pavilion sagged next door, their members handing out pamphlets and wooden cross pen-

dants. Opposite, Madame Gorbachova's Psychic Services offered free palm reading. The path ended in a cul-de-sac of dented trailers. A final tent was staked in the center.

Black canvas stretched taut between white ash poles etched with armored figures and giants. Hemp charms weighted by dangling stone figurines hung from ropes and lined the canopied entrance. Mary caressed a small raven, the wings outstretched, and a tremor jolted her arm. A heavy curtain shielded the entrance, and silver letters announced that Wothan the Wanderer, the Traveling Tattooist Trained in the Pleasures of Body Art was currently performing, shows on the half hour. A cool draft leaked from the entrance.

Mary slipped behind the heavy curtain into a gloomy arena, and like breaking a seal, the heat and carnival clamor seeped in behind her. The audience never turned, even the back row strained toward the stage, but Wothan fixed his single eye on Mary.

He stood on a wooden stage painted with a swirling galaxy, the stars glinting in the dim light—an overhead beam mimicking the moon. He emphasized his empty eye socket by tilting a wide-brimmed hat over his good eye. Wrinkles cracked his skin, but his hair and trimmed beard remained black. A cloak embroidered with tattoo-like Celtic designs rippled down his broad shoulders and rigid back. His gaze lifted as he faced his assistant, or Wish Maiden as he called her—another name for a Valkyrie.

Mary let out a shaky breath and eased into a back seat far from the nearest man. Ratty velvet blanketed the folding chairs and smelled of spiced incense and body odor. The audience consisted of men in camouflage T-shirts and baggy jeans. Those seated by the aisle spat tobacco juice into the dirt walkway.

The Wish Maiden strutted among the audience to select volunteers, which incited muttered comments and whistles. High heels emphasized her legs. She grinned, flashing perfect teeth, and licked her full lips. She wore a metal corset with her skin visible through lacelike designs cut in the front and sides. The back only tied halfway, but her blonde hair hid her exposed shoulders. She tousled the boys' hair or caressed their bearded faces before choosing a volunteer, guiding him up the rough cut stairs with an arm around his waist.

The audience only had eyes for the Wish Maiden, which Wothan's sleight of hand exploited. His act mostly consisted of the Maiden exposing part of her flawless skin to the crowd then Wothan muttering Old Norse, passing his cloak over her, and making a tattoo appear. He encouraged participants to test his magic by trying to smudge the ink or searching her skin for concealed designs. By the show's end, traditional flash tattoos—nearly naked Gypsies, sailor girls, nautical stars, gliding swallows, and writhing dragons—covered her body.

Wothan's guttural voice filled the tent, and a commanding tone edged his words. "How many of you young, red-blooded, American men would like to take this love-

ly maiden home for a night?”

Whistles and obscene calls made Mary flip up her hood. The Wish Maiden blew a few kisses and took a sweeping bow that made the front row crane their necks.

“I’m afraid I can’t spare her, but for an extra five dollars, she will apply a tattoo sure to bring plenty of—shall we call it pleasure?”

Only the boys, grinning sixteen-year-olds, lined up in front of the Wish Maiden, receiving a temporary tattoo of a topless Gypsy that the Maiden made a great show of wetting with her tongue before smoothing it across each boy’s forearm.

Wothan waited at the entrance and traced the tattoos with a knotty wand, muttering a salacious phrase. Mary pulled out her notepad and sketched Wothan’s design. After the Wish Maiden forced the final boy out, Wothan flourished his silver-veined cape over her head then snapped it back—she vanished. Without the cloak’s enveloping folds, he appeared leaner, more muscular. Like a weightlifter, veins ridged his arms under faded green ink. He rolled his black T-shirt’s sleeves, displaying a raven tattoo on each bicep, their outstretched wings disappearing along his collarbones. Runes inked the folds of his neck, and Mary recognized designs to protect against harm from behind and turn him invisible to those who wished him violence. She had hand-tattooed similar runes on her wrists using a sewing needle and pen ink but kept the designs hidden with makeup.

He tossed the cape over a chair and clapped his hands. “Let me have a look at

you, my intruder.”

From a hidden fixture, the lights brightened, and the spotlight shone on Mary. She squinted, shading her eyes and gripping her pencil like a knife, but she stepped out of the light and bowed. “All-Father, I’ve come to make a request.”

Odin straddled a chair, his arms folded along the backrest. “It’s been a long while since anyone called me that.”

“It’s the form of address a Viking might make before asking supplication.”

He turned his head, catching her with his good eye. “Times have changed. Perhaps I prefer Gallows Lord. Besides, you’re too short for one of my warriors. Let me guess, you want a miserable Spell against the Evil Eye tattooed on your neck—like the other magicians.”

Mary dropped her satchel on a chair beside him and removed a thousand-page book with a broken spine and a nearly illegible ornate title: *Runes Appropriate for the Decoration of Body and Soul*. She balanced the book on her forearms, opened to a list of the eighteen runes—Odin’s runes—that not only made up the Old Norse alphabet but unlocked the words’ potential to create magic. “Since I am training to become a runist, these seem more fitting.”

He stood, heat radiating from his skin, and the scent of carrion sickened her. “For nine days, I hung from a tree with a spear in my side to win half of these runes. For the others, I gave my eye. What could you give?”

She returned the book to her satchel and cast her lie. “You need somebody to

display your handiwork and carry on your legacy. It's bigger than a carny show."

"Mary Collins, age twenty-one, graduated from Stanford with a degree in computer sciences, minor in medieval studies. No magic in the family heritage, which is largely German and French. You're not my kind."

"So a bunch of boys from Hicksville deserve your magic?" Mary held up her drawing of the rune—a braided infinity symbol. "I saw you tracing this on the tattoos."

"Clever girl to write it down. The last time, somebody simply traced it over his arm and in so doing, imprinted his shirt's checked pattern onto his flesh. Ended up calling it a birthmark, I believe."

"It's a Bonding rune. You made each of those tattoos permanent. Why go to all the trouble?"

Odin placed his foot on a chair and folded his arms over his knee, his shoulders hunched, predatorlike, and staring eye-to-eye with Mary. She retreated a step.

"Every day when they look in the mirror, they'll think of me. When the woman passing on the sidewalk stares and sneers, they'll think of me. When others ask about the tattoo, they'll tell a story about me, or even better, lie—invent a story to explain away the chaos I've seared onto their skin. These boys will remember me for the rest of their lives."

"You mean they'll hate you. If you're looking for worship, you won't find it in their thoughts."

"Don't disregard rage. My Berserkers felt little love for me, but they fulfilled my

purpose."

"These are backwoods kids, not blood-thirsty warriors."

"You think they deserve better? I could tell you the futures of each of those young men." He pointed to different chairs. "A coward in combat. Steals his brother's wife. A murderer. But maybe my tattoo will send them into degeneracy or send them into a convent for repentance. I've added a little chaos into their lives, a wild card—enough to alter the future beyond my foresight."

She sketched another rune, vortex-shaped meant to glimpse the future as if peering through a keyhole. "But not all of them would have become dishonorable." She ripped off the page and pressed the rune against a seat, witnessing a pinhole portion of the last occupant's future. "Police chief, decorated. Doubt that's going to happen with a stripper tattoo."

Odin cupped her chin and tilted her face upward. She jerked at his touch, but his fingernails pricked like claws. "You question my designs—the God of Wisdom and Gore? You should know by now it's a magician's job to obey the gods."

She stepped out of his reach. "Like you said, times change. I serve no deity."

"So you're a wanderer—no altar to call home. That makes me your god." He swept open the entrance curtain, motioning her outside. "After my little show, you're still willing to trust me with your skin?"

"Since it's in your best interest, yes. From now on, my magic will hold a part of your signature—and I'm willing to pay."

Sunlight burned off Odin's showman

persona fast as oil, leaving only his inhuman presence. He swept off his hat and shook out his sweaty hair, scowling against the noonday sun. His T-shirt stretched tight across his broad chest and clung to his shoulders while his tattoos gleamed. He stalked the throughway, the crowd parting before him without a glance but bumping into Mary or blocking her path, so she walked in Odin's footsteps.

He slipped between a funnel cake cart and pocket-knife seller into a trailer lot and strode between the dented RVs. He unlocked a vintage trailer, holding the door for Mary. A festering smell filled the air. Bear and wolf pelts carpeted the floor and blanketed a small bed wedged against the back wall. Black feathers dusted the countertop, Mary guessed from Odin's ravens Huginn and Muninn—thought and memory. A driftwood bird perch stood by the only uncurtained window, and a half-eaten rabbit bloodied a metal tray screwed to the perch. Picked-clean ribs arced over torn fur, and its remaining eye stared at Mary. She gagged and turned away. Weapons lined the walls, creating an armory rather than a sense of style—shields painted red and white, swords with runed hilts, silver-inlaid scabbards, a yew longbow with carved ivy tendrils. Battle scene tapestries, haunted by a cloaked Odin, hung over the windows, and two stuttering candles had been placed in makeshift lanterns made from empty mead bottles labeled in Icelandic. Drinking horns hung over the counter.

Odin lounged at a small table fitted with bench seats and patted a narrow spot

next to him, but Mary only placed her book on the table, avoiding a dark stain. He flipped through the section dedicated to the runes he'd discovered, granting him wisdom and ultimately, magic. The thin paper whispered beneath his fingers. Illustrations showed his simple runes in different designs, each change giving the tattoos a certain bent—to protect the wearer against enemy weapons, unfriendly spells, poisons or to offer good luck, health, endurance. The final design, bookmarked by a ribbon, depicted nine interlocking circles binding the body. Instead of a specific concentration, the wearer willed the runes into action against whatever problems a situation might present just as a Norse skald might mold the same eighteen runes into an intricate metaphor.

Odin tapped the page. "If you were merely a rune writer, you'd want a Wisdom tattoo, but you're inking yourself in battle finery."

"Trickster gods like you turn magic against others without a second thought, so I need some protection. Besides, when it comes to runes, I want to become one of the best runists."

"Then you can't fear getting your hands dirty. They'll be covered in blood one day, and so the trick is to make sure it's not yours." He stood, circling her, forcing her to shuffle aside. "I hope your ambition means you're willing to pay my sacrifice." He unzipped her sweatshirt and eased it off. "You've studied the gods long enough to know what I desire."

She hooked her fingers in his jeans,

pulling him closer. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

He pressed her against the counter, and his lips bruised hers, his teeth sharp. She leaned into him, mussing his hair then running her fingers along his jaw lean as a wolf’s muzzle. He tore at her belt, ripping down her jeans, and his hand brushed a month-old tattoo scarring the skin beneath her navel.

Mary stepped out of herself and backed away, pulling up her jeans. A translucent double, the rune book had called it her shadow, continued fulfilling Odin’s sacrifice, but she felt like the shadow, watching as Odin forced her other self onto the bed.

Mary rested her palm against the waistline tattoo she’d hand-inked with a sewing needle—a knot with mazelike threads. The rune combined a Welsh design meant to help a person escape thieves by casting a double and an Irish rune to stop unwanted guests from entering a house. She hadn’t tested it before now.

Outside, she waited for them to finish and huddled on a cinderblock, shivering beneath the July sun. Her back felt exposed, and when she turned, no shadow mirrored her—an unforeseen loss. The tattoo had gone cold, icy tendrils freezing her skin, unlike the unresponsive runic scripts she’d cast in her notebooks, performing silly things like creating fire that wouldn’t scorch or preserving a rose through the frost so it bloomed all winter—not defying a god.

Odin shouldered open the screen door and stretched, hollowing his shoulders so

his black T-shirt pulled tight across his chest. He licked his lips then sauntered toward Mary. “Dangerous game, tricking a god.” He struck just as she stepped aside, but he still caught a fistful of her sweatshirt. He gripped her by the throat and slammed her against the trailer. His icy hands put a chill beneath her skin, and the emptiness of his missing eye glared as fierce as the glow in the other. His inhumanly cool breath smelled of frozen turf and snow-slushed seas.

She swallowed but choked, his fingers tightening and nails splitting her skin. She tried to pry open his hand. “I’m only following your example.”

He bared his teeth, but his grip loosened.

She sucked in a breath. “You stole the mead of poetry by making love to a woman for three days before running off. If you’d given me a test of strength or courage like one of your warriors, I wouldn’t have to rely on trickery.”

He released her throat and dragged her by a fistful of her sweatshirt behind his trailer, hidden from view. “Strength and courage, is it? Fine, I’ll test your stamina.” From beneath the trailer, he pulled a metal briefcase and plastic folding table, forcing open the legs. “Take off your clothes.”

“What are—”

“Strip or I’ll do it for you.”

Mary hesitated until Odin stepped toward her. She kicked off her sneakers and slipped out of her jeans then underwear while Odin watched as he opened the briefcase and assembled his tattoo gun. She

tugged off her T-shirt and unhooked her bra, dropping them on top of the pile. She planted her bare feet, back straight and hands clenched at her sides.

He slapped the table. "Lie face down."

She crawled on top, the plastic cold against her skin, and stretched out, her feet hanging off the edge and chin resting on her folded hands. She shivered even though the sun scorched her.

Odin smoothed his hands down her spine and over her hips as if flattening an unruly canvas. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her arms against her ribs as he caressed her lower back, tracing a rune—one of his eighteen.

Metal clicked against metal, and the tattoo gun whirred. "If you squeal, I'll cut out your tongue."

The needle stabbed, and Mary ground her teeth then bit into the flesh of her palm.

Hour by hour, Odin's needle laced runes and ink into scars. The process combined magic and traditional inking techniques, and her skin healed in moments without flaking or scabbing, but the usual irritation became intense pain. His power burned beneath her skin like a fever. Mary's muscles ached and sweat slicked her hair along her neck and shoulders.

The first time Odin's needle grazed a vertebra, her body arched, but he forced her flat again, bracing his forearm across her. As the needle progressed up her spine, it felt as if Odin had slit her skin and carved his runes into her bones. Pain pushed her into partial consciousness—a

waking dream where the tattoo gun's whirring became the buzz of black flies crawling over her naked body, their legs pricking her skin. Ropes bound her to a tree, cutting off circulation until her arms and legs felt like deadwood, and a wind warm as breath made the ropes creak, the tree moan.

Odin's heavy hand brushing the sweaty hair from her face pulled her into the present. The tattoo gun was silent.

"Stand if you like—if you can."

He held a carved drinking horn with silver rim, the sweet scent of mead adding a bite to the evening air. The sun slipped behind the hills, and multicolored carnival blubs flashed while floodlights lit the crash derby arena. Moths swooped and dove into the beams.

Mary swung her legs over the side and eased herself upright. She tried to take a deep breath, but her chest and sides ached, bruised by the table-top. Odin sat beside her, and she turned, facing away. He towed the blood and ink off her back. His rough hands made her flinch.

He slung the towel over his shoulder and sipped from his horn. "About a quarter done, I'd say. The worst is over." He cupped his hand, cold from the drinking horn, around the curve of her pelvis then played his fingers along her ribs to her shoulder blades. "But there's still plenty of skin."

Mary bowed, hair shadowing her face as she bit her already split lip.

He clasped her shoulders and lowered her onto the table again. The dark didn't

stop him. He only leaned closer, his arms propped on her back and his breath raising gooseflesh along her spine.

As the sky grayed and dew mixed with her sweat, Odin turned her toward him. On her side, she tried to draw up her knees, but her back's stretching skin pulsed. She crossed her arms and closed her eyes as his fingers explored the curves of her hips, the hollows of her ribs.

"Nearly done. Just the finishing touches."

On both sides, he inked rootlike tendrils around her hips while branches followed her ribs—the only sections of the design she could see. She rolled onto her stomach again, but the tattoo gun, mostly silent, buzzed in spurts. She flinched at each noise.

After a few minutes of quiet, Odin spread a blanket over Mary's raw back. Sweat and blood from her gnawed lip stained her face, and she wiped herself clean before raising her head, clutching the blanket as she slid off the table. Blood splattered the plastic surface. Her skin prickled and sweat streaked the extra ink bruising her skin with Odin's smeared fingerprints. Her back throbbed.

Odin towed off his bloody hands. "There's a mirror in the bathroom."

She gathered her clothes and entered through the backdoor while Odin waited outside. On the bed, a charcoal stain outlined a human shape like an atomic flash burn. She touched the remains of her shadow, the grit sharp as powdered glass and smelling of Odin's carrion musk. She

backed away and shuffled into the tiny bathroom.

A cabinet mirror hung over the sink. Mary turned around and let the blanket fall. She took a shaky breath, braced against the counter, and looked over her shoulder. An ash tree grew across her skin, the trunk following her backbone while branches spread along her shoulder's bends and roots curved around her hips like fingers. The trunk had been shaped from a column made of Odin's runes. Roots, branches, and leaves were also created from runes, fine-lined as capillaries, and read from left to right, forming sentences—letters for magic and words. The Old Norse alphabet consisted of the same magic runes, so every spell also became a statement.

A single glance branded the boldest runes into her memory. Mary faced the mirror, pressing her aching back against the cool shower door. Runes flashed behind her eyes, and she jammed her fists against her sockets. The runes sorted themselves, and automatically, she translated her own saga. Odin had fulfilled his promise and tattooed the powerful runes, but he had used them to write a prophecy in her skin. After the flare of fear burned off, she took another look, half-perched on the sink and angling toward the mirror until her spine popped. She reversed the runes and mouthed the words as she translated whole paragraphs, her past recorded in the roots and her future in the branches, all supported by the trunk of eighteen runes—what she'd requested of Odin.

Her life story bloomed from the base of

her spine, growing in gleaming lines that tangled into roots or branches of Nordic runes that not only controlled the supernatural but language, spelling out the possibilities of magic while binding her with a predicted future: her pursuit of knowledge would turn the next years tumultuous, and for each runic triumph, something of great importance would be lost, partially in sacrifice to the gods as Odin would not be the last deity to cross her path—other tricksters would find her, come to her with the frequency of lovers. She never married, no children, and her friends remained spread along her travels and would call her a wanderer, but her search for runic knowledge would be a success, her power growing. She'd gain recognition from other practitioners of the Magical Arts before her early death near age fifty. While not suicide, she played a part in her passing—a violent end. She'd survived deceiving Odin with only surface wounds but had sacrificed her shadow to receive another.

She punched the mirror, a web of cracks distorting the glass. A second blow shattered it and bent the cabinet door. Shards filled the sink. Her hand bled over the glittering bits, but the fresh stinging dulled her back pain. She used an edge to cut a length from the blanket then rinsed her hand until the water ran clear and bound up the wounds.

She wiped off stray ink and Odin's fingerprints. With a damp corner, she swabbed her face and neck. She held her breath as she tugged on her T-shirt, the material making her skin tingle. The waist-

line of her jeans rubbed the fresh ink with each step. She zipped her sweatshirt to her neck, and holding up a large piece of mirror, combed her fingers through her sweat-tangled hair.

Outside, Odin faced the sun, his wide-brimmed hat tilted to shade his good eye. Her blood still stained his hands. Neither cast a shadow.

Mary shoved her fists into her pockets to hide her trembling. "You need a new mirror."

"Next time, take a closer look at my designs. I've hidden all sorts of runic spells in the roots and branches. If you ever learn to use the tattoos, you will be a fine piece of my magic."

"I'm not yours. We've made a business transaction—that's all."

He clapped a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be so cold, Mary. It doesn't suit you. No human calls on a god and escapes unscarred."

"These scars will make me better, not control me. I freed my future by coming to you."

"You never needed me, as proved by your little bedroom trick. Your homemade tattoo fooled me long enough to demonstrate your talent. In a few years, you could have tattooed yourself with almost the same result, but you chose me as your All-Father, and in doing so, your future."

"We'll see," she said under her breath. She left him standing in the morning sun like a lost ruin, surrounded by rusty trailers and the distant rattle and crash of carnival rides. ❖

“PREVIOUS TENANT”

by A. L. F. FAGAN

Sara walked up to the apartment door and saw the number 212. She looked at the tag on the key in her hand and saw the same number. She unlocked the door and slowly entered the apartment, calling out, “Hello?”

There was no answer, only the sound of the refrigerator humming in the background. Sara continued into the apartment and stepped into the living room. There she saw a man sitting on the couch. He was clean-shaven, with specks of grey in his black hair. He did not move or in any way acknowledge Sara’s presence. She paused for a moment, then sat down next to him. He continued to look straight ahead.

“You’re Jack?”

The man turned and looked at her. “How did you know my name?”

Sara smiled. “Someone whispered it in my ear. I’m Sara.”

“Hello, Sara. Are you the newest tenant?”

“No, the tenant and the landlord asked me to stop by. I specialize in cases like this.”

“Oh.”

“You’re lost, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re looking for something?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re looking for someone?”

“Yes.”

Sara paused, then asked, “Is her name Emily?”

Jack had an astonished look on his face. “How do you know these things?”

“Someone keeps whispering to me,” she said with a chuckle.

“Well, someone knows more than they should, but yes, her name is Emily.”

“Care to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“That’s OK, I can do the talking for both of us. You and Emily had a relationship. In fact, the two of you lived here in this apartment for a time. There was an ugly breakup, and she moved out. Each of you drifted in and out of other relationships. Over time, the two of you independently arrived at the conclusion that the breakup was a mistake. On the few occasions that your paths crossed, one or both of you were involved with someone else, so the time never seemed right to get back together. Am I in the ballpark?”

“What are you, psychic?”

“Yes. Now you should be able to move on, but you can’t bring yourself to do so, at least not without her.”

“So far, you’re batting a thousand.”

“Jack, you don’t have to continue on this way. The only thing stopping you from

moving on is yourself. I've helped others in this kind of situation and can help you too."

"Well, now you just struck out. I don't want your help."

"I know that this can be difficult, but—"

Jack interrupted her. "I don't want your help!" He stood up and looked at her angrily for a few seconds and then vanished from sight.

#

Sara sat at a table in the office of the property manager. Also seated there were the current tenant, Janice, and Lily, the manager.

Lily said, "Sara, please tell us what you've learned."

Sara responded, "Indeed, your belief that there is a ghost in the apartment is correct. His name is Jack. Apparently, he used to live in that unit."

"Yes, that is the case. I remember him well. He lived there for over twenty-five years. We never had any problems with him. Jack was a bit of a loner, but was completely harmless. Paid his rent on time. He passed away several months ago. His younger brother inherited everything and cleared out the apartment. I thought that was the end of it until last week when we started getting reports of Jack being seen on the property. Often times in the apartment, sometimes in the entrance lobby, in the gazebo near the building, or just wandering in the parking lot."

"Jack does seem like a good person. He suffered some great sadness and loss in his lifetime. He lost the one true love of his life

and still mourns. I offered to help him move on, but he has too much anger and pain to accept it."

Janice asked, "Couldn't you perform an exorcism or something? I can't go back there knowing that he could show up at any time. The first time I saw him, I thought he was a burglar."

Sara shook her head. "I only perform exorcisms on malicious spirits. Jack is harmless, just a soul in pain."

"I can't go back to that apartment with a ghost there."

"I understand. I'm OK with it, but I realize that not everyone can deal with this type of situation."

Lily looked at Janice and said, "You are welcome to stay in the vacant unit on the fourth floor until this is sorted out. If you like, I could have the maintenance guys move your belongings, and we can make that your permanent unit."

"I appreciate the offer, but it is smaller than what I need." Janice looked back at Sara and asked, "Isn't there anything that can be done?"

"Hmm, give me a little time to work on it."

#

Almost a week later, Sara was at home meditating. It was early in the morning, well before sunrise. She wore a robe and sat on a cushion in the center of the room. The room was illuminated with candles, and incense gave off a relaxing aroma. Sara did not have her usual ponytail, instead her long brown hair lay on her shoulders. There was a serene expression on her face. She

had been meditating for a while and had lost all sense of time. Suddenly Sara snapped out of her trance, her eyes growing wide. She got up and went to the bedroom to get dressed.

#

The next day was cold and overcast as a funeral procession rode onto the cemetery lane. A dozen vehicles followed behind the hearse. Upon arriving at the newly dug grave, the procession came to a slow stop. The funeral director calmly orchestrated the removal of the coffin from the hearse and led the pallbearers over to the grave where it was lowered into place. A few elderly family members were ushered to folding chairs. Everyone else stood as the minister gave a brief but emotional eulogy. When this concluded, mourners slowly dispersed as the staff began filling the grave with dirt.

Near a large tree in the distance stood a lone figure wearing blue jeans and a hoodie. The hood covered the figure's head, and dark glasses obscured the person's face. Sara quietly walked up from behind and stopped alongside the onlooker. She stated, "Usually, most people don't hang around long enough to see their own funeral."

The figure turned toward Sara and took off her glasses, revealing the stunned expression on her face. She asked, "Do I know you?"

"No, you don't. My name is Sara. You must be Emily."

"How could you know that?"

"I know a lot of things. I know that you can't move on. I know that you spent the last few decades of your life in misery

because you lost the love of your life. I know that every chance that the two of you might have had to reconcile seemed to slip away. I also know that his name was Jack."

"What are you, psychic?"

"You know, I've been getting that a lot lately. To answer your question, yes. I'd like to help."

Emily put her glasses back on and resumed watching the grave being filled in the distance. She asked, "How do you possibly think that you can help?"

"Come with me."

Sara turned and started to walk away. She looked back to see Emily still standing where she was. Emily seemed torn between following along or staying.

"Emily, I can't help if you won't let me."

Emily looked back at her grave in the distance. Sara walked back toward her and said, "Look, just come with me for a little while. It won't take long."

Emily turned to her and sighed.

Sara pressed on. "Don't worry, you can come back here if you want. Trust me, your grave isn't going anywhere."

Emily nodded and followed Sara to her car. The two got in and Sara drove away.

#

Sara pulled into a parking spot behind the apartment building and turned off the engine. The two got out of the car. Emily looked at the structure and said, "I think I know this place."

"You should, you used to live here. They remodeled it over the years and redid the landscaping. Give it a good look, and

I'm sure it'll come back to you."

Emily stared at the building for a moment without saying a word. Then she turned away and looked at the ground. She finally said softly, with a hint of sadness in her voice, "I can't go in there."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"Emily, this is something that you need to do. You've got to find resolution, or you might never be able to rest in peace. I know that it means facing down some personal demons, but you'll wander forever if you don't."

Emily glanced back at the building, then quickly looked away. Her voice began to crack as she said, "I can't." Her head slumped forward and she began to cry. Sara rushed to Emily and hugged her.

"It's OK," Sara whispered. She spent several minutes comforting Emily. Eventually, Sara was able to calm her down and took her to a gazebo on the property.

"Wait here, this should only take a few minutes."

Emily nodded, and then Sara walked toward the apartment building. After getting the key from Lily, she went up to the apartment. Inside she found Jack sitting in the same spot as before. She took a seat next to him and said, "Jack, I need to talk to you."

"You don't know how to take a hint, do you?"

"It's not exactly a specialty of mine. Look, you need to know that Emily recently passed away."

Jack's scowl immediately disappeared,

and his expression turned to one of sadness.

"I'm sorry to hear that, I truly am. Did she suffer long?"

"No."

"Good."

"Jack, you should know that she is in the same situation as you're in; she can't move on. The loss of a special relationship that almost was, still haunts her just as it does you. But unlike in the past, there is nothing to stand in the way of you and her being together. You and Emily can move on together. That's the way it was always meant to be."

Jack turned away and looked at the floor. After a long pause, he said, "I can't."

"Why?"

He shook his head. "I just can't."

Sara let out a sigh of exasperation. "Good grief, no wonder you and her couldn't keep a relationship going; you and Emily are too much alike. You're both a couple of stubborn knuckleheads!"

Jack turned to face her. "You might be right about that."

"Jack, are you happy in your current existence?"

"No, not particularly."

"You could spend the rest of eternity like this, unable to move on. Is that what you want?"

"Perhaps that is my fate."

"You might be willing to endure this yourself, but are you willing to condemn Emily to the same eternal misery?"

Jack stood up and walked across the living room. Sara got up and walked up to

him.

“You still love her, don’t you?”

Jack said nothing.

“Go to her, you know you want to. You’ve always wanted to.”

Jack remained silent. Sara waited for him to respond, but he said nothing. She frowned and then said, “You should know that she’s on her way to the apartment as we speak.”

“What? How does she know where to find me?”

“I told her, that’s how,” Sara said with a smirk.

Jack glared at her. Then he looked at the front door. His angry look turned to one of dread, and then he vanished. Sara left the apartment and walked out the front door of the building. In the distance, she could see Emily still waiting in gazebo. As Sara stood watching, a maintenance worker walked by. She held out the apartment key and said to him, “Could you give this to Lily? Her problem with apartment 212 is about to be resolved.”

The man took the key and responded, “Oh, that’s the one with the ghost.”

“Yes, but he’s about to move on.” She gestured for him to observe the gazebo. Within a few seconds, Jack appeared.

The maintenance worker exclaimed, “There he is!”

Jack and Emily looked surprised to see each other. The pair stood in silence for a moment; then a conversation started. Sara and the maintenance man were unable to make out what was being said.

The man asked Sara, “Who is the

woman?”

“Her name is Emily. She and Jack were once lovers, but they broke up a long time ago. In the subsequent years, they both came to regret ending their relationship but never had a chance to get back together. That is why Jack hung around here—he was in too much pain to move on from this world. Emily recently died and was in the same situation. The only way that they can move on, is to do so together.”

“So you told them to get back together?”

“Well, it wasn’t that easy. Both of them were reluctant to take that first step. When Emily expressed hesitation, I had her wait in the gazebo. I approached Jack, but he was reluctant as well. I then made up a white lie and said that Emily was about to enter the apartment. As I expected, Jack fled. I guessed that he might show up at the gazebo, and he has.”

“What made you think he would go there?”

“I knew he has a special place in his heart for the gazebo—that’s where he and Emily first met.”

At that point, the two of them saw Jack and Emily throw their arms around each other. After a long embrace, they vanished together.

Sara said with a smile, “It looks like the ghost problem is gone.”

“How did you know all of this? Are you psychic?”

“You know, you’re not the first person to ask me that.” ❖

“THREE SHORT-SHORTS”

by J. SCOTT WADE

The Lottery Winner

Chris questioned the wisdom of this journey, again, a few minutes before the massive blast. Sweat stained the front of his suit, the kind that stress, not heat, creates. One hand quivered and held the other, in his lap, as the shakes of fear escaped his body. He sat in his only chair, in a stark room, listened to the radio, and looked out the window beside him. The scentless ocean scape of emerald green, three hundred feet below waved, in rhythmic repetition. He thought, “Who would have thought that winning the lottery would have brought me to commit this act?” His stoic personality and degrees in Critical Thinking forced debate with himself, again. “Should I do this?” He asked himself, aloud.

The hundredth debate began, and he thought, “My big win, one chance in one hundred million, showered rewards and bombarded, like hail, burdens on me. I have no debt. Car, credit card, and rent payments are no more.” He continued, “Food, clothes, power bills, and fundamentals of this world are no longer a concern. Medical insurance is defunct and replaced by first class, prepaid, healthcare. My work in the gym, with the world class coach, gave

me superior health and fitness to rival any Olympian.” Chris flexed his arms and admired the bulk of his biceps and triceps. “The lottery, by sole chance, has provided the means for me to be free.” He thought. “Well, free of sorts” He mumbled. His mind accelerated and continued the mental exercise.

The burden of winning had exacted more agony than he could bear at times. He felt like he stood-in for Atlas with the weight of the world on his shoulder. Every day, isolated, and lonely. He had lost his parents and his unborn brother years ago to a car accident. The girlfriend couldn’t cope when he won the lottery and the change it had manifested. She had left him. “How could love turn to hate so fast?” he asked. Then, in response, he mentally lied to himself the empty catechism, “Winning the Lottery changes people, their circumstances, their lives, and those that surround them forever.” His mind spun faster and he headed for a point of collision. He couldn’t stop the truth that burst and splattered his psyche as it always did at this point of debate. The chance of one ticket drawn had become the catalyst of veracity that exposed his naked self. Chris whispered to himself, “I am a selfish coward.

Analysis to Reflection, part of his

process, mandated the decision to act and he couldn't turn back. He realized that he loved no one except those that were gone. He missed his parents and would never know his brother. There were times he had fits of rage that they had left him behind. He tried to reconcile his loss through Christianity with the promise of Heaven. The ministers didn't like his analytics much and abandoned his investigation calling him an intellectual zealot. "So much for love." He cantered. He railed through Judaism to understand from Rabbi's what laws had been broken to require such recompense. They were a bit reactive to his challenges and he didn't want to blame a lamb. He settled on the comfort of Buddhism and his own interpretation of the Four Truths. It fit him because Buddhism described reality in terms of process. Chris, the critical thinker made that work, his way.

First, *existence in suffering*, he had experienced that. "Check!" he spoke. Second, *suffering has a cause, craving and attachment*. "Check!" he barked. "Negligent drivers killed my family and she'd dumped me." he accused under his breath. Third, *there is a cessation of suffering called Nirvana*. "Check!" he breathed. "Yet to be determined," He thought. The coming violence would soon prove it right or wrong. "Process, process, process." He hissed. And fourth, *there is a path to the cessation of suffering*. "Check!!!" he ordered. Chris wanted to be on this path. He had chosen a fiery one. Buddhism had utilized an eightfold path and Chris had reduced it to one. That is all

he needed. One path, on one very expensive custom-made seat sitting on an explosive device comparable to four million pounds of TNT or Megatons.

It was time. The question answered, again. Chris decreed in judgement to the audience of his own mind, "My wisdom is sound. Let future generations judge my final act here on this earth, I don't care!"

Chris's hand, cold and shaking, but determined, reached and flipped a switch on the console to his right and laid back into the seat. He heard the rumblings and felt the first tremors of the compact metallic room swaying, unsure of its foundation. He took a deep breath, prepared for the massive dispersion of energy, and allowed the radio clamor to channel to his mind now forced into neutral. The clamor, a militant voice, "Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven, Six, Five, Four, Three, Ignition, Two, One, (pause) We have lift off!!!!!"

Chris roared to the heavens above him, his Nirvana, "Mars, here I come!"

The Window Behind Me

Jacob's evening ritual began, upstairs, with his favorite rocker recliner, the television, and his Himalayan Salt lamp. The chair and the remote synchronized with every breath he drew of the rock-lit essence of the sea. Each switch of the channel pushed incessant propaganda into his numbed brain that would raise alarms on any Neurologists EEG. Jacob liked his routine. During the day he wrote code for a game app popular on smartphones. He did-

n't have any friends and didn't want any relationships. He hated pets, cats and dogs, and they didn't like him. Jacob, at five feet five inches, went through life un-noticed and he liked it that way. He stopped the channel hopping charade and settled on Crime TV, the only channel he watched. Jacob took a breath of salt air, kicked his feet up, and relaxed.

Unsolicited, a chill caused the hair to rise on his neck and overpowered his senses. Jacob felt watched. The pyloric taste of stomach acid crept into his mouth as he muted the television. Jacob bore the eerie sensation that someone or something had intruded where they had no business. He stopped rocking and held his breath to listen. After several attempts to assuage his self-diagnosed paranoia he looked at the window behind his chair. The ethereal sensation came from there and won the contest for his attention. His heart struck his chest like a door knocker as he stood up and turned to look closer.

The window was a small, horizontal, rectangle useless as an escape or an illicit entry point. Its white wood framing encircled the sliding glass panels and looked much like a television screen of years ago. Jacob peered at it with far more interest than he had given the high tech illusionary across the room. Then, he saw movement. Sudden dampness sprouted under his arms and the smell of Ban deodorant, blended with pungent sweat, permeated the air.

A man's face stared back at him. Jacob's eyes focused and he realized, with a start, that it wasn't his face. The intruder

had black hair, hazel eyes, and a crooked nose. Jacob had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a perfect roman nose. Repelled, he sprung backwards until his back slammed into the counter behind him. "What the hell?" exploded out of his mouth, propelled by the onerous thumping of his heart and thrust of pain in his kidney. Jacob's face, exhibited fear then, burst into anger. Consistent with his passive aggressive history he caught his breath and charged back to the window. The face in the window reacted with shock and retreated like a laser beam, in reverse, through the air. Jacob's eyes, like a radar, tracked its traverse across the six lanes of the interstate and over a security fence. Then it diminished to a pinpoint of light into a, blacked out, barred window of the South Carolina Correctional Institute. Like a blown transformer, a bright white light punched Jacobs's eyes, and flashed into darkness.

Jacob, in shock, gulped for air as the claxons in his brain reminded him that he needed to breath. He took a step, turned, and fell into his recliner. Shaken, he pulled his knees up, and hugged himself for a time. Dank sweat slipped down his face and neck, and he welcomed the reality.

"Impossible!" dominated his mind and shot out of his mouth. The prison rest six hundred yards away. "Am I losing my mind, going nuts?" raced through his panicked mind, out of his mouth, and echoed off the walls. His mouth, dry and bitter, felt like the bottom of a fresh laid cat litter box. He stood, headed to the fridge for an emergency beer and passed the window. His

curious mind and rebellious feet conspired to stop him there. His heart raced, almost begging, "Don't do it!" The internal war lasted a minute and the heart lost. He forgot that curiosity killed the cat, like Sylvester, his mom's intrusive cat. The irritable, intrusive cat, that had simply disappeared or so everyone thought.

He leaned close and peered out the window. A burst of light exploded out of his eyes as if they had become lasers with zoom lens. His vision flew across the interstate, passed over the security fence, and stopped at the brink of the black window on the second floor of the prison.

Jacob's body stood statuesque at the window as he stared into same barred glass where the intruder had retreated moments earlier, six hundred yards away. Jacob looked inside.

The gray, morose, prison cell looked medieval. He saw a man, with a shaved head, in a yellow prison suit laying on a bunk. He had a magazine in his hand and a tray of uneaten food lay at the foot. Suddenly alert, the man turned like he sensed someone watching. He jumped up and sprung to the window until they were face to face, separated only by the barred glass. The man grinned and showed his, gapped, rotted teeth and Jacob imagined he could smell the reek of his breath. The stench of the prisoner's evil persona seeped through the thick glass and enveloped Jacob like a giant spider web that wrapped his face. Jacob hated spiders and their webs. He gagged at the decayed body odor, the smell of death, like smoke, that filled

his nose, mouth, and mind. The number on his prison suit read nine hundred and one. Jacob's street number read one hundred and nine. "How odd? He thought, "I don't believe in coincidences." Jacob eyed his polar twin, his inside out, like a positive to a negative. The sudden realization ginned unadulterated fear through his whole being. Jacob forced his eyes closed in denial. A flash of bright light, like an exploded light bulb burst in his mind and out of his eyes, and he collapsed his weight onto the kitchen counter. His new, unwelcome, laser vision had returned him home behind the white window of his sanctuary. Jacob heaved for air, gagged, and spit the stench of the man, like bile, to wherever it would land.

Panicked, he struggled his way to the upstairs closet and grabbed the "Monopoly: Get Out of Jail Free" beach towel and tacked it over the window. Exhausted, Jacob limped to the bedroom, fell across the bed, and escaped into sleep.

The next morning he awoke, clear-minded, but different, to the earthy aroma of coffee auto-brewing. He opened his iPad, logged in with, "Jacob Johns" and clicked the link for local news. He had to settle the debate in his mind whether last night had been a nightmare or not. "It's time to stop watching Crime TV!" He spoke aloud.

The news headline read:

John Jacobs, Death Row Prisoner 901, Executed at 6 am this morning for the Peeping Tom murders that took seven lives where he claims special windows lured him to them. It is

known that whoever saw him in the act, became his next victim.

Jacob stared at the picture of the man he had met in his window.

That day, with boards, Jacob sealed off the interior and exterior of the special white window and then began the search for a new place to live.

That night he walked a potential neighborhood. On the third street he stopped by an island of shrubs, turned, and saw a lit window of a potential neighbor. The window called to him like a Siren from Homer's *Odyssey*. His vision shot across the landscape and he peered into the scene of a woman prepared to bathe. She turned to the window and saw him. Jacob felt, an evil rise within him, a rabid desire to kill. The stench of John Jacob overwhelmed him. The woman became victim number eight.

Gerry

She wondered what it was like in his silent world, and wished he could tell her,



instead, she traced his eyebrows with her fingertips. Streaks from her finger and droplets from her eyes smudged the cold glass and formed prisms on the screen of the iPad. Gerry, with his noble face, strong jaw, high cheek bones, stoic black eyes, and the silken frame of his long ebony hair, stared at her, silent. Janice brought the tablet closer and touched her lips to the image of his full, firm lips. The intimate proximity to his covert smile, rugged looks, weathered skin, a man's man of the outdoors, made her feel happy, alive. The heart rhythms of love pulsed in her neck and her face flushed, peach red, with desire. Her wet mouth opened to him and with a passionate French kiss, her tongue, smeared the screen with a mixture of dribble and satin red lipstick. Her breath slowed, rasped, in and out, as she imagined the glory of his response. Their hot tongues touched, and saliva intermingled to release passion and heat in her loins. A musky wet fragrance of lust filled the room. Janice had discovered love.

The retired model, in her panties and T, rose from the vanity and placed the tablet on the decorative pillow by her satin pillow. "Gerry, you wait right there." She said. "I will only be a minute, be patient."

Janice, to the world a forgotten spinster, lived in a modern Mercedes House apartment, on West 53rd Street. The panorama of Midtown, like a masterful painting, refracted through the high windows of the master bedroom. The orange peel sunset against the apricot skyline on the Hudson River edged out the New York

sparkled nightscape in its daily competition of live art. Financial security, acquired from a family trust, allowed her to hide and protect her secret love, Gerry, from her Psychiatrist, and the world.

Driven to seduce, Janice chose a black lace, two-piece negligee from her closet, and held it to her body. She turned to her Cheval glass. A fifty-seven year old woman with over dyed, short brunette hair, met her eye to eye. Large oval eyes, dark brown, thanks to contacts, critiqued the reflection of a cloned Liza Minnelli. Her rouge cheeks drooped less, thanks to the Dr. Omar's Wonder Cream. The chin scar, now a trace line, from the tuck a month earlier. Her neckline creases, once ten, were now two. The review skipped past her flat breasts, scanned lower, and to a pregnant-like bulge. She pressed her hand to her stomach and a jolt of pleasure, at her own touch, radiated through her body. Janice fluffed the camisole top to cover her tummy. "There, that's what great fashion is about." She said, Satisfied.

Dressed, she returned to her vanity and chose Beautiful, by Estee' Lauder and spritzed the garden mist on her neck, wrist, and between her thighs. Janice knew Estee' Lauder had named it for her, but they denied it publicly, in 1983. The essence of flowers filled the room and transformed it into her *amour jarden*.

The void of night consumed the last sliver of golden orange in the window and she moved to the dual portrait framed on the wall. On the left, a New York Times photo showed a young version of her posed

on the catwalk of the 1980 Met Museum of Fine Art Fashion Show, her first and last. To the right, a colorized photo, of the famous Apache Chief, Geronimo Goyathlay, circa 1890.

Janice and Gerry met in the museum, the day of her show. The critics had laughed at her when she slipped and one critic blurted, "She's proof, money can't buy class." Horrified, she ran to the back of the museum and fell to the floor, alone. Mascara smeared her face and fingers as she sobbed in failure and saw him through her stained digits. Illuminated, his fierce eyes rained compassion, into hers. She fell in love with him at first sight.

Destiny revealed itself, the next night, at the Premier of the 1980 movie, "Somewhere in Time". A surreal message that true love spans all time. It convinced her and Gerry would be united someday. The mystic time warp, driven by love, commitment, and desire, existed. "The day is coming, we will overcome the lies and oppression we have both experienced, and be together." She said. Her eyes pooled with emotion. "I promise, dear."

Janice's moved to the bed and her body quivered in anticipation. She took her evening Clozapine pill, laid on the bed, and rolled over to face Gerry. "It's time my love, make sweet love to me again." She rasped. "Just like last night." ❖

“FREEDOM”

by SHAINUR ULLAH

Ed. Note: Welcome to episode three of our serialized short novel *Freedom*. In this story, alien beings feed and survive off the freedoms of humans, who can only combat them by restricting their own rights, even to the point of slavery. See episodes one and two in our January 31 (Disablot) and March 21 (Ostarablot) issues to catch up and...enjoy....

Episode 3

The next day I decided to go to Mr. Wilson's house, he was so far from society that I was afraid he would not even know what was happening and that everyone was in danger, I took my things and left, not without before telling my parents that they had a lot of courage, and that they did not give themselves to any of these creatures, however tempting their offers were, and I also told them not to be afraid for me, it would be fine, as always, I was already an adult, and if being younger and innocent could resist, much more now, it was much stronger, they would never have an opportunity, I took my bags and my convictions and undertook the trip to Mr. Wilson's house.

Once I got to the town, I decided to go to Mr. Wilson's house, and this time the

view of his house seemed even more gloomy than before, that is, it always looked like abandoned land, but this time it seemed more gloomy. Much more sad, and of course I had plenty of reasons to see myself that way, but it was inevitable to think that perhaps these beings (who were already known to visit us quite often) would have taken poor Mr. Wilson with them. At that moment I felt panic and sadness. I touched the door with force, this time more than three times, however I did not hear anything, I started to surround the house, to have a view of what was inside. So I started to see in each of the spaces between the windows, I went to the back, and then I went back to the front, and I kept on playing, and calling, to see if anyone would answer me, but they seemed unsuccessful attempts, there was a lot of silence; I was exhausted and decided to sit by the window on the left side, I felt a little disappointed, decayed, surely this man had abandoned all hope and had taken his things, probably escaped to find a new life, leaving behind all his past, or Maybe it was trying to escape from these beings, the last option gave me a bit of chills.

I do not know how long I was with my eyes closed, with my head resting on one of the outer walls of the house, suddenly a

noise was heard inside the house, I opened my eyes and turned around quickly, I tried to locate Where the noise came from, I was scared and could not see clearly. I approached stealthily to the entrance of the house. The door gave a rather dark screech, and it slowly opened. I was afraid of the figure that was going to show before me, I feared that they were, however, what I saw I think it was still but, a Mr. Wilson, a very poor Mr. Wilson opened the door to me, could barely move, was Obvious that something had happened to him, and surely it was related to the events of the last days, with a weak voice he invited me to go.

"What happened to it? Why does it look like this, perhaps they ... "I managed to tell the old man that he was facing me, but he did not let me finish the sentence and he said" They came, they came for me, first in the shape of my little one , they wanted to take us, but I am afraid, I feel that she is much weaker than me, that is why I cannot stop watching her, I feel that she has lost her hopes and she wants to deliver ", I understood inside me that it was her wife, who for some reason I did not know before, I asked her why I had never seen her before, that I was too embarrassed to ask her about her before, because I had never mentioned her, only in her story, and that I came to think that she was not alive; He told me what had happened to her.

"Time after they took William away, my wife was devastated, and I always thought I saw him everywhere, and almost always he was submerged in his thoughts, he wanted to have his little one back. I decided then

that I should be careful with her, I should take care of those thoughts of wanting to see Will again, and so it was a long time, until one terrible day, was next to the stairs and saw Sarah and William in the doorway from one of the rooms, they were playing and laughing, as if she was not seeing them, that is, they were ignoring her, until both of them got up simultaneously and walked with a determined step towards her, she told me that she felt a deep terror , and took some steps back, unfortunately fell down the stairs, and had some fractures, the doctors did not give encouraging news about his health, lost the ability to walk on his own, and isolated himself so much that he barely left the room, They were sad days for me, Jacob, but I learned to deal with a lot, rather, with everything that had happened. I do not feel as strong anymore to take care of her, I am afraid that one of these days she will simply abandon me. "

Mr. Wilson was quite right, he would never be prepared for everything that could happen if these beings did not stop chasing them and to encourage them to lose their lives, I saw the whole thing as a kind of suicide, that is, strange beings offer you freedom and happiness with just accompanying them, it is logical that they want something valuable from you, as valuable as your own life, so technically you are deciding to die, get away from everything known and go into the hands of evil creatures that incite everyone to lose your life.

We stayed in the room, and I began to tell him everything that had happened, the cases had increased exponentially, and it

was very difficult to give concrete information due to all the theories and assumptions that were handled in all the places that the creatures had visited, however I tried to tell him everything that was known so far, I even told him about the desires of many men to return to being slaves, of the visions of some, and of the apparitions of their ancestors warning them about freedom; the face of the man reflected great impression and also a little hope, perhaps it would manage to move the creatures away once and for all from him and from his wife, he would not let them take their souls far from it. He was willing to fight for that, and I wanted the same for myself and my family.

I also told him that in a few days the information that was being handled officially in the capitol would arrive, this would be key in the process that was beginning, it was the most important thing. While we were talking, we heard the noise of some object hitting the floor above, Wilson made use of an agility unknown to me, took strength and ran up the stairs to the entrance of a room, I got up and made the same, I arrived a few seconds to the same place where he was, and there I saw her, a beautiful girl, smiling, her face denoting sweetness and innocence, she was staring at Mrs. Wilson, she did not even make any movement that proved that He was aware of our presence in the room, we took advantage of that to get a little closer to Mrs. Wilson's bed, who was in a trance, and her face full of love and tears; I understood that it was about little Sarah. With a

very quick movement, Wilson was with his wife, and he put his arms around her, and whispered in her ear that her pretty Sarah was gone, that none of this was real, that they should get out of there.; I was just there, petrified, without contributing anything to the situation.

Mrs. Wilson came to herself, and looked at her husband and said "it's not real", and just then, another figure came on the scene, it was a smaller child, it was William, the woman's attention returned to the creatures, this time to the child, who sat on the bed, very close to her, "I miss you so much, mother, come with me, let's be happy forever", the woman separated from her husband, kissed him on the front, and tried to get up, but almost fell, however there were both creatures holding both arms, she made a gesture, and his lifeless body fell to the ground. They did not stare at Mr. Wilson, they looked at me, they smiled and then turned their eyes to that man, who was sadder than ever, "It's now free, you'll never have to see her suffer again, and if you want to, you will not either what to do" said the creatures in unison. The scene was so terrifying for me, as tempting for the old man, then I knew what to do, I took Mr. Wilson in my arms and closed the door of that room, I told him that tonight I could not go there, to accompany me to the house of my parents, but he could not articulate a word, he was deeply impressed, he could not show any kind of reaction.

I left him for a while in the living room, while trying to think of a plan to

protect him, for some strange reason I felt that he was already part of my family and that we shared some life experiences, this despite the great age difference between us. On his face I could see the reflection of my father, who tirelessly tried to protect me from everything that could harm me.

"I have no reason to stay" was the first thing the old man said after the whole tragedy happened, "Mr. Wilson, you must live, we must find a way to kill these creatures, whatever they must have some weakness, we all have it "When these creatures come for me, I will go gladly." The man's words were final, I was sure that things would be as he said, but I did not want to see how these beings again won, I did not want to see how they continued collecting lives, collecting people, ending the lives of others, of those we wanted and of those we knew. So that night I decided to stay and take care of Wilson, anyway I was not going to leave the town until the authorities had an official bulletin about what was happening and how we could protect ourselves, I told the man of the house that I had to go the night in the town and that I would stay with him, and in this way I would also help him with the preparations for the funeral of his beloved wife, that way he would have a support, and a helping hand, evidently needed it; I would also be in charge of notifying the authorities what happened, so they would do the pertinent procedures to add this case as one of the list that they currently had.

That night neither of us slept well, Mr. Wilson because he felt tormented by his

loss, and I was worried that they would try again to take him away and that he would leave without thinking, even so I tried to keep calm, I did not want to transmit more fear or restlessness to a person who was already having a terrible moment, someone who had to see all the members of his family die, someone who is now submerged in deep sadness and loneliness. The authorities arrived soon, they interrogated us, and the process was completed really quickly, Mrs. Wilson would have a Christian burial the next day (we were all believers).

I accompanied the Wilsons to the funeral and also to the funeral, the ceremony was quite normal, and suddenly Mr. Wilson became very pale, he began to tremble and told me in a very low voice "my children are coming for me", I walked my seen all over the place, to see if I could recognize the pair of creatures that had previously ended the lives of so many, however I could not find anything, but I was sure they were not far away, I could feel a presence outside this world, I wanted to have the information about how to evade them, I wanted to fight and get to the root of all this evil that was affecting us so deeply, and I was not the only one, the people were organizing to face what was coming, like me , they wanted to protect themselves and theirs, to survive was necessary for all, a collective desire; When I left the funeral I wanted to talk to the men who already handled the information about what was happening, I thought I had the victory in my hands, I could almost taste the secret formula to kill these creatures.

"They call them aliens, or extraterrestrials, at first the believers thought it was a demonic work, but definitely this has nothing to do with the forces of good or evil, apparently they came to earth, from somewhere with the In order to extract from all human beings the most valuable condition of all, freedom, according to the city authorities, who have been investigating these cases for a long time, indicate that they had never attacked slaves until the laws forced them to turn them into workers; Many of them believed that this right would lead them to possess many more, and apparently, this sense of freedom was what attracted these beings to places and areas throughout the national territory, where cases had been registered and where they had not. Our people are not the only ones who are suffering because of the misfortune that these aliens have brought, but since we handle this information, we must take care that it reaches every corner of the earth, it is important to be protected from this situation ", this is the summary that had been indicated by the spokesperson responsible for distributing information from the capitol.

We were in a town square, listening to all the details of the visit of these people to the capitol, they were extremely concerned about all that implied that "freedom" was the condition that attracted all these disgusting and despicable creatures, these aliens were undoubtedly the most horrendous beings on earth, only wish to end the life of all beings on earth, I wondered if they needed a new home, the thought

made my skin crawl.

"How are we supposed to hand over our freedom?" Someone in the crowd asked, and the rest fell silent, everyone had understood what the aliens were looking for, but they did not understand what it meant to reduce freedom in order to avoid visits by the aliens. these creatures; This was not an easy matter to touch, that is to say, all of us who were in that square had grown up with very few limitations, that is, we were never in the capacity of slaves or servants, on the contrary, there was always someone under our command , and at least in my case, there were many people who had to attend to my needs and comply with what I ordered or with what my parents ordered, so we knew a lot about freedom, but how to avoid it, we did not know anything. But it was not time to think about it, or to lament, it was time to listen to the recommendations that the rest of the nation had proposed in order to save our lives, to protect our children and all close and familiar relatives.

"There are not too many recommendations that we were given in this regard, that is, the feeling of freedom can vary in levels for each individual," the spokesman began, saying, "I have to answer the question that was left in the air." take into account many aspects of life, for example, I can say that I do not have freedom when I cannot eat at the time I am hungry, this is to mention one of the most harmless assumptions of all that could have told us " ; They told us about an entire family that had to sell themselves as slaves, since apparently the

visits of the aliens had increased their frequency, practically harassed them, then the father made this decision before having to watch one of his children die, or his wife. This option would never be considered in my mind, I could not understand that a person was able to renounce all their rights and riches, to renounce life as he knew it, only by the arrival of beings that were taking happiness from everyone, withering lives, without having to suffer the consequences, because true science was not even known how you could defeat creatures like these, the information we were hearing said how we can avoid them (without guaranteeing any success), how to prevent being a target of these creatures, but, they never mentioned how we could defeat them, because for many to win was more important than to avoid.

Mr. Wilson was hearing all these stories and assumptions, if only this information had reached him a long time ago, perhaps he would have all his beautiful family in his arms, the joy would be part of him and would not have to be sorry for all the facts that now belong to his past, his life was not as unhappy as it is now.

My mind was traveling really fast, how could I explain to my parents that they could have moved these creatures away from me with effective methods? This would undoubtedly leave them a little frustrated and sad, but it would remind them that they are just now taking letters in the matter, and studying the possibilities that exist to avoid unwanted visits. I thought maybe it was better to start implementing

some of the limitations that came to my mind, limitations that of course were not so extreme, since I was not ready to take a big step, nor was I ready to see my slaughtered parents as slaves, they worked all their lives as masters, they still do it, they think that I am too young to be able to take charge of the house by myself. I made a mental list of what I could implement little by little, soon those actions written there would materialize and I could get away unscathed from this whole situation, I only looked for protection against any damage.

The meeting in the square ended, and the people left the place with many more questions than anyone who had heard the subject for the first time, but for me, the meeting ended up being a little satisfactory, that is, how much would it have taken me a while to discover that freedom is the reason why these beings are operating on earth? That was enough for me to begin to create defense strategies that could alienate the aliens from our lives once and for all. I paid attention to those words spoken by the spokesman, every corner of my mind was attentive to the suggestions and methods of prevention, so when we left there, Wilson and I went home to his house, we are going to create such an infallible plan that we would forget all the bad experiences we had until that day, we would forget these terrifying beings completely, we would live a completely normal life despite their presence.

"I would like to add elements to your list, but it is very difficult to think with so much pain in the mind and in the heart.

You better try to protect yours, just as I could not do it, I'll go to rest, "and so, with that impetus, Mr. Wilson climbed the stairs, the same ones in which his beloved wife had lost the ability to walk and move freely throughout the house; I wonder now if this limitation helped him to keep the aliens away, I also wondered if it was one of the options that this man had in mind, to end one of his bodily functions to feel extremely limited, remove that freedom that we love so much, so it would happen with a minimum change, a spark that would keep away all the bad beings from all the innocent people of the town.

I sat there, discouraged, thinking that maybe Mr. Wilson would not survive if he was alone. After a while, he joined the fur-

niture next to mine, he came down with a better face, he did not look so tired anymore, the sadness remained, it really is not something that he thinks he can disguise or hide. I noticed a change in him, but it seemed flattering, maybe they were wanting to continue living, something he had not seen since his wife had died a couple of days ago. That night we had dinner, and we even had a couple of drinks, somehow I felt victorious to know a little more about those creatures, and the old man seemed to share the same joy, I feel that perhaps in a long time he had not dedicated himself to living, just to worry about the health and life of others. ❖

END TRANSMISSION